

The only constant is that everyone is lying.

The Kurds are lying about why the Arabs left their houses and the Arabs are lying about who destroyed their houses and they're both lying about who ordered the Arabs to leave in the first place.

Chief Warrant Office Bill Moore's job is to find out who's in the middle, what's nearest to the truth. Moore, special operations officer for the 173d Airborne Brigade, has is trying to sort out the status of forced evictions in this area.

On the drive out to the village the convoy is all 'rock 'n' roll.' That song from those Russian girls, "All the things you said," plays on cheap speakers from a portable CD player. At every pothole it skips a beat and there are many potholes. The music adds a strange element. Seeing women in traditional Middle Eastern garb walking with stacks of wood bundled on their heads in the field while it plays feels odd.

A sergeant in the tailing vehicle, chokes for a moment as a dust cloud, stirred up by the lead vehicle, envelopes him and his crew.

"Dammit," he mutters, "Can't they stay on the hard ball?"

His driver just shrugs and pulls down his goggles. The interpreter is sleeping and the turret gunner, long since caked in dust and grime, just sways along with the bumps, seemingly impervious to it all.

As the convoy nears the village the song changes, Kurt Cobain now screams from the tinny speakers, but the CD, or the CD player, succumbed to the dust. It chokes through the first few rifts of, "Smells like Teen Spirit," before being switched off.

The vehicles have entered the village now and Moore's military police escort has switched gears. Game faces are on—it's show time. As the vehicles screech to a halt, the military police spill out, forming a quick perimeter.

Moore riding in the lead vehicle, hopes to see a deserted village, ready to receive Arab families, who will hopefully move back into their homes tomorrow.

What he sees though is much closer to what he expects, Kurds still occupying Arab houses.

"Why are you still here?" he asks.

Time is ticking though and Moore has less than 24 hours to ensure the village is ready to receive its rightful residents.

Further down the road there is something that Moore has yet to encounter, a destroyed village. Windows, still in their frames, have been ripped out from the walls. Not one house has a roof, burn marks are everywhere, and piles of bricks lay in silent testimony to the devastation. And the dogs, always, there are dogs.

Iraqi's rural villages, indeed its cities, at least as far as Kirkuk is concerned, could be the ASPCA's worst nightmare. You can't drive a mile without encountering at least 10 of these mangy, dirty, walking flea factories. Some are friendly, some are vicious, and still others are seemingly just too sick or tired to care. Bob Barker's pleas to have your pet sprayed or neutered haven't hit here yet. The residents have bigger concerns.

"I've never seen the Kurds do anything like this before. Why did they do this?" Moore asks the village mayor through an interpreter.

The response leaves Moore less than content.

"He said they [the Kurds] came here and they said this land is their land. That's why he is coming with the people—to start taking the land and that's why there is destruction here," the interpreter replies.

"He didn't take the land, he destroyed the houses," Moore interrupts.

Every conversation is a diatribe of history of who wronged whom. Nothing, not even the simplest of questions can be answered with anything less than five minutes of impassioned speech. It's discouraging and it's repetitious.

"Everyone's lying," Moore says to his interpreter afterwards and both of them laugh. "The Kurds all say that the Arabs just left the houses. When I ask who destroyed the houses the Arabs say the Kurds did, and the Kurds say the Arabs did."

"It's the Iraqi way, I think," Moore says shaking his head.

Sadly, it's most likely the Arabs are destroying their own homes to prevent the Kurds from moving in, believes Moore.

It doesn't matter though, the sun, now reaching it's mid-morning point is already beating down in typical brutal fashion. What matters is making sure the villages are ready for the Arabs tomorrow morning.

Moore orders the four Kurds living in the village to leave the area immediately. He assures them that if they're found there again, living in houses that are not their's, he'll arrest them.

The next day, Moore dutifully makes the drive there, military police in tow. He hopes this time to be greeted by Arab families, baggage, children and pets living inside the homes they built.

He's not lucky. The village is still deserted save the Kurds, who remain.

"Someone's scarring them away, telling them not to return," Moore said. "We're trying to get the word out and, in most of the villages we are, but for some reason this village is different, they aren't coming back yet."

Moore and the MP's order the Kurds to immediately leave and watch as they pack up their meager belongings.

The village is finally deserted and days roll by but still the Arabs don't return.

"We've got to get to word to the Arabs that it's safe to come back," Moore said.

But word either isn't reaching them or they're still too afraid to return as the crops in the field grow ripe.

Only time will what the outcome will be for these small villages and their inhabitants, currently beset by terror. But for now, this village at least is still deserted as the vehicles drive away, kicking up yet another cloud of choking dust.