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Down to the Crossroads

An Iraq War Story

WE WERE FINALLY ON THE ROAD into Kirkuk. In the distance plumes of black smoke were snaking up into the sky. The vast Kirkuk oil fields, among the largest reserves of crude in the world, made this city one of the biggest prizes of the war, and the retreating Iraqi forces had set several of the wells ablaze. We watched them burn.

We didn't know it yet, but we would each be drawn to these flames at different rates of caution—or lack of it—amid the rattle of machine-gun fire, the crunch of not-too-distant artillery, and the ominously deserted streets, following the Iraqi army's hasty retreat. For at least twenty-five hundred years, fire and oil have been part of this ancient city. The Old Testament tells of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar who cast the Jews of the Exile into a "burning fiery furnace," a reference to the eternal flames from Kirkuk's natural-gas deposits. And so maybe it was some timeless, existential expression of these fires that drew us closer to the oil fields.

This was April 2003, in the days after the initial US-led invasion of Iraq—long before any of us knew how agonizing and costly this war would be for Iraq and for America and their military allies. Baghdad had already fallen, and my brother Rick, a photographer, and I were covering the war together. We had waited weeks for the moment when we could push forward from the north to Kirkuk, one of the last Iraqi cities where Saddam Hussein's ragged forces would "surrender." (We didn't know then that the forces were not really surrendering at all, but merely fading back into society. Many of them would be regrouping as part of the opposition.) We were inching our way forward on the crumbling northern front lines, reminding each other of a simple axiom of war: retreating armies are as dangerous as advancing ones.

It was early February when Rick and I first arrived in northern Iraq. Rick sneaked across the border by hiding in a potato truck. I came in several days later when the Turks permitted a group of about fifty western journalists to cross the border in a convoy of three buses. When Rick and I met up in the northern Iraqi city of Sulaimaniya, we laughed hard about

Rick's tale of being hidden in a small compartment covered by potato sacks, with only a small breathing hole. Getting crushed by potatoes would be one hell of a way for an Irishman to die, I joked with him. We both knew we were getting a bit old for this—maybe that's why we laughed so hard.

We vowed to stay together in these dangerous days, the initial invasion and then the wind-down of the first phase of combat operations. In fact, I had even promised our mother, Ginny, back in Boston that we would stay together, that I would look out for Rick. We both had wives and children who had grown used to us being out on assignments like Bosnia, Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine—the various insurgencies, revolutions, and natural disasters around the world. Our families worried about us, but seemed fairly convinced when we told them we were relatively cautious in how we operated. Our two other brothers back home didn't really buy it. At the idea of taking huge risks for such short money, they just shook their heads.

We were not “embedded” with US forces, as were so many journalists covering the invasion of Iraq. In the parlance of Operation Iraqi Freedom, we were “unilaterals.” That meant we were on our own. Rick and I had come up with what we thought was a well-considered plan for staying together as a team in two separate mud-caked and battered GMC Suburbans. Each of us was traveling with another colleague, a driver, and a translator, our own sort of journalistic platoon. We had all the supplies we needed. Extra gasoline, water, oranges, bread, and Thuraya satphones to stay in touch if we got separated. It seemed like a solid plan.

For now, we were focusing on the road ahead into Kirkuk, watching for land mines. The last remnants of the Iraqi forces were deserting a sprawling military base known as Camp Khaled, on the southwestern edge of Kirkuk near the oil fields. In a field off the side of the road, two dozen Iraqi uniforms and black military boots lay in exactly the place where the soldiers had stripped them off; it looked as if the human forms that once occupied the fatigues and the boots had been vaporized. Actually, the soldiers were simply folding back into Iraqi society. Lurking on the fringes were ragtag Arab volunteer fighters, mostly from neighboring Syria, known as the “Saddam Fedayeen.” Those guys weren't giving up. Instead they were looking for a final battle that might deliver them to the paradise they were promised for fighting the infidels.

Our old GMC Suburbans lurched up over mounds of earth dumped by the collapsing Iraqi forces, desperate to slow the pursuit by the US-led

coalition of forces. Eager, heavily-armed looters and Kurdish soldiers in old trucks and buses and mud-caked cars streamed forward. Convoys of US Special Forces seemed to favor late-model, white Toyota Land Cruisers. The CIA teams typically traveled in brand-new black Suburbans with tinted windows. Blaring horns and bursts of gunfire filled the air. The fire close by was celebratory, but the more distant rattling of machine guns was the withering fight from a falling army. People on the road waved Iraqi and American flags, and one man shouted “Haji Bush!” or “Bush the King.” Anti-aircraft guns lay abandoned in open fields. Military posts and fortresses along the roadside were reduced to rubble from two weeks of sustained aerial bombardment.

Rick’s driver kept his Suburban in the lead. The vehicle bounded aggressively over a particularly high berm, one of a series that the retreating Iraqis had set up to slow down the advancing US and Kurdish Peshmerga troops, allies of the American forces. Then a rusted, flatbed truck packed with Kurdish soldiers suddenly cut between our vehicle and Rick’s and, as it creaked up onto the berm, its axle broke. It hung there like a ship stuck on the rocks. I saw Rick’s vehicle pulled over on the side of the road, about three hundred yards ahead of us. The Peshmerga truck’s broken axle had us all tied up in traffic. (Through twenty years of reporting on conflict in the Middle East, I would have to say one of the more consistent realities of war is traffic. And chaos. By then, the “liberation” had become one huge chaotic traffic jam—the victors chasing the spoils of war and the vanquished fleeing for their lives.) A group of impatient French journalists tried to drive around the berm where the truck was perched with its broken axle; as they skirted the edge, there was a small but fierce explosion. They had triggered a small “toe popper” land mine which flattened their tires and damaged the engine, but didn’t kill them. Clearly the Iraqis had mined the road, and it was dangerous to try and drive around the obstructions. So we all waited while the Kurdish Peshmerga heaved at the truck until it became dislodged. We could finally pass. By the time I looked up, my brother Rick’s vehicle was gone.

The US forces were scrambling satellite communications throughout the area, so our phones were not working. We were separated. The plan had fallen apart, and we were learning another rule of war: “No military plan survives first contact with the enemy.”

About ten miles down the road, Rick had come to that crossroads where the oil field was burning. He allowed himself to be drawn into the flames. As he and his colleague Paul McEnroe drove down the road

toward the oil well fires, out of the billowing smoke and the shimmering heat came a blurred, grainy image, thundering forward. It came into focus only through the zoom lens of Rick's Nikon D-100—a green military truck hurtling towards him. There were fighters in the vehicle, and they definitely were armed. And they definitely weren't American. They appeared to be coming straight at him. Eight Kurdish fighters in a white pickup truck surged ahead of Rick's vehicle and blocked the road. As his driver reversed, Rick kept shooting—the motor-drive clicking the frames forward at fractions of a second and making the whole scene seem to unfold like an old movie in slow motion. Rick was in that mad, crazed adrenaline rush of covering war, the point where you forget about everything else. The sweet spot for war photographers.

Rick jumped out of his vehicle and moved closer—to focus his lens as the Peshmerga confronted the fighters. One of the Peshmerga shot the passenger in the truck as he tried to get out, presumably to fight, since his gun was drawn. Then the driver jumped out of the truck with a pin of a grenade clenched in his teeth and the pin of a second grenade clenched in his right fist; Rick still kept shooting. The fires of Kirkuk had drawn him in too close. Much too close.

NEAR KIRKUK, IRAQ, APRIL 10, 2003: Saddamist Fedayeen fighter (lying on the ground, to the left of the Fedayeen truck) was shot and left to die by local Kirkuk militia. The others in the photo are Kurdish militia.



It must have been ten or fifteen minutes after Rick had turned toward the oil fields when we asked our driver to stop at that same crossroads. I was with Sandro Contenta of the *Toronto Star*, a good friend and a great reporter. We saw the black smoke from an oil well fire rising up from inside the refinery, but the road was desolate; it felt more dangerous by virtue of the fact that no one was on it. We moved on, deciding not to chance it. We would double back later to see the oil fields and check out the fires.

We were anxious to get to the center of Kirkuk, so we pushed ahead on the straight road where the front lines around the city were crumbling. At a checkpoint near the entrance we ran into the Kirkuk Brigade, a group of fighters we had gotten to know back in March, in the weeks before the war, waiting for the front lines to open.



THE BRIGADE WAS ORGANIZED around a field commander named Tariq Gogja. He lived right on the front line; from his rooftop you could see the Iraqi army tanks protecting a ridge. Back in March, we ended up sleeping there on the cold cement floor of his home. “Where’s America? Why don’t they bomb?” asked Gogja, looking out as Iraqi soldiers laid land mines and moved about from one bunker to another. Tariq was a thirty-eight-year-old Kurdish lieutenant colonel in the forces they call Peshmerga—the word means “those who face death.” He lived up to the name. Shot nineteen times in more than twenty years of fighting for the Kurdish opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein, Tariq was one of the Kurds’ toughest fighters.

Tariq’s right trigger finger had been blown off in March 1991, when he and his fellow Peshmerga held Kirkuk for less than two weeks during an uprising that George Bush, the father, had called for in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. Ultimately, the US failed to back them, and thousands of Kurdish fighters were slaughtered by Saddam’s forces as they quickly retook Kirkuk. “Kurdistan,” as some 3.5 million Iraqi Kurds insisted on calling their quasi-state, was a kind of consolation prize for that earlier fiasco of American policy in Iraq. After the Gulf War, it had been protected by a US- and British-enforced no-fly zone, but it still also served as a bitter memory of past American promises. Since he had lost his trigger finger in the fighting, Tariq had perfected how to shoot with his middle finger. To prove his agility, he held the middle digit up to the sky for us and flexed it obscenely. Then he laughed.

Tariq was an aging warrior, and maybe that was why Rick and I—feeling like aging warriors ourselves—felt a kinship with him. We also got to know his best friend, Pola, and his longtime comrade in arms, Ali. He and his commanding officer Hawlkut, the colonel, and the more aloof but respected Rafaat, were the inner core of the Kirkuk Brigade, and they had taken us under their wing. They called us *kaka*, which was a Kurdish term of endearment that could be roughly translated as “brother-in-arms.” Tariq insisted that Rick and I stay with him. We were grateful. It was the perfect accommodation for war correspondents—a commanding view of the front line, electricity for computers and satphones, and a comforting sense of being surrounded by Peshmerga with guns.

On March 25, Tariq said goodbye and rejoined his unit, which was one of the more elite forces within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the political party that controlled the Kurdish-dominated eastern sector. He packed his home video camera, which was always by his side. He looked depressed. He wasn’t going to take that ridge, not now. He was heading to the Halabja Valley to fight the Islamic militant group Ansar al-Islam—a smaller war within the wider American campaign to topple Saddam. This sideshow of the Iraq War gave Tariq and those of us who covered it a sense of dread. It felt small and meaningless, and it was easy to wonder why you would be risking your life there.

Even though he and the Kurdish forces hated Ansar al-Islam almost as much as they hated Saddam’s regime, Tariq looked forlorn about not heading toward Kirkuk. Kirkuk was their homeland. It was, as the Kurds saw it, their promised land. Their Jerusalem. But since the 1970s, Saddam had conducted a policy of “Arabization,” tantamount to ethnic cleansing—confiscating Kurdish homes and lands, and handing them over to loyal Sunni Muslim Arabs and Bedouin tribes. The Kurds want their city back. A city of one million people, Kirkuk was now a volatile mix of Kurds, Arabs, Turkomans, and Assyrian Christians. All of them held claim to its rich history, and all of the forces—the ethnic groupings as well as the US government, neighboring Turkey, and the multinational oil companies—were also vying for its vast natural resources. Kirkuk was a tinderbox waiting to blow. When Tariq left to fight the militant Islamic group, I handed him two Cuban cigars and my brother gave him some flattering warrior portraits of him and his buddies. He held the cigars up just before he left and said, “We’ll smoke these in Kirkuk.”

At the end of March, after heavy air bombardment of the Ansar al-Islam positions, a furious ground battle coordinated by US Special Forces and

the Kurdish Peshmerga broke out in the Halabja Valley. We headed there to try to find Tariq. We jumped into a rented 1985 Toyota Land Cruiser and tore out of Chamchamal for the roughly two-and-a-half-hour drive to the valley that lay beneath the Zagros mountain range that separates Iraq and Iran. In remote pockets of the rugged terrain Ansar al-Islam and its seven hundred fighters had over the last two years taken control of a string of twelve villages and imposed upon them a Taliban-like rule. In his February presentation to the United Nations where he made the case for a war on Iraq, US Secretary of State Colin Powell had highlighted Ansar, claiming—but offering little proof—that Ansar completed a triangle that linked Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. He presented a satellite photograph of a mud-hut complex where he said Ansar was attempting to produce chemical and biological agents for use in its terrorist war on the secular Kurdish government and in its wider vision of “jihad,” or “holy war,” against what bin Laden liked to call the “Zionist-Crusader alliance.”

The drive to the Halabja Valley was always harrowing. We had been coming and going on that road for weeks but on this day it had a particularly ominous air. Kurdish security officials warned us that three Ansar teams had shaved their beards and were plying this road looking to pull off another suicide bombing, not just against Kurdish and US soldiers, but against us—western journalists. We stripped the “TV” signs off the truck as we got close to the valley and then plunged farther toward the front line, knowing it was completely closed to journalists. We talked our way past the first checkpoint, manned by Kurdish soldiers, with the promise that we were just going to talk to the local security office to see about getting in. Then we made a run for it, doing our best to fake the hard-ass Special Forces look. In the back seat, we sat up ramrod straight, held our water bottles like we were cradling M16 assault rifles, and nodded confidently through dark sunglasses. We instructed our driver to say only one word at each checkpoint: “Americans,” and then keep moving.

We were in. A blown-up and burned-out carcass of a vehicle used in an Ansar suicide bombing mission lay in a heap at the turn in to the village of Khormal. That bombing had killed three Peshmerga and a colleague of ours, an Australian cameraman named Paul Moran. We tried to look past the wreckage out at the dramatic landscape—a vast green plain of spring clover bursting with yellow daisies and red anemones that slopes upward to greet the low-lying hills and snow-capped peaks beyond. A lush patchwork of green and brown fields, largely uncultivated. After decades of conflict in this pocket of northern Iraq, the fields have been seeded with land mines.

The town of Halabja has become synonymous with the capacity for evil in Saddam's regime. It was the site of a 1988 chemical weapons attack, killing some five thousand Kurdish men, women, and children. Although George W. Bush used the victims of that attack as poster children in his call for war, western criticism of the attack when it happened was muted. During the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam's militantly secular regime was a de facto ally of the United States—a bulwark against Iran's Islamic revolution. The Kurds who lived along the northern border with Iran were caught in the middle of the fighting. Fifteen years after Iraqi airplanes dropped the shells laden with VX and mustard gas on Halabja, there were still thousands suffering from cancer, miscarriages, blindness, and congenital birth defects. America had never provided a dime to help them.

Despair at the West's indifference to Kurdish suffering provided fertile soil for militant Islam. It was first planted in the late 1980s by Saudi charities who offered aid to desperately poor families willing to conform to the Saudis' strict Salafi, or Wahabi, interpretation of Islam. Women were to be veiled. Men bearded. Prayers at the mosque were mandatory. The proselytizing of the rural Kurds, who were overwhelmingly Muslim but far more moderate and traditional in their ways, was relentless. The Saudis donated prefab mosques where Koran-thumping clerics railed about the evils of the West and the need for a "return" to a more fundamentalist Islam. The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan was born. And after the autonomy of the Kurdish area was established in 1991, the IMK became a political player. Their movement drew urban Kurds from Erbil and Sulaimaniya to the rural villages of the valley. Then the movement fractured into two more militant wings—Ansar al-Islam and another group known as Komala. And so, as if to set the stage in this sideshow and all the absurdities that would follow, these Islamic movements that came out of the first US-led war in Iraq were now forces the US would be opposing in the second.

Komala's stronghold in the village of Khormal was relentlessly pounded in the US airstrikes that preceded the ground offensive on Ansar. Thirty of Komala's followers were killed while they were sleeping by a missile strike on their barracks. Komala's leadership and its several thousand fighters emerged from the rubble and agreed to an amnesty deal in which they were relocated—albeit temporarily—to other areas. The removal of Komala provided the US Special Forces and Kurdish fighters an easy entrance into the mountain hideouts of Ansar. The US Special Forces' forward spotter teams had been picking targets for weeks and

strategizing on how it would corner Ansar in the hills. This battle was promising to be a smaller version of the US-led battle against Al-Qaeda at Tora Bora in Afghanistan. The way the Special Forces saw it, the assault on Ansar was to be a textbook offensive against a militant Islamic group—a chance to test the playbook they’ve been training to perfect against Al-Qaeda-linked groups from Yemen to Uzbekistan, Somalia to Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge.

It was about 2:00 p.m. when we pulled into the fortress of a local Kurdish commander who put us up for the night to watch the action unfold in the hills. On the roof, three US military forward observers sat in plastic chairs with laptop computers and military maps calling in coordinates for the ongoing air strikes. They didn’t stay long, and we avoided them—because the commander asked us to and because we thought they’d have us thrown out. An unmanned US military drone provided real-time aerial footage of the movements of Ansar fighters through ridges and mountain passes. Like Civil War field commanders, we sat on the rooftop and watched the fighting. Five-hundred-pound bombs from B-52 strikes and laser-guided JDAM missiles from F-14 fighter jets cracked like thunder and echoed across the valley. Thick black plumes of smoke rose up from the folds of the hills.

We didn’t know it at the time, but after interviewing Tariq’s fellow Peshmerga, US Special Forces, and Ansar prisoners, we learned that we were watching Tariq and his men—in what would prove to be the most intense firefight of the offensive.

We covered the war against Ansar al-Islam from the rooftop of a Peshmerga commander’s home. It offered a full view of the mountain range in which the fighting could be seen as it jumped hill to hill and valley to valley. Down on the ground, at some point in the fighting, Tariq handed his video camera to his lifelong friend Pola and told him to try to get some shots of him in battle. Pola obliged, but teased him about his vanity. Tariq was on a wild tear, Pola remembered, lugging a Russian-made machine gun known as a “BKC” and literally shooting from the hip, sweeping the caves with its heavy-caliber ammunition.

Ansar fighters returned fire from some freshly dug graves just up from the village of Golp, and just around a hard corner on a dirt road at the entrance to Sargat there was more intense fire coming from the caves just above the now leveled Ansar military complex and barracks. Through binoculars we could see Ansar troops firing from the caves and mountain hideouts—small puffs of smoke emerging from the shadows in the

sheer cliff faces above the Ansar stronghold of Sargat. From the low-slung entrances to the caves, about twenty of Ansar's most committed recruits were engaging Tariq and his men in a fight to the death.

Ansar al-Islam was made up largely of so-called Afghan Arabs, holy warriors from all corners of the Arab world, some of whom had been trained to fight jihad at Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. They included two fighters from Saudi Arabia, an Algerian, several Lebanese, at least one from Qatar, and a Palestinian named Ahmed Mohammed Tawil, who hailed from the Rafah refugee camp in Gaza. A grizzled veteran with a dirty black beard and cracked teeth, Tawil had come to fight "Jews and Americans," as he would put it. These fighters were infused with bin Laden's theology of jihad; for them death only meant passage to paradise.

US-armored Humvees with .50 caliber mounted machine guns provided support. Alongside them, US Special Forces knelt, hoisted, and aimed shoulder-fired rockets on the caves. Kurdish forces along with "dismounted" US Special Forces advanced forward. It was a six-prong advance on Ansar by one hundred Special Forces and roughly seven thousand Peshmerga. Each prong was named for a primary color. Tariq and his men were in the "yellow prong," which was being coordinated by the US Special Forces' Team 81.

Several of the Special Forces told us they were impressed with Tariq and his men, although several also expressed regret that they did not have more time to get to know—"force recognition," as one of them called it—the Peshmerga who were fighting and dying alongside them. One told me: "They are all like mountain goats, man. The 'Pesh' were doing one hundred yards every five minutes under very heavy fire . . . That's a very good clip for any soldier. You could definitely say they take more risks than your average American soldier. We called it a Kurdish bomb. You just throw those guys in there and they start blasting away." Another US soldier, a forward spotter, remarked on how the Kurdish fighters, especially Tariq, were protective of the younger Americans, telling them, "This is our fight." These aging warriors didn't want these young American bucks fighting their battles, and they pushed hard—and far in front of the US forces—up the hill into the Ansar strongholds. As one member of the Special Forces with the earnest, singsong accent of Minnesota, said, "They kept treating us like their sons or something, you know, telling us to stay back, protecting us. It was pretty remarkable to see, you know."

The "Afghan Arabs" in the caves of Sargat were lying in wait for Tariq and his men as they moved up the hill. Tariq motioned to his men that

he was going to push forward, and Pola picked up the video camera and pressed Record. A blast of fire came from one of the caves, and a bullet struck Tariq in the left side of the abdomen. Then, Pola said, it was as if everything moved in slow motion through the video lens. Tariq dropped the heavy machine gun and spun like a dancer and then bowed, clutching his gut. He collapsed. Pola and several other Peshmerga dragged him out of the line of fire. It was about 4:30 p.m. and the light was fading.

As we watched from afar, we had no idea that the ambulance that screamed down the road was carrying Tariq—fighting for his life and losing. From our rooftop perch at dusk, the ground fighting was visible in the form of red-phosphorus-tipped bullets known as “tracer fire” that streaked like blinking neon through an almost purplish light in the gathering darkness. What we were seeing was the US Special Forces plan being carried out with precision: air strikes, followed by Kurdish fighters advancing and support fire from the Humvees. We could see the Ansar fighters backed up the hills toward Iran, their fire withering. There were longer pockets of quiet now. Ridge by ridge we saw the Kurdish fighters lighting flares and then showering tracer fire up into the sky like Fourth of July sparklers—a signal to artillery crews that they had taken the hill and a traditional Peshmerga victory celebration. The locals would get the glory, and they would suffer the casualties. From the US military point of view it was all textbook.

Our driver brought us the news; he had been informed by another driver who had been with the family. “Tariq is dead!” he told us. My crew quickly drove to Chamchamal, where we met up with my brother, who sadly told us what had happened. Tariq bled to death from the gut wound that cut him down in Sargat.

The next morning we attended the funeral. A line of Kurdish fighters flanked the entrance to the mosque in Chamchamal. Each one of them held up their right hand, a kind of oath of war or a testimony of faith. Inside the mosque, we removed our boots and sat cross-legged with hundreds of other fighters on oriental carpets. Shafts of daylight sliced through the green-tinted windows of the mosque. The Muslim cleric, or imam, chanted the Muslim prayer for the dead—mournful and mesmerizing. The clicking of machine guns shifting from broad shoulders to the ground mixed with the clacking of Muslim prayer beads in calloused hands. As we left the funeral, the line of Peshmerga again raised their right hands and we did in return. “*Assalamu alaikum*,” or “Peace be with you,” and we answered, “*Wa alaikum assalam*,” or, “And upon you may there be peace.”



AND SO, in April, now that we were finally on the road to Kirkuk, we were remembering the history we had with these fighters. Tariq's closest friends refused to dwell on his death or to lose focus about getting to Kirkuk, but the mood had shifted perceptibly among his brigade. Getting into Kirkuk still mattered to them more than anything, but arriving without Tariq would take a lot of the joy out of it. On that day when the road suddenly opened up, the Kirkuk Brigade was among the first forces to push their way into the city in the early morning. When we arrived in the center of town, there was Rafaat, from Tariq's own Brigade, already holding court in a governor's office which had been ransacked and looted of much of its furniture.

The US forces were slow to arrive. The first ones in sealed the oil well, showing their sense of what mattered most to Washington. Such priorities understandably caused concern among some in the Kirkuk Brigade, who felt it was the Kurdish forces' right and responsibility to secure the oil fields. Rick was also there at the oil fields, but if there were any US Special Forces securing them, he didn't see them. What he did see was a man emerge from the truck that had barreled toward them. As the man bounded out of the vehicle, Rick saw through his zoom lens that he was carrying two grenades. Rick kept shooting. The motor drive on his camera was going off furiously now. One of the Peshmerga Kurds pointed his rifle at the Fedayeen fighter and then grabbed him by the throat. The two men were in a death lock. The driver of the Fedayeen truck then reached for a Kalashnikov on the front seat and one of the Kurdish soldiers turned and shot him.

My brother was still pushing forward and clicking off frames. What he didn't know then was that the Fedayeen fighter was making a deal with the Kurdish soldier. The former told the latter that he had no issue with the Kurds, he just wanted to kill Americans. The Kurdish fighter took the Fedayeen's AK-47, but let him go. The Fedayeen fighter still had the grenades—biting on one pin between his teeth and the other held in his left hand. He disappeared into high grass on the side of the road.

The Kurds dragged the wounded passenger out of the vehicle and left him for dead. Then they drove off with the truck, which made Rick realize that the booty of war may have had a lot to do with this scene. Rick moved up and did some close-up photographs of the wounded fighter on the side of the road, who reached up to him and pleaded in Kurdish,



NEAR KIRKUK, IRAQ, APRIL 10, 2003: Kurdish militia stop a Fedayeen soldier (right), who brandishes a grenade in his right hand. He pleads with the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters to let him kill the American journalists reporting on this skirmish.

Kaka. Rick took a frame of him reaching up and then walked away. The dying man had tried to kill him. On the way back to his vehicle, Rick and Paul heard shooting erupt all around them; it appeared that there were more Fedayeen fighters in and around the refinery. They were worried about the fighter with the grenades, who was somewhere in the tall grass. Paul wanted to push forward; Rick felt that they were just taking too big a risk. Their driver, an old Peshmerga named Jaza, kept the vehicle running. Suddenly there was a big eruption of gunfire and Rick said, "Let's go!" Rick and his colleague Paul ran about forty yards toward the car, fearing for their lives.

While these events were unfolding, I was on the other side of town watching a crowd of Iraqis toppling a bronze statue of Saddam about two miles away in the center of Kirkuk. It was a joyous moment for the Kurdish crowd. They were beating the fallen icon with steel bars, pieces of wood, and even their shoes. A beautiful scene, but also a predictable one at this point. A statue had been toppled just two days before in Baghdad, and it was now happening all over Iraq. I kept looking over my shoulder for my brother—figuring if he wasn't here there were two possibilities. One was that something bad had happened.

Another possibility—something which I feared was more likely—was that I was in the wrong place, and some wild scene was going on

somewhere else. Was he out there getting the big story while I was missing it? When you are covering a war, there is always a frantic race to see everything and, when it finally breaks wide open, a feverish, irrational insecurity sets in. You figure other reporters must be seeing more action. The sibling rivalry thing just made it that much worse. The whole war was coming to an end, the regime was crumbling. Where the hell was Rick?

In front of the governor's office, I saw Tariq's old brigade members and friends. They were in charge now, issuing orders to the troops on which buildings to take over. Hawlkut gave me a bear hug and asked, "Where is Kaka Rick?" I told him I didn't know, that I was a little bit worried about him, but that I was sure we would meet up at some point. I noticed that Pola was off on the side of the action, and he looked sad. I stopped and talked to him; he was thinking of Tariq. He started telling me of the fight that killed him. Pola wept openly and put his hand on my shoulder. He said that, on that day, he had had a premonition that Tariq was going to die. Tariq's wife had felt this as well, he said; she came to him and asked him to take extra care to look out for Tariq. There were tears welling in Pola's eyes. He told me he wished he hadn't videotaped the scene, that he should have kept focused on the fighting and forced his friend to focus on the war. I tried to comfort him. I told him that you can't look back, and that Tariq died doing something he believed in. Pola was weeping openly in the bullet-scarred entryway of the governor's office—in front of a mural of Saddam that had the eyes scratched out and the face covered in red spray paint. Broken glass from windows smashed by looters was everywhere, and as we shifted uncomfortably on the soles of our boots, it crunched underfoot.



IN IRAQ I ended up feeling like I was experiencing two different wars. The first was the one I covered for the paper. This was the standard chase for hard news—another stop on the “Axis of Evil” world tour which since 9/11 had taken me to the front lines in Afghanistan and now here in Iraq. In the straight journalism of this war, there were two stories in the north, and both spoke to the long haul that America will face in Iraq. First, the view of Ansar al-Islam and the militant Islamists—that the US invasion of Iraq was the next war—would undoubtedly be a significant factor in the US efforts to establish security in post-Saddam Iraq. And second, the long-dormant ethnic tensions in Kirkuk—now pushed dangerously close to the surface—would likely pose the most profound challenge

for the US as it sought to establish the institutions for an occupying and eventually transitional government in Iraq.

The other war I was witnessing was an interior story, one that was less interesting to my editors back in Boston. That war was about the personal relationships you develop with fighters like Tariq, and all those caught in the middle of the larger forces at play, like the Kurds we had come to know in Halabja. It's about the complexity of traveling with a brother (not to mention close colleagues and friends) in one of the most lethal wars for journalists in history. They were the small stories, given the enormity of what was going on around us, but they were what made up what felt like *my* war, as opposed to *the* war. When you're covering a war it is just too easy to forget that all geopolitical conflicts are made up of these more personal, interior wars. They are about people and about people being killed, and the great sadness that causes.

Pola got hold of himself and told me, "You should find your brother." The words were bracing, like cold ocean water. I knew I had to immediately focus on finding Rick, and I set out to do just that.

Rick's encounter with the Syrian fighters in the oil fields was ending. The Fedayeen fighter with the two grenades had disappeared in high grass on the side of the road, and they feared he was stalking them. The wounded fighter seemed to be bleeding out. More shooting was erupting, and they were heading for their truck. The gunfire was intensifying all around them. Rick's driver, Jaza, was certain the fire was directed at them. They didn't stop to find out. They just kept driving. They'd made it out alive. Much later, I would ask Rick about that moment and why he'd kept shooting when he knew his life was in imminent danger. What kept him there, doing his job?

"I guess I had already resolved that I could die in this situation. You know that going in, of course, but now I was doing a quick calculus that the threat was very real, that it was right here upon us. What kept me shooting was what was happening right in front of me. It was hand-to-hand combat. How often do you see that? Very rare. And that was the whole thing, I guess, a desire to capture a rare moment of very intimate fighting," Rick said.

He explained, "War these days is not usually like that. It's air strikes and drones and sniper fire and distant contact, but this was right there in front of us. Men from two warring sides trying to kill each other. So I just thought, 'I am not going to stop shooting.' Not at that moment."

Forty-five minutes after Rick and his colleague Paul had survived

the ambush, Sandro and I finally doubled back on the road in search of them. We came back to the crossroads. This time we could see cars on the road, with the oil fires still burning in the distance. We went toward the oil fields, following the smoke from the fire. We saw a body on the side of the road.

As a small crowd was gathered around, I asked the driver to stop. As we approached, we saw two Kurdish soldiers kicking what was obviously a dying man. The wounded man had a bullet wound to the chest and was not armed. He was wearing brown woolen clothing that was clearly not a military uniform. A crowd of Arabs were gathered around the wounded man; a young member of the crowd kept saying, in English, "Mercy! Mercy!" The Kurdish fighters grabbed us by the arm and pulled us away from the small crowd, nodding in the direction of the body and saying, "He tried to kill our men. He tried to kill Americans. They are Fedayeen." They said there was another dead fighter also in civilian clothing in the field.

The dying Fedayeen fighter kept trying to lift his head. A pathetic glance up at the Westerners, by a desperate man demanding decency in a country that has known little of it. This seemed a look we will all have to get used to in post-Saddam Iraq. When he lifted his head, the Peshmerga kicked him down. It was too barbaric and cruel, even within the barbaric and cruel context of war. We demanded that the Peshmerga find an ambulance and argued through our interpreter that even an enemy fighter, if that was what he was, had the right to live. The Italian journalist even argued that it was practical to spare him, since if the fighter were alive at least they could interrogate him. The Peshmerga threw us a long glance that was somewhere between disgust and annoyance. One of the Peshmerga who appeared to be in charge emerged from a building they had commandeered, holding a Syrian passport. He said, "Look! This one is Fedayeen from Syria." I wrote down the name in my notes. Youssif Aboud Mohammed. Then, finally, they stopped a small, beat-up sedan, painted orange and white, that happened along the road. We helped them load the body into the trunk and asked the driver to assure us that he would take the wounded man to the hospital. The Fedayeen's wounded bare feet hung out of the back of the trunk, and his head banged off the side of the trunk as the car sputtered down the potholed street, still thick with smoke from the oil well fire. I believe he lived—we later learned from Peshmerga and other reporters that a Fedayeen fighter from Syria was recovering in the hospital.

At the time, I had no idea whatsoever that the man on whose behalf we pleaded for mercy was the same Fedayeen fighter who had tried to kill my brother less than an hour earlier.

The next day the news came to me from some colleagues in the field: Rick had nearly been killed, but they believed he was okay. I was stunned, and wanted to get in touch with him, but communications were completely down. Finally by e-mail my editor informed me that he was okay. Three days after the incident, I finally connected with Rick, back in Sulaimaniya. He was shaken, and he was heading home. I would go with him.

We were waiting for a C-130 military cargo plane that would lift us out of northern Iraq to a military base used by NATO forces in Bulgaria. While we waited, we drank warm cans of Turkish beer and pieced together all that had happened. In the hotel lobby with our duffel bags packed, Rick finally showed me his photographs. It was only at that moment that I realized that the man who had tried to kill Rick was the same fighter we had saved on the roadside near the oil well fire. The intersection of fate stunned us both.

“You fucking saved his life? Why the hell did you do that?” Rick asked, only half joking.

We told Rick the story and went over the details, and we checked again and again, each time more certain that he was indeed the Syrian fighter lying by the side of the road, bleeding out from a gut shot.

The collapse of the last Saddam stronghold of Tikrit was under way, and I could now write in my newspaper that the war I had been covering for them was over as well, or so we thought. Actually it was just beginning. I would go back again and again to Iraq over the following eight years, as we chronicled the war’s full descent into disaster for US foreign policy and for the Iraqi people. On one trip to northern Iraq in 2008, I checked at the hospital in Sulaimaniya to see if the name of the Syrian fighter was recorded in any admission reports, but there was no such thing. Certainly not from those chaotic days at the start of the war, and I checked with a high-level security official in Washington as to whether this Syrian fighter might have ended up in Guantánamo or in the network of prisons of our Arab-world allies. I found nothing, but I will always wonder whether he is still alive and, if so, if he remembers that intersection of fate in 2003. Does he have any idea that the American who tried to save him on the roadside is the brother of the American he tried to kill? Rick and I often muse about going to Syria to find him someday.

My trips to Iraq are less frequent these days. I haven't been back now for three years, but ten years after September 11th, I am still going back to Afghanistan on occasion, and I'm still reporting the Long War. Rick has made a few more trips to Afghanistan as well. We are just too old for this shit, but we keep doing it. There's something that keeps drawing us in, like the flames flickering beyond that crossroads in Kirkuk.