

ABSTRACT

Title: "THERE WILL ALWAYS BE ANOTHER WAR": A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT'S RETROSPECTIVE ON REPORTING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Sharon Maria Behn, Master of Arts, 2014

Directed By: Associate Dean Ira Chinoy,
Philip Merrill College of Journalism

Every day, hundreds of journalists risk their lives to cover news developments in volatile areas of the world. They have been beaten, kidnapped, tortured, and killed. Yet they continue to do their jobs, and new reporters join the fray. Their work as foreign correspondents in challenging environments carries a high price that is not fully recognized by news organizations, the public, and often not even by the correspondents themselves. This thesis helps provide an understanding of that human cost. The methodology is autobiography, which allows for an intimate look at the behind-the-scenes experiences and personal toll during a 30-year career in journalism. Salient themes include employment status – staffer vs. freelancer or stringer – as well as gender, ethics, and fear and its consequences. The need for such understanding has become increasingly relevant as many media organizations, under budgetary pressure, ask reporters to deliver more and ever faster from a dangerous world.

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CORRESPONDENT'S RETROSPECTIVE ON REPORTING FROM AROUND
THE WORLD

Sharon Maria Behn

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Advisory Committee:
Associate Dean Ira Chinoy, Chair
Professor Maurine Beasley
Associate Professor Christopher Hanson

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Dedication

To my children.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge, in roughly chronological order: Sandy Sloop, the UPI editor who first hired me; Pascal Fletcher of Reuters, who was unfailingly kind; Peter Wise, then with AP, for being a constant friend in need; Beni Ammar for his coat; the Maryknoll sisters for a roof over my head in Juba; Oxfam; Thorir Gudmundsson of ICRC; David Jones, a great editor; Willis Witter for his support; Semoud, a loyal driver; all my journalist friends who have reached out and helped me cross treacherous territory; all the of interpreters and fixers who put their lives on the line to help me get the story; the House of Ruth; Associate Dean Ira Chinoy for his patience and insights and without whom this thesis never would have been written; those who gave me the room to write; my best friends Tamara Laird and Cornelia Sarvey for never giving up on me; and above all, my children, Aphra, Nicholas and Allegra, whose love and strength have made me a better mother, person and reporter. Jose Miguel and Stephanie, may you always rest in peace.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There are very few heroes in the world, and I am not one of them. I am a street journalist: I cover events as they happen on the streets and alleys of the world. I flinch when things get rough, and things get rough a lot. But I wouldn't give up my work for anything. I was once asked what I would do if I had a million dollars. I would be doing the same thing, just staying at better hotels. Maybe taking a few more breaks.

It takes a certain toughness to be a foreign reporter, to land in a foreign country, sometimes without cash, organize travel, cars, translators, and fixers in a place where you don't always speak the language and where there is often conflict or all-out war. And to do it alone. It can be dangerous and lonely work. And scary as hell. From the reactions I have had to my work, it appears that many people don't fully understand how journalists get the information from far away – whether from bombed out cities, refugee camps, remote villages or anger-filled capitals from Africa to Asia – that becomes the news on their doorstep, television or computer screen later the same day. A stranger in an airport once asked me if I was flying to Iraq to tell more lies. Why would I fly into a war zone to tell lies? What would I gain from that? Another person accused me of being a traitor because I was flying to Iraq but not telling the real story of American success and sacrifice. Really? A traitor? This from someone who had never stepped foot in Iraq.

I have received emails with amazing photographs of soldiers scrambling up hills in Afghanistan under fire, sent to me by people who were asking furiously why the press was not covering these events – photographs taken by Associated Press and other photojournalists. Somehow lost on the senders was the fact that journalists were

shooting the pictures, or recording sound, or taking notes, while working in exactly the same dangerous places as the soldiers, but without guns.

Most foreign reporters live a pretty pedestrian life much of the time. We don't have stables of researchers, comfortable cars, drivers or satellite trucks following us around. We do all of our own research, sometimes stay in places that resemble hell, and watch wide-eyed as our hotels are bombed, repeatedly. We have been shot at, threatened, harassed, arrested, and abandoned on the border between Iraq and Kuwait with nothing but a backpack in the middle of a war. We have begged and, when needed, bribed hotel operators and other Internet providers to get our stories out.

But sometimes the hardest part is coming home. It took me years to figure out that the hair-trigger temper, the feelings of isolation, alienation, and anger were part of my inability to cope with the return to normality, which is no longer normal for me. I realize now that soldiers and aid workers go through the same thing. But unlike them, outside of a circle of journalists, and the occasional "What is it really like over there?" I have heard comments more like these: "Well, nobody told you to go, you asked for it," or "you like the adrenaline rush," or even "what kind of mother are you?"

There is a rush, no doubt about it. It's the rush of being at the center of something important, of moving fast, of uncovering lies and telling people's stories, and being able to do hard things. But it is not the rush of horror, or pain, or seeing others suffer, or fear. Everyone hates the fear, the horror. Everyone hates the suffering their families go through – even when their families manage to stay together.

Twenty-four hours a day, journalists around the world report on political, social, cultural and religious developments, allowing a global audience to better understand the world they live in. The reports are written informatively, contextually, sometimes ironically or even amusingly. But perhaps we should also know how these stories are found and who explores, writes and produces them. Perhaps in understanding the process, we will better understand the context and the true cost of the news.

There are many different kinds of journalism. Some people choose to write about the intricate world of local or national politics, and in some countries, this can cost the reporters their lives. Others are passionate about long, painstaking investigations into financial or criminal issues. And there are foreign correspondents who spend their lives moving from country to country, or from conflict to conflict.

This thesis will focus on what it means to be a foreign correspondent, the challenges and rewards of reporting in often unstable situations, and how the news received every morning in a daily paper, radio show or Internet page actually gets there. How did the story start? Who wrote it? How did they find out about it, who did they talk to? What decisions did they make along the way? What compromises did they make to protect their lives or the lives of those helping them or the lives of the people whose stories were being told? And in particular, what is it like to be a woman doing this work – in an often macho journalistic culture, and often in places where there are added elements of danger for women who do this work.

I want to address these questions because what we know about life in some of the most difficult parts of the world is brought to audiences by a vast, multinational

network of extraordinary reporters, writers, photojournalists, and cameramen, many of them incredibly brave, with deep knowledge of their stories. Their words, their stories, their images can be transformative. They don't just record history, they illuminate it. They choose this work mostly because they love the challenges, rise up to the difficulties, and learn about themselves and others through it. They also often have a sense of responsibility to the people who otherwise have little chance of being heard. Much of their work is accomplished at great personal cost, yet they are somehow compelled to go on. For the most part their names are not household words – unless, in some cases, they are unfortunate enough to file their final reports from conflicts that claimed their lives.

In the course of my research into the lives of female foreign correspondents, I found that there is little academic material that focuses on particular issues that these journalists face, and how those issues may or may not affect the way they cover the news. What does exist is fascinating, opening a window into the stories behind the reporting, such as the personal reflections in *War Torn: The Personal Experiences of Women Reporters in the Vietnam War*, a compilation of autobiographical accounts.¹ After reading their words, I felt so much better about myself: I wasn't crazy after all. I believe it is important to know these background stories, particularly now when there is so much suspicion of the press, perhaps born of a lack of understanding of the actual nature of the work.

So what does it mean to be a foreign correspondent, and why do people do it? Partly it's because there are few other jobs where you can spend your Tuesday

¹ Tad Bartimus, et al., *War Torn: The Personal Experiences of Women Reporters in the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004).

morning hovering in a helicopter in the shimmering sunlight above a huge Shi'ite pilgrimage in the city of Najaf, then land and dig into a meal of chicken with your hands while talking to an Iraqi military officer. These are not the details that make it into my news reports, but these are things I am going to write about here, in my attempt to explain some of the ground realities and challenges as they played out in my own life, as a small piece of a much larger picture of how foreign news has been reported for the last 30 years.

My approach is to use my own life as a case study that I believe will help tease out and focus attention on important issues in that larger picture. Over a 30-year career, I have worked as a staff reporter, foreign correspondent, bureau chief, stringer, and freelancer for news organizations with local, national and international reach – including United Press International, Agence France Presse, the *Washington Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and Voice of America. I have filed reports in English, Portuguese, and Spanish and worked in French. Along the way I returned to graduate school for two master's degrees, including one to expand and improve my journalism skills in radio, video and online reporting in addition to print. I also became a mother of three while continuing to take on foreign reporting assignments in volatile areas.

My journalism career began in 1984 at a small local English language newspaper in the country where I grew up, Portugal, and moved to United Press International in 1986 after it had declared bankruptcy. At the UPI office in Lisbon, we were still sending news via ticker tape. A few years later, I was using a small computer, but to send my stories I would have to unscrew hotel telephones from the wall and hook up into the phone lines. Now, of course, everything is digital and

moves at breakneck speed, and I file stories in a variety of forms – text, sound, photos, video and social media.

Undertaking this autobiography has been a surprisingly challenging experience. I have found myself exploring difficult issues that I normally would have left tucked away, untouched. But focusing intensely on my own personal story without giving myself much room to hide has allowed me to offer a level of intimate detail and narrative continuity that I think would have been impossible to achieve if I had chosen to interview a number of other female foreign correspondents instead.

In the balance of this chapter, I will provide more detail about the relevant base of literature from which my thesis departs, and I will discuss my autobiographical method and the issues involved in using such an approach.

In Chapter 2 I explore whether being a staff correspondent versus being a stringer or freelancer affects the type of story being covered, and how it is covered. Absolutely, it does. I have been a journalist for 30 years. For about half that time I was a stringer or freelancer. The rest of the time I have been full time staff, but I still work closely with freelancers. These itinerant reporters without staff positions need to sell their stories in order to pay the rent. As a result, they are heavily dependent on what editors want. And the coverage that news organizations want but cannot provide from their own diminishing staffs and diminishing budgets tends to come from areas that are in turmoil. This is especially true for stories that have not yet reached the international headline-grabbing level. So freelancers and stringers are hired instead. These reporters have little or no protection and often work at great personal risk. They may be financially compelled to do more of the “bang-bang” stories, as many

editors still follow the “if it bleeds, it leads” mantra. For reporters who, as a result, routinely dive into conflict journalism as an adventure, the risks are great, both physical and psychological, and in the case of stringers, there is no home-base organization to fall back on for support and treatment.

In Chapter 3 I consider whether the gender of the reporter is relevant in journalism and, in particular, whether it is relevant in understanding the experience of being a foreign correspondent. Being female brings a diversity of experience, much as being of a particular race or ethnic background, but it is not relevant to the kind of news that is covered. Yet there is evidence of bias in the way others, including editors, view gender. This can at times affect who gets to cover what, although these patterns are changing. Gender can also make the challenges of covering a story, or even a region, much harder than some would expect. There is constant sexual harassment. In volatile or dangerous situations, men are often the ones in power, and cultural sexual politics can prove particularly difficult for female correspondents. Women have to constantly maintain a careful balance between being friendly and being professional, as well as understanding what those limits are in different cultures. But even in reporting circles and liberal cultures where gender is more of an academic construct than a ground reality, equal-rights attitudes towards women often change when women become mothers. Many societies still barely tolerate mothers leaving home to put themselves at risk for the sake of their work, even if that work is for a worthy cause. For the reporter, motherhood can broaden an understanding of the world around them. It also exponentially increases the emotional and psychological cost for both the correspondent and her family.

In Chapter 4 I explore the degree to which standards of ethics taught in the journalism classroom apply on the ground. Journalists tend to develop their own personal codes of ethics that dovetail with their professional ethics. I did not study journalism formally as an academic exercise until 25 years into my career. But I have wrestled with ethical questions and found that what is being advised in the classroom may not map cleanly to what goes on in the field where the dangers and the stakes in certain kinds of mistakes are high. One of the questions I have often asked myself is to whom are we responsible: ultimately, the reader, of course. It is our job to inform the reader in a balanced, contextual and fair way about what we see and experience on the ground. But other questions may provide conflicting answers. What is our responsibility to our sources, to those who prefer to remain in the shadows? What is our responsibility towards ourselves, our safety, and how much we should risk for a story?

Chapter 5 is about fear and its consequences. In the context of being a foreign conflict reporter, fear can be a healthy emotion. It makes reporters think first, it teaches them to plan for different contingencies, to understand the risks of a particular place. Most reporters have very personal relationships with fear, and we all handle it differently. The consequence of constantly confronting that fear is trauma. Being a journalist and particularly a foreign correspondent has given me opportunities to do a type of work that I love, to enjoy my professional life, to challenge myself and to succeed. It has allowed me to see things I never would have seen, to understand the world in a much more detailed way, and to talk to people from every different walk of life. But it has come at a price, not only to me but also to my family. I, like many

others, suffered from some form of emotional trauma. I, like many others, did not know it. That trauma plays out in different ways and if not understood, can damage our personal lives. In addition to the trauma, I have realized that our professional training is terrible when the same way of being invades our personal relationships -- the need for secrecy, the pretense of interest, being impartial and having a high tolerance for emotional pain. Some journalists succeed in turning one part of their life off to accommodate the other. Others do not. Journalists may thrive off the challenges of a difficult or dangerous story, but they watch their personal lives crumble as a result, even as they feel an overriding sense of responsibility to a story, to people who have no other way of being heard.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I reflect on why this lifestyle, despite all of its hardships, can still seem to be attractive and worth the costs. Journalism has given me the ability to be myself, to enjoy my life, to challenge myself and to succeed. It has allowed me to see things I never would have seen, to understand the world in a much more detailed way, and to talk to people of every different walk of life. Journalists experience history first hand, then try to bring those events alive to their audiences in a way that makes sense to those far from the front lines. It is never a straightforward process and rarely an easy one, but many reporters like me cannot think of doing anything else. This chapter attempts to answer the question of why foreign correspondents feel compelled to keep returning to danger zones and how our personal experiences in those zones, the hard lessons we learn on the way, make us better reporters. This thesis is not meant to be a theoretical or abstract answer to a question. It is an answer based on my own life. In the end, it is a single case, but it

incorporates what I have seen in the lives of hundreds of colleagues and competitors over 25 years, and so I hope readers will find it a significant contribution to understanding the circumstances and costs associated with delivering news from the world's most challenging and dangerous places.

.....

I felt compelled to undertake this thesis after trying, during the course of my studies for a master's degree, to understand my own motivations for the life I had chosen and that I continued to choose in new ways. In fact, before I had a chance to complete this thesis, I had the opportunity to move to South Asia in a new role as bureau chief in Pakistan for the Voice of America, which included regular trips to Afghanistan, as well, and one non-stop 18-day work trip to Egypt during the second military coup there in 2013.

As part of my studies, I searched the literature on foreign correspondents – and especially on female correspondents. I found this literature to be thin, although there were a number of works that helped inform my thinking and the questions I asked. A compilation of autobiographical essays, *War Torn: The Personal Experiences of Women Reporters in the Vietnam War*, helped me see that the self-doubt, fear, excitement and other emotions I had largely kept to myself were probably more common than I had realized.²

My War Gone By, I Miss It So, an account by Anthony Loyd of his time covering wars in Bosnia and Chechnya, provides a detailed look at one journalist's slow mental destruction through the boredom and horrors of covering these brutal

² Bartimus et al., *War Torn*.

conflicts.³ I hope that my own account can contribute to a broader understanding of what it takes to be a correspondent in such dangerous places, especially now when there is so much suspicion of the press – perhaps born of a lack of understanding of the actual nature of this occupation.

I also consulted works on writing memoirs and found a number of autobiographies helpful in approaching this thesis. *The Things They Carried*, a collection of stories by Tim O’Brien about American soldiers in Vietnam, was useful both for its storytelling techniques and its exploration of the way memory affects the narrator’s psychological narrative.⁴ An American Marine’s memoir of World War II in the Pacific, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, is a masterful personal chronicle of war that reminded me of the importance of small details when recreating scenes from the past.⁵

While these works were valuable, I came to feel that there were elements of the experience of foreign correspondents which needed more attention than I found in the literature on this subject. I chose autobiography as a means to do that – to use my own life as a case study.

While it was an interesting process to dissect my own life in a way I had not done before, this approach has special challenges and uncomfortable elements. I had to decide what was salient. And I had to contend with the question of what was reliable – in my own memories and in the memories of others with whom my life has intersected over the decades.

³ Anthony Loyd, *My War Gone By, I Miss it So* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

⁴ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998; first published 1990).

⁵ E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1981).

My approach to deciding what was significant for this thesis was to break up my experiences into a number of categories that ultimately became the themes of the five chapters after this one. These themes allowed me to choose from among a multitude of experiences and select those that were relevant.

As for memory, I made an effort to match what I recalled against the facts and observations in news stories I had written and photographs that others and I had taken. I have attempted to recreate conversations from memory. These may not be the precise words that were spoken, but they capture the essence of the experiences and interchanges involved. I sent out emails to old colleagues and contacts and asked them if their recollections matched mine. Ultimately, memory is a fragile thing, created out of a personal and subjective perspective on one's experiences. But memories are what mold our identity and change how we react to new situations. In their discussion on self, identity and autobiographical memory, Jefferson Singer and Pavel Blagov explain that "self-defining memories are uniquely eloquent passages" that dramatize our identity in narrative form. They also point out that:

... most narrative memories, and especially self-defining memories, are hardly sterile communications about past events that inform us in a methodical manner about the content, time period, and location of previous experiences. To the contrary, they are affectively charged reconstructions of past events that have the power to shake our rational understanding of past experiences, bias our ongoing processing of information and intensify the importance of current events that bear similarities to the situations recollected in these memories.⁶

⁶ Pavel Blagov and Jefferson A. Singer, "The Integrative Function of Narrative Processing: Autobiographical Memory, Self-Defining Memories, and the Life Story of Identity," in *The Self and Memory: Studies in Self and Identity*, eds. Denise R. Beike, James M. Lampinen, and Douglas A. Behrend (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), 126

At some point, after my move to Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2012, after I had begun working on this thesis, I made a conscious effort to capture my experiences and my feelings as a separate thread while I was reporting, writing and capturing the news in photographs, sound and video. In fact, the process I settled on for capturing these experiences – by sending emails to friends and family – provided such an invaluable opportunity to describe and reflect that there is a portion of Chapter 5, “Fear and Its Consequences,” based on a string of those emails that I kept on a trip to Iraq – a war zone I had already visited numerous times. Writing an autobiography has been a challenge. Honestly interviewing oneself is not an easy experience. I threw out the first 50 pages, which I had written in a fury of self-justification. I threw out the next attempt because it seemed self-indulgent. But it was necessary to do all that to reach a point where I could take a more agnostic look at the past while allowing myself to relive emotions that I had forgotten.

Going through old emails was one of the best methods I had of checking my own memories: the letters and notes that I wrote from various reporting assignments contained a lot of raw emotion and a level of detail that was invaluable. Talking to colleagues, friends and family helped me work through some of the harder passages and forced me to look at aspects of my life and work more honestly. Rereading stories I had written brought back a flood of sensory details, and I could almost taste the dust of Baghdad in my mouth, hear the crackling of termites eating away at my bush hut in Mozambique, and feel that stomach churning fear when I realized I was in danger. It has been, overall, a very interesting exercise.

Chapter 2: Staff Correspondent vs. Stringer and Freelancer

"Are you happy?"

Sherlock Holmes to Dr. Watson before they enter Dr. Moriarity's munitions factory, in *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*⁷

There is a strict hierarchy in the news business between staff reporters on the one hand and freelancers or stringers on the other. A position as “staffer” comes with all the benefits: paid travel, paid hotel, health insurance, life insurance, body armor, guaranteed payment. "Stringers" usually have some sort of contract with a particular news agency, whereby they are guaranteed to be paid for a number of articles per month, and may or may not get travel expenses. "Freelancers" are paid by the piece and are not guaranteed anything unless negotiated on a case-by-case basis. For those who did not get degrees in journalism from the world's top journalism schools and then graduate to unpaid internships and eventually to paid internships and then full-time staff jobs, freelancing may be the only way to break into the business.

As the budgets for news reporting shrink and the nature of story coverage changes, more and more news organizations are turning to freelancers to meet their coverage needs. However, there is a lot of discussion within the industry of the ethics of using freelancers in highly volatile combat situations. Some argue that using freelancers in situations like Syria exposes journalists to unacceptable levels of risk without any accompanying responsibility from the media organizations. For example, who is going to evacuate a freelancer or stringer whose leg has been blown off or who has been struck by a bullet? Who is going to negotiate the release of a kidnapped reporter not on the staff of a news organization?

⁷ Michele Mulroney and Kieran Mulroney, screenwriters, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, directed by Guy Ritchie (Warner Brothers, 2011).

Others argue that it is up to the reporter to decide what level of personal risk is acceptable. No one ever forces freelancers to enter a combat zone. It is a voluntary assignment. If freelancers accept these jobs and accept below-par conditions – not enough money, no body armor, and so on – they must accept the consequences.

Having worked as a freelancer, stringer and staffer, I can understand all the arguments involved. As a freelancer I have taken many risks, but I have turned down assignments that I thought were almost suicidal. One was a request from Video News International in 1995 to cover the war in Chechnya. The idea was first to travel with Russian troops to the frontline, then turn around and report from the opposite frontline among the Chechens – all for a total of \$1,500 dollars. The money did not even cover the cost of the body armor, let alone travel, food, drivers, cars, and any other related expenses in what was then one of the most dangerous combat zones. Oh, and they wanted it all on video. The specific instruction was: "We want to see the muzzle fire." I guess it had not occurred to them that with the small cameras we carried this level of detail would have meant being situated just inches from said gun, making the journalist a target to whomever was on the other side. I didn't go. Another colleague did, and ended up broke, sleeping on the floor of a news agency, and finally selling the footage to a different media outlet.

Being a freelance reporter is a love affair: moments of total elation and high-flying freedom, when everything is just right, and you know there is nothing else you would ever want to do, no other place you would rather be – mixed with periods of deep self-doubt, questioning, and the desire to just get up and walk away from it all.

In the middle is all the hard work – the organizing, networking, talking, persuading, and writing.

.....

I remember shivering. Partly, I was just cold. I turned and looked at the man next to me: good-looking, day-old beard, a tan baseball cap on his head, and most importantly, a jacket. God, I wanted that jacket. We were sitting in the back of a Hercules C-130, a workhorse cargo plane, where some nets had been strung up as like rope pews along the length of the plane. There was no heat, no noise protection. It was two in the morning. We were flying into the Algerian desert.

The night before, I had sauntered into a bar in the city's main hotel and invited myself to a table where a journalist had been negotiating with a member of the Sahraouian guerrilla group for a way to go see their desert camps. Sure, I could come along. After I realized what I had signed onto, I had a moment of panic. I called the press room in Lisbon, where I was living at the time, and talked to Peter Collins, a veteran journalist who had seen everything.

"If I'm not back in a few days, call someone to come get me, OK?" I have a flair for melodrama. "Yeah, sure." Peter hung up. Great. No sympathy there.

So, now I was shivering on the back of a cargo plane, heading into the Sahara. I glanced over again at Beni Ammar, the BBC reporter next to me.

"Cold?" he took off his jacket, and put it around my shoulders. I put my head on his arm, so very grateful. When you are a freelancer, with absolutely no backup, and usually little money, small gestures like that are particularly special.

I was 24, maybe 25. A year and a half before, after failing in my attempts to be a reporter in Brazil and the United States, I had returned to my childhood home in Portugal and joined a small local English-language newspaper, where most of the articles felt like they ended with the phrase "A good time was had by all." The editor was an Englishman, Nigel Batley. I started off physically collating the paper, moved up to the lightroom, where copy was pasted onto the printing sheets, and graduated to making tea for Mr. Batley. My tea-making skills were apparently below par, so I was allowed to type copy.

Every weekend, I would go out, dig up a story and write about it. Suicides in local slums, music, anything I could think of. I had never trained as a journalist, so I really didn't have a clue. On Monday, I would put my story on Batley's desk, and he would unceremoniously sweep it into the trash. I have no idea whether he read them. Finally, he did read one and called me in. The copy had red lines everywhere. I felt like I was back in school. But he had edited it! He made me understand what a lead was and how to structure a news story. In a year, I was on the three-person reporting team. Shortly after that I started freelancing for anyone who would take me.

Eventually, I got bored. I decided to travel around the Maghreb region of northwest Africa and write for all the editors who might be interested. Crain Communications took a story on advertising in Arab countries. I wrote about business issues in the region for The Financial Times Business Information. I withdrew all my savings and jumped on a plane to Morocco's famed Casablanca.

Then I don't know what happened. Somehow, my adventure seemed to be taking a much more serious turn.

I stared out of the window of my old-fashioned hotel at the traffic outside. What am I doing? What if something happens? I don't know anyone, I don't speak Arabic, my French is pretty puny, and I don't know whom to interview. What if I get mugged? Assaulted? I was terrified, frozen in front of that tall window, framed by long-faded curtains. I can't stay here. This is stupid. I took a deep breath. Ok, I am going to buy a knife. Anyone messes with me, I'll stab them.

Half an hour later, I was in the open-air markets, being followed by a very persistent man who wanted to show me the world. I think that's what he was saying. I finally whipped around and said, fine. Show me where the knives are. He did, then disappeared. It worked! I'm not sure if I ever would have used my knife – I kept it for years – but apparently a short, wild-eyed woman with frizzy hair wielding a weapon is enough to make most people walk away.

The cargo plane landed after a couple of hours, setting down on a runway of sand lit only by a row of jeep headlights. We were about a dozen journalists. A German television crew and I jumped into the back of a jeep and joined the convoy of cars, lights turned off, and drove off into the silent and densely dark desert night, an incredible umbrella of stars above. Every now and again, the drivers would put their heads out of the window and look up. With no roads, no sign posts, they were driving by the stars. The German crew and I looked at each other and laughed: is this cool, or what?

It was an amazing four days in the desert. We met the guerrilla fighters and their families. We even saw a guerrilla military parade in the middle of the sand dunes, guerrilla leaders under a tent canopy, their supporters out in the hundreds,

ululating – a sound that stretches out for miles across the sands. I was mesmerized, by the sounds, the colors, the good looking Sahraouian men, the tents, the sweet mint tea. This is work? Oh my God, this is amazing. I wrote a long piece about the guerrillas and presented it to *North South* magazine, a publication started up by former *Time* magazine employees.

My article was woefully incomplete. From what I recall, there was some context gathered from the US embassy library in Algiers, nothing about the Moroccan side of the conflict, no interviews with analysts. Thankfully, *North South* rejected it. But I learned a lot. I learned by watching Beni, by talking with him, and by having my article thrown out. I learned that this was what I wanted to do the rest of my life. And I learned that if I didn't get better at it pretty fast, I was going to starve and live under a bridge.

Freelancers and stringers have incredible freedom. You can go anywhere, cover anything. You can tell an editor to get stuffed – of course, you might never work for him or her again – and you can work at your own schedule. On the other hand, if you don't work, you can't pay the rent. So sometimes you take incredible risks to get a story. Editors know this, and they use it. For media publications, freelancers and stringers are a good bargain. Editors are not responsible for freelancers, don't need to pay health insurance, and most of the freelanced work is accepted "on spec" – if they like it, they buy it. If not, too bad. Good freelancers usually build up a stable of editors and publications with whom they work. One story can be rewritten with different angles or leads for different markets. For example, a bomb story can focus on the one Australian victim for an Aussie paper or the British

building blown up for the British press. The anti-Western group that was behind the explosion can be the lead for the US market.

I was not a very good freelancer. I hated rewriting the same story, and I was so disorganized and such a bad salesman that I just couldn't bring myself to schmooze enough editors to ever make money. I was in it just for the love of the game. Breaking even was good enough for me. But this meant that not breaking even was a very small step away from being desperate.

Soon after Algeria, I tried to cover the Cold War conflict in Angola. But my plan of marrying a Brazilian to get a passport that would allow me to travel to Luanda was torpedoed when my Roman Catholic mother found out I was about to use the holy sacrament of marriage to write about a war. Instead, a year later I was in Malawi. It was 1987.

My new plan was to drive through Malawi to the border with Mozambique, then cross the river in a canoe, sneak into western Mozambique, and travel with the universally-hated, right-wing-funded Renamo guerrillas in their brutal civil war against the Soviet-funded Frelimo fighters. An editor with the *Independent* of London had said he would be interested in my copy.

A couple of months later I found myself sitting in a small windowless room in the middle of nowhere in Malawi, staring at the Bible on top of the plain wooden coffee table. My plan to sneak into Mozambique had suddenly gone awry. Malawi had come under a lot of international criticism for its covert support of the Renamo guerrillas, and the country's leadership certainly didn't want any journalists snooping around near the border. I looked at the Renamo fixer with whom I had arranged to

travel. This can't be good, I said to him silently, eyebrows up. He shook his head, yeah, not very good. We had been arrested by Malawi's notorious Criminal Investigation Department, and we were waiting to be interrogated. All I could think of was if I get sent back home, I am going to lose my story and the cost of the ticket. It was only after the questioning that I realized I could have had a bullet in the head and been dumped in a ditch, and no one would ever have been the wiser. No one would have known for months, if ever, because as a freelancer, I was really on my own.

Eventually we were summoned into an office. Three huge CID officers were there. Just what was a white girl doing driving through the Malawi countryside? Was I linked to Renamo? No, sir. Not me. Was I a journalist? Where was my permit? A journalist? Who me? No, no, I was a teacher, helping little children speak English. Did I have a permit for that? A permit, uh, no, I was a volunteer.

This went on for a long time. They even used the good cop-bad cop routine. I could end up in jail. Things could be bad. But I stuck to my story. And I was naturally ignorant enough that it sounded plausible. Then they started questioning my fixer – in the local language. After a while everyone started to relax. They were even laughing together. Suddenly the Renamo fixer stood up. We were being let go, all with a lot of laughter and back-slapping. I asked my fixer later what he had said.

"I told them you were a white girl looking for some black men for sex, because everyone knows black men are better at sex. And that I am here to help you in your quest. And we are having a good time." Oh. The gender and race cards together. But

it worked for me. We were in Mozambique a few days later, though not before one more adventure.

Malawi has a huge sky. Way underneath, deep orange earth frames the road, bordered by expanses of wild green. Whole villages are in that green. The only way you would know that is by the clumps of whitewashed mud buildings on the side of the road, selling cold orange Fanta soda and lots of beer out of outsized refrigerators. It was the first time I saw women slowly getting drunk in the daytime heat, smoking lazily.

We were driving fast now, partly to put a lot of distance between ourselves and the CID office, and partly to get to the Shire river crossing. I had my seat belt on. My fixer never did. I remember turning to him to say he should put it on, when suddenly he swerved the car, and we crashed. The car flipped in the air and landed upside down, crushing the roof onto my neck. I must have blacked out, because all I remember was waking up and screaming "Socorro!" – the word for "Help!" in Portuguese. My English had disappeared. Villagers started coming out of the trees, running towards the car. My fixer managed to open his door and get out. My door was too smashed to open. Slowly, they pulled me out of the window, kicking glass out of the way. My head had a small cut. My fixer hurriedly turned down all suggestions of calling the police or the hospital. We have to get out of here, he said. We hitched a ride to the next town, then realized the CID were right behind. We managed to get another ride, and this time drove at night until we reached a village where the fixer had family. I spent the next three days there, lying on a hard wood bed, completely concussed.

The thing is, freelancers did not normally have health insurance. So even if I could have gone to a hospital, I could not have afforded it. And we do not have home bureaus to call in case of emergencies. There is travel insurance, but it is wise to read the fine print – it may not cover medical emergencies that arise in conflict zones. From my experience, and having both hired and worked with many freelancers, I have observed news organizations exonerate themselves of any responsibility when it comes to freelancers and stringers unless the case becomes a high-profile one.

A few years later, I had moved to Kenya and was covering the region for various publications. Relief flights were a good way for journalists to travel to hard-to-get areas. In 1988 I hopped into the cockpit of a massive C-130 four-engine turboprop cargo plane to get to the civil war raging around Juba, in southern Sudan. Juba had a bad vibe. You could almost smell the blood in the streets of the city. The paths outside the city were mined. Thousands of displaced people were slowly starving in sagging grey refugee tents set up amid acres of dust. The war between north and south Sudan was being played out with ordinary people – non-combatants – in the middle, just like every other war. Walking through the refugee camp, I finally squatted down in one tent where an emaciated mother held her newborn child. I was freelancing for a Danish publication, *Politiken*.

"What do you think the future holds for your child?" I asked. God, what a question. I was turning into a monster. "Everything good." What else is a mother supposed to say?

The next day I was exploring the markets controlled by the northerners. There were sacks overflowing with flour, cans of oil, sugar, and pulses. I decided to ask

why there was so much food here, while less than a mile away thousands of people were starving. I got some ugly looks, but I kept insisting. I wanted to know why.

Suddenly, someone grabbed my arm and started pulling me along the market street.

"You're under arrest."

"What? I have permission. Here, look at my papers."

"You're under arrest."

I was being dragged away by an angry man who was not in any uniform and did not care that I had flimsy sheets of paper giving me permission to report. Cell phones did not exist, but whom would I have called anyway? Suddenly, out of nowhere, a young man on a motorbike appeared, speaking English, defending me to what turned out to be a member of the northern-aligned militia. His arguing didn't work. Apparently I was going to be tried for my offenses. I was terrified. A few weeks earlier a British journalist had been held in a Juba jail for "offenses" and was only released when the British Home Office stepped in. The hope that the US government would step in for a freelancer was farfetched. The young man, whom I later learned was working for Oxfam, a relief agency, became more assertive. He would drive me to the "court," he would be my "lawyer." And he did. We ended up in a nondescript room. The judge and jury was one person – the same man who had arrested me. My Oxfam hero talked for a long time about the importance of the press, of the world needing to know what was happening in Juba, that I would tell the world of the plight of all – including the militia. The angry judge finally relented. I was free to go. But I had to leave Juba in the next 24 hours. The man from Oxfam drove me

back to the house where I was staying, the home of an order of Catholic missionaries. He said I should take the warning seriously. I did.

I never told *Politiken*. Why bother? I turned in my stories once back in Nairobi, Kenya, keeping my experiences carefully out of them. My only regret is that I do not remember the name of my Oxfam rescuer. But ever since, Oxfam has been at the top of my heroes list.

The truth is, freelancers love their work. They know the only chance they have of being published is to go where no one else will go. And editors have papers to sell. All freelancers know that publications will happily accept work from incredibly dangerous places – even as editors from the same news organizations may hedge on the question of responsibility by saying, “We never asked them to go, they were going anyway.” In my mind, especially in extremely dangerous areas like Afghanistan or Syria, this is unacceptable. I believe just as news organizations have developed standards of ethics that their reporters must follow, they must also develop ethical standards of safety and recourse for how they treat their news-gatherers. Some news organizations make huge efforts to safeguard their stringers who come under threat, such as offering them safe places to stay or airfare out of the country, or to help family members of stringers or local staff who are killed. Often, staff journalists will work to get their local staff or stringers out of danger, or hold fundraisers to help those wounded or the relatives of those killed. This year, for example, a local reporter for Agence France Presse was shot dead in Kabul along with his wife and two of his three young children. A third child survived. That child is now safely in Canada, and is receiving intense physiotherapy partly through journalists’ personal donations. But

as war zones get harder to report from and the use of “citizen journalists” or “citizen reports” increases, media organizations will also have to consider what their responsibilities are to these new kinds of reporters. One news organization was ready to supply cell phones to “citizen reporters” in Syria, but had not developed a plan of action if any of these reporters were caught and imprisoned for their reports.

In 1997, I was working in Kazakhstan, Central Asia, for a business publication named *Platts*, owned by McGraw Hill. Next door in Afghanistan the Taliban were gaining strength and stories were beginning to seep out about their public executions, women being forced to wear burqas covering them from head to toe, and the playing Afghan music becoming an offense punished by whipping. I called the *Christian Science Monitor* to ask if they were interested in features from Central Asia, which was suffering from a vicious post-Soviet hangover. Orphanages were being abandoned, children were dying. The Aral Sea, the largest inland body of salt water in the world, was drying up, too, displacing entire communities – all stories that I felt merited coverage. The answer was roughly this: "Well, yes, we'll see. But, you know, if you happen to be in Kandahar, then we would be really interested."

If I happen to be in Kandahar? No one just happened to be in Kandahar. It was the Taliban stronghold. But maybe I could go to Kandahar. I pulled out maps, made calls, found a United Nations flight from Pakistan. But how was I supposed to get to Pakistan? It was going to be really expensive, and the *Christian Science Monitor* at the time paid roughly \$110 per story. Maybe I could stay for free with the UN people? I went around for days trying to figure how to "happen to be" in Kandahar.

Finally, I gave up. There was just no way to get there, work there, and get out with a degree of safety. And I couldn't afford it. Not for \$110.

But other freelancers did go. And they stayed, some managing to impress a publication enough that they finally got hired as staff – the ultimate goal of most stringers and freelancers. That meant a regular paycheck, travel expenses, equipment on the company's dime and health insurance. Still, even without staff positions, freelancers went – and continue to go. But often, things do not end well. This was the experience of Jill Carroll, a freelance journalist on assignment for the *Christian Science Monitor*, who was kidnapped in Iraq:

Baghdad, Jan. 7, 2006 was a sunny Saturday. For me it promised to be an easy day. Not that my life in Baghdad was easy. Freelance journalism is a tough business everywhere. But I didn't want to sit in a cubicle in the US and write, as I had, about the Department of Agriculture food pyramid. Here I was living my dream of being a foreign correspondent – even if that meant sometimes living in a hotel so seedy it was best to buy your own sheets.

First up were some routine interviews of Iraqi politicians trying to form a new government. Three weeks before, the country had chosen its first democratically elected permanent government. But Sunni politicians were dismayed at how few seats they'd won.

Later, I planned to leave my virus-ridden laptop (stashed in the trunk) with a techie friend of my interpreter, Alan Enwiya.

Alan was vital to my newsgathering process. We had been a team for almost two years. We were also friends – it felt as if we were almost siblings – who'd worked through Iraq's difficult and increasingly dangerous conditions.⁸

Jill Carroll was one of the ones who accepted the *Christian Science Monitor's* offer, this time in Iraq. In January 2006, at age 29, she became the 31st journalist to be kidnapped in Iraq. That year was the height of the war. Every day, bodies were

⁸ Jill Carroll and Peter Grier, “The Jill Carroll Story: Part 1 – The Kidnapping,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 14, 2006.

found on the streets of Bagdad, dumped next to sidewalks or garbage piles. But while CNN and Fox TV crews drove around with heavily-armed and trained security teams, and stayed behind the relative safety of the blast walls of the Green Zone, freelancers such as Carroll lived in cheap hotels and hired local drivers to hop around the city.

Carroll's driver was let go by her kidnappers. Her interpreter, Alan, was killed and his body left in the streets. Carroll spent three terrifying months as a hostage of a Sunni militant group, listening to guns being cocked, and forced to appear in that militant favorite, the propaganda video. She was finally rescued and returned back to the States, where the *Monitor* offered her a full-time job.

At the time, there was a lot of support for Carroll. But there was also criticism among the journalist community and beyond of the risks that Carroll took. Somehow, the blame landed on her, not on the organization for which she was working. Somehow it was her fault that she did not have strong-arm security, her fault that an extremist group decided to kidnap her. Suddenly, rather than respect for getting great stories at personal risk which she had tried to mitigate, she was being slammed for not having been careful enough.

I have mixed feelings about this. I am by nature a very cautious journalist. I test waters carefully. I have a deep fear of being kidnapped, tortured, raped, brutalized – and that fear is close to the surface because I have so often been in places where that reality insidiously swirls around me. I don't take a lot of risks without having thought out a Plan B, and a Plan C. In Iraq, I learned never to tell anyone where I was going ahead of time, except for the one emergency contact person. I

never traveled the same road twice. I never had new drivers. I kept the same fixers. I had people I could call to rescue me. And that saved my life.

Others are much braver than I am. Some journalists take risks that perhaps I would not. But I don't think that is what is at question here. I believe Carroll knew how to mitigate the risks. She knew the turf. And risk or not, I believe that media publications have a duty, an obligation to their journalists, freelancers, stringers or otherwise. You cannot accept work then cavalierly say you are not in some measure responsible. They should be paid enough to stay in decent hotels. They should have some measure of insurance. What if the stringer or freelancer gets sick? Or is in a car crash? Do you leave them, saying, oh well, sorry you don't have health insurance, or medevac insurance. What if the journalist is shot? The organization should have a document containing everything from the freelancer's blood type, to next-of-kin phone numbers. What if they are killed? The organization should have an agreement to repatriate the remains. And they should have a plan in place if their contributors get kidnapped or arrested.

Without the reassurance that a news organization has your back, life can become very challenging for freelancers working in a war zone. Francesca Borri wrote this blog post during one of her trips to Syria:

He finally wrote to me. After more than a year of freelancing for him, during which I contracted typhoid fever and was shot in the knee, my editor watched the news, thought I was among the Italian journalists who'd been kidnapped, and sent me an email that said: "Should you get a connection, could you tweet your detention?"

... People have this romantic image of the freelancer as a journalist who's exchanged the certainty of a regular salary for the freedom to cover the stories she is most fascinated by. But we aren't free at all; it's just the opposite. The truth is that the only job opportunity I have today is staying in Syria, where nobody else wants

to stay. And it's not even Aleppo, to be precise; it's the frontline. Because the editors back in Italy only ask us for the blood, the bang-bang. I write about the Islamists and their network of social services, the roots of their power—a piece that is definitely more complex to build than a frontline piece. I strive to explain, not just to move, to touch, and I am answered with: “What’s this? Six thousand words and nobody died?”⁹

There have been very strong reactions to Borri’s blog. Some readers were sympathetic, seeing Borri and her work as heroic. Others, including fellow journalists, found Borri's comments as self-indulgent. There are hundreds of reporters who have traveled into Syria, staffers, freelancers and stringers. No one forced Borri to go to Syria, no one forced her to accept her low pay, and those not on the frontline cannot be expected to share her fears. A photographer friend of mine who has covered many conflicts as both a freelancer and staffer, was bluntly critical: "It is freelancers like that who ruin it for all of us. Why did she accept such a low pay? And then cry about it. If you agree to go, you assume it."

Media outlets, after their experiences of Iraq, Afghanistan, Algeria, Libya and Egypt, appear torn on their use of freelancers in war zones such as Syria. According to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, several main newspapers in Britain, including the Independent and the Guardian, went on the record saying they would refuse the work of independent journalists in Syria. But after the Syrian government’s August 21, 2013, sarin gas attack on neighborhoods around Damascus that reportedly killed

⁹ Francesca Borri, “Woman’s Work: The twisted reality of an Italian freelancer in Syria,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 1, 2013.

some 1,500 people, the same news outlets posted a search for reporters in a closed online forum used by journalists reporting from that country.¹⁰

I have had my own conflicts with this. I recently went to Afghanistan to embed with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) NATO troops there. I had arranged for a camerawoman on contract to come with me. However, ISAF requires media organizations to sign documents detailing their financial responsibility and liability waivers for all of their intended reporters, staffer, freelance or otherwise. My organization refused to assume full responsibility for the contracted camerawoman, and even though she accepted the terms, ISAF would not. The embed was canceled. ISAF later told me they were reviewing the paperwork to allow more flexibility for freelancers to embed. I am not sure they should. After 30 years' experience in the field, and knowing that reporters get shot, maimed or killed, I am convinced that all media outlets must assume a degree of responsibility for all their contributors.

This is where the reporting love affair can turn into an abusive relationship: media organizations exploit freelancers, and freelancers allow themselves to be exploited. It is a system that is fundamentally flawed.

I spent some fifteen years as a freelancer and stringer. I was in Portugal, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mozambique, Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Russia, Latvia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. I made little or no money beyond what was needed to cover my expenses. And I didn't always succeed. I learned everything on the job. I had a blast – but I also turned down those offers that I thought

¹⁰ Richard Pendry, "In Syria, freelancer demand amidst increasing restrictions," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 9, 2013.

were too risky. And I was ecstatic when I finally was offered a full-time job, complete with cell phone, expense account, regular hours, overtime, paid vacations, and health insurance.

Ironically, what I would come to find is that to keep that a job, it is not always a good idea to turn down the riskier assignments. Just as a freelancer can get a career-damaging reputation as someone who is difficult or refuses to enter danger zones, a staffer can be similarly labeled. Then when the opportunity arises for a really plum job overseas, that staffer can instead find himself or herself on permanent desk assignment, sitting in a corner of an office editing someone else's copy. Or even once abroad, a reporter can be pulled back to a home-office desk. As one senior editor, now retired, explained when I asked her about this, official newsroom policy was that if a correspondent were to fear for his or her life if sent to a particular conflict area, the newsroom could not force that correspondent to go. But, she added, the reality was that if a correspondent kept turning down assignments to dicey areas, he or she would not be much use to the news organization, and that would be a reason to pull the correspondent back. Even when applicants for staff positions are asked whether they are willing to take on assignments to dangerous areas and say yes, she told me, an editor might draw them out and conclude they are not a fit for that sort of work.

This fear of being taken off the foreign beat can push reporters – whether staffers, freelancers, or stringers – to repeatedly take on risky assignments when they could benefit from a break. More open discussion between editors and their field reporters – and better management of reporters in high-risk environments – could go

a long way toward alleviating this situation in which even staffers find themselves engaging in dangerous behavior.

Chapter 3: Gender

I wanted a knife. Not a little pen-knife. A big knife. One to hurt people with. Totally ridiculous because I have no idea how to use a knife to defend myself. I was 24 when I bought my first knife in Casablanca, Morocco, on my first solo journalist trip abroad. Morocco was not particularly politically dangerous – not at all, in fact. But as a woman traveling alone in a very male-dominated society, it seemed prudent to be able to defend myself from sexual harassment or worse. It was a reality then, and thirty years later, it is still a daily consideration.

Luckily for me, I make the worst cup of tea. Years before Iraq ever happened, my first editor, old-school British journalist and editor Nigel Batley, gave up on my making him tea after about two tries. But his old-school attitudes toward women permeated the small English language newspaper that I – and a staff of almost all women – worked for in 1984. We fought back in small sneaky ways. When he inserted what seemed to us like a sexist reference into an article I had written about a Portuguese female mayor, the desk editor rearranged the position of the advertisements so that we had to cut several words from the piece to make it fit. They just happened to be the words he had written.

That was almost 30 years ago. Since that time, the sexual discrimination I have run into is rarely overt in the newsroom, but it is a daily reality on the streets.

Nobody discouraged me from working as a journalist or from going somewhere to report. The discrimination I have felt in the newsroom is more insidious, seeping into managing editors' decisions of whom to send to cover a story, whom to appoint to a particular beat. As I spent most of my early career in the field as

a freelancer in Europe, Africa, Russia and Central Asia, I didn't really feel any particular gender discrimination until I worked for the French news wire agency, Agence France Presse, in Washington, DC. I remember the exact day.

It was September 11, 2001, 8:45 am, and the reporters and editors were gathered around the main table in AFP's DC office for the daily morning planning meeting. The chief editor was droning on, and I wasn't really listening. I was staring at the TV instead.

"Oh my God, it crashed into the tower. The plane, it crashed into the tower," I said, talking mostly to myself.

"It crashed right into the tower." That was Matt Lee, at the time one of AFP's best and most prolific reporters.

"There's a second one, there's another one," I cried out.

"No, no, it's a replay," Lee said.

"No, no, it crashed too."

Everyone was staring at the TV, in shock, then we all scrambled over to our computers.

September 11 was one of the biggest events to ever happen for the media. For the next 10 minutes stretching into the next three months, I worked non-stop, covering every press conference, and typing out "urgents" almost hourly.

But on that day, barely hours after the first plane hit, we had to get reporters to New York. We had no one on the ground.

I immediately put my hand up. I was one of the most experienced reporters there. As I recall, the conversation went something like this:

"I'll go!"

"No, Sharon, Thanks." "How about you?" he asked one male reporter, and then another.

Both, like me, had young kids at the time. They did not want to go.¹¹

"I'll go, I'll go," I sounded like a school kid.

They sent a male reporter – who made it as far as Baltimore when the train was stopped. I don't blame the reporters at all and have no criticism for their decision. It was their decision to make. But anybody who knows me, knows that I would have driven, biked and walked into Manhattan.

It was my first true disappointment as a reporter.

After that, I was turned down for Guantanamo, the U.S. prison for "combatants," for the Tora Bora military operation in Afghanistan, and for every other reporting assignment in potentially volatile situations. I recently contacted my AFP manager at the time, and asked him if he would have acted any differently today.

This is his response:

I vaguely remember having a discussion with you about reporting. It would not surprise me that I would have recommended against sending a mother in such a "volatile" situation. I may be old-fashioned or even "sexist", but I feel a mum is too "valuable", even more than a dad, for her family. And I would make the same decision without hesitation.

¹¹ I recently contacted one of those two male reporters, to check my memory. This was his response by email: "I was working the weekend overnight shift when the planes struck, so I came in and worked double-duty weekday overnights with [a colleague] for about two weeks. I never left the office, other than to go home. I had just moved in with [my fiancé] and we married on October 6, so I was in no position to head out on a reporting gig. I recall that [another reporter] went, but got stuck in a train half-way to New York."

I felt that perhaps part of the problem resulted from AFP not having any women in its top echelon of editors in the United States. I left AFP two years later, in 2003, when the *Washington Times* offered me a reporting job.

According to the September 2010 Global Media Monitoring Project report, “statistics strongly suggest that stories accorded high news value by newsroom decision makers are least likely to be assigned to female reporters.” In a special commentary in the same report, Amie Joof points out that even in 2010, newsroom editors, features editors and senior reporters, who are mostly male, are ordinarily responsible for assigning stories and journalists.¹²

Sexual harassment and gender violence are inescapable. They cross all national, ethnic and socio-political boundaries. My own experiences range from being sexually accosted in an elevator by the vice president of a leading think tank in Washington to being groped by street vendor in Cairo. It is not a question of how a woman dresses or what she says. It is more that women journalists are constantly operating within traditionally male-dominated areas, where power and control are often expressed through everything from opportunist sexual grabs to more insidious and life-threatening advances.

Journalists often work in situations where they are dependent upon others for their safety. And those who are in control, those carrying the weapons, those who can either ensure your safety or abandon you to extreme danger, typically are men.

Journalists being led into and out of Syria with the rebels are completely dependent on those rebels for their lives. In Afghanistan, if you are with male guides, you are

¹² Sarah Macharia, et al, *Who Makes the News? Global Media Monitoring Project 2010*: (Toronto: World Association for Christian Communication, 2010), http://www.genderclearinghouse.org/upload/Assets/Documents/pdf/gmmp_global_report_en.pdf

dependent on them to know what to do in highly dangerous situations. If a woman is confronted with sexual harassment in situations like these, the consequences can be extreme. Add to that mix: while you are being protected by one group of men, on the opponents' side of the equation exists the exact same male dynamic. In other words, there is nowhere to run.

There is a lot of discussion in academic circles about the ethics of using one's gender in the workplace. But in the field, gender is something imposed upon a female journalist, not something she seeks out. Conversely, in the battlefield, or in any volatile or male-dominated situation, academic considerations of what is ethical when it comes to gender quickly give way to basic survival. If I have to use the fact that I am a woman to get out of a dangerous situation, I will. If being a woman is putting me in a life-threatening situation, I am going to do everything to mitigate that risk. For years, I carried a knife, and that gave me a degree of comfort. I have also carried a taser and learned martial arts. I have never actually used any of these things. When situations have become difficult or even dangerous, I have relied only on my wits and the help of others.

Every woman develops her own survival techniques. You try to befriend your protectors in a non-sexual fashion. You need to be friendly – we want information, after all – without being over-friendly. You need to establish trust without being overly trusting. You need to present yourself as accessible, without being too open. You need to be able to smile in the face of many off-color or sexually inferring conversations without signaling any approval. You need to be one of the boys, while keeping your boundaries. And you need to maintain a blanket of respect around you.

Sometimes these work; sometimes they don't. The consequences range from harassment to rape to possible death.

I entered Iraq for the first time in 2004, hitching a ride from Kuwait to Baghdad with a Kurdish businessman with murky connections and his American bodyguard, a giant of a man wearing white snakeskin boots. We rode in a convoy of cars, everyone carrying guns, stopping only to buy gas by the side of the road, and to pee. Trying to pee in the empty Iraqi countryside torched by war surrounded by 12 men is not easy. I finally managed to convince everyone to look away, and I parked myself between the front and back passenger doors of one of the cars. No one ever tells you about these things. There was no handy-dandy booklet on “How to Cover a War as a Woman.” There are now many resources available online, but either there were none then, or I was simply not aware of them. My best advice came from fellow female reporters and other women in the field. One, never wear an underwire bra. If there is a bomb blast, the wire can pierce you. Two, always carry tampons. Another reporter may need them. and they are great to stop the bleeding from bullet holes. Three, pack very light, and know that batteries are more important than clothes. Four, learn how to pee into a cut-off water bottle in a moving vehicle. Five, always know the names of local guards. Those are the names you scream out when you need help. Six, trust your instincts. I would add one more: if you need glasses, either get 24-hour contacts, or get your eyes Lasik-ed. A bomb blast will blow your glasses off your face, and you will be caught blind in a very bad situation.

Whereas the dangers of war reporting are well recognized, the reality of gender and gender violence is rarely addressed by media organizations from what I

have seen and experienced. Perhaps this is because not enough women correspondents bring it up. Making an issue out of gender can get a staff correspondent reassigned to a permanent desk job pretty quickly. In order to help their reporters deal with volatile situations, many media now send their combat correspondents to what is known as “hostile environment training.” This is typically a week-long session taught by former military from one country or another. Journalists are placed in a variety of situations: booby-trapped houses, being kidnapped and held in stress positions, mass casualty trauma situations. But in my case, none of these trainings dealt with the challenges that a female journalist faces and how she can work to mitigate them. There was also no gender violence awareness training for the men taking part in these sessions.

Within the fairly tight circle of conflict reporters, I personally have rarely experienced overt gender discrimination from fellow journalists. In my career, I have protected my male cameramen as much as I have been protected. Working side-by-side with women and men, I have never felt much of a difference. To be sure, in some cultural settings there is a lot of male-talk that goes on that is annoying and can be offensive. But it has never hampered my work. Yet, others say there is still a degree of shock when men see women covering difficult combat zones. Francesca Borri, an Italian freelancer covering the war in Syria, describes it like this:

One recent evening there was shelling everywhere, and I was sitting in a corner, wearing the only expression you could have when death might come at any second, and another reporter comes over, looks me up and down, and says: “This isn’t a place for women.” What can you say to such a guy? Idiot, this isn’t a place for anyone.¹³

¹³ Borri, “Woman’s Work.”

Sexual harassment is a constant, daily presence. It permeates almost everything that a female reporter does, or doesn't do. It affects how you dress, where you go, how you go, and forms part of the daily risk calculation. It affects how you interact, and ultimately, it can endanger your life. Sexual harassment is mostly a game of power, and in the current world, men are still at the top of the power spectrum. Many of those we interview are men. And harassment occurs everywhere from Washington to the streets of Cairo. When working as a print reporter in Washington, I interviewed the vice president of a leading think tank several times. His habit of touching my hand at the table, which I gently withdrew, ended up with him assaulting me in the elevator. I informed my editor I would no longer interview that particular person.

In Cairo, while covering the military takeover of Egypt in 2013, I was often in Tahrir Square. In my 18 days in Cairo I did not see one fellow female reporter on the streets. Tahrir Square, with its massive uncontrolled crowds, had become rape central, and many women, reporters and otherwise, had been attacked there. I was there one day with my cameraman and fixer doing a TV piece on the revolutionary graffiti that covers the walls at one end of the huge square. It was three in the afternoon, the square was almost empty, and our car and driver were parked to the side. I walked by the wall, looking closer at the art, as the cameraman worked a different angle. I walked past a young man who looked barely 20 years old. He was tending a small wheelbarrow-sized kiosk. Without even trying to be subtle, he grabbed my breast. I was so shocked all I did was shout a string of obscenities. When I stomped over to the driver to tell him, he just shrugged his shoulders. But my fixer was a powerful

Egyptian woman squeezed into a delicate little body. Her reaction was clear: she walked over and lectured the young man until a crowd of men began to gather. She quoted the Quran, she cited Egypt's national reputation and pride, until one of the men slapped the teenager as punishment, and the offender apologized for his action. It might have all seemed trivial, but for both the fixer and me, it was important to make clear to all the men present that it was not acceptable to sexually harass a woman. Cairo has a reputation for having one of the highest rates of sexual assault of female journalists in the world. CBS's Lara Logan was raped in 2011. Mona Eltahawy was sexually assaulted that same year. Natasha Smith was stripped naked and assaulted in 2012. A Dutch reporter, whose name was withheld by the Dutch embassy in Cairo, was gang-raped in 2013. It was important to me to try to break that cycle.

Women do not always discuss these things amongst themselves. It is a given constant and we all develop ways to cope. A female colleague in Afghanistan once asked me how I made it clear to male contacts that I was not interested in being touched. I told her that I simply say that I am divorced and as a result truly hate men. It works sometimes. At other times it backfires. In Pakistan, one of the men I interviewed became a cell phone stalker. Unfortunately, he was well connected in a society where social connections equal power. That power is particularly dangerous in hostile environments.

I arrived in Iraq in 2004. American troops had been there for a year, the insurgency was growing in the streets, and the country was governed only by guns. There were men with guns everywhere: US security men, Iraqi businessmen, religious men. Everyone had weapons. Kidnapping was on the rise. The hotel where I

stayed had been mortared. Gruesome homemade videos of beheadings of foreigners and those who worked with foreigners were on everyone's cell phones. It was not a safe place.

I had been navigating the testosterone-heavy hotel for weeks. Days before my official departure, I emphatically refused to have sex with one of the men, and suddenly I was no longer welcome in the hotel. The next day, I found myself in a car being sent to the Iraqi border with Kuwait, squeezed between a 19-year-old waving an aging Kalashnikov in my face who cheerfully admitted he had never shot a gun in his life, and three other men. Someone supposedly had been enlisted to pick me up at the border, a strange, sandy, no-man's land.

When we got to the border, I realized this was a set-up. There was no one to pick me up. It was getting late. The driver told me his orders had been to leave me there and head back to Baghdad, a five hour drive north. I was terrified. I was calling the only contact I had in Kuwait, desperate. He said he could only come the next morning. The driver knew leaving an American woman alone at the border was a death sentence. He couldn't do it. He put me back in the car, drove to the Iranian-influenced city of Basra, found a hotel and rented three rooms – my room, the one directly in front, and one adjacent. He came into my room, which had two beds, took one mattress and wedged it into the window to prevent anyone entering. Then he gave me a pistol, put it under my pillow, and told me if anyone came in, to just start shooting. I have no idea how I slept that night. The next morning I was back at the border, picked up, and left Iraq. The driver was not so lucky – he was fired for not

abandoning me at the border. I know now that he was helped by an American soldier and now lives in Canada.

I have been rescued many times by the kindness of strangers, both women and men. And I have also developed an obsession with having a Plan B. And Plan C. I am always thinking of a way out, whom I can turn to for help, whom I can call, whom I can depend on.

In the field, there are many gender-biased cultural customs that female reporters face when working – in the more conservative Muslim countries, for example. Women can face almost constant sexual harassment from men on the street, or even from Western security guards freed from the anti-harassment laws of their home countries.

Yet, thanks to the incredible work done in the past by women reporters around the world and particularly during the Vietnam War, when sexism was a much bigger hurdle, Western society is slowly moving towards accepting women journalists and women combat reporters. Even though there is still a gap between women and men foreign correspondents, there are now more women working in the foreign field than ever before.¹⁴

¹⁴ Macharia, et al, *Who Makes the News?* ix: “Foreign and national stories are now reported by women almost to the same extent as local stories. This situation is different from the period 1995 to 2005 when local stories were more likely to be reported by women than those of a broader scope. 40% of local stories are reported by women, 38% of national stories and 37% of foreign stories. Thus, while the divides between local, national and foreign stories are becoming blurred in terms of the percentage of stories assigned to female reporters, the high reporter sex-gap continues across stories of all scopes.”

Motherhood

Being a woman foreign correspondent is one thing. Being a mother is another. While it is true that women who opt to keep their careers, or who must keep their careers for financial reasons – the same as men – do so at certain personal sacrifice, the heaviest cost is borne by their children. This is a reality I had to come to understand, and finally accept.

My first child was born in 1989 in Nairobi, Kenya, when I was still a freelancer. Morning sickness drastically cut down my work schedule. Most mornings I ended up passed out on the only couch in the Nairobi press center, an old sink-down sofa in the Voice of America office, feebly calling my patient husband to please take me home. The arrival of my daughter changed my life. She ended up being with me everywhere: in the UPI newsroom, in the car with the nanny as I ran into the Russian embassy to conduct an interview between feedings, in my arms as I slept. I went back to traveling when she was about nine months old. I bounced back from Addis Ababa, jubilant to be home, only to have her turn her curly-haired head away from me.

Having children never stopped me from working. When I was pregnant with my son, I covered the AIDS epidemic in Uganda. When I was pregnant with my third child, I was freelancing for Associated Press in Boston as my husband attended Harvard. She was six months old when I accepted a video training course in Philadelphia, and six months later we moved as a family to Moscow. Married to someone with a steady job, I had the luxury of being able to work part-time on stories that I really wanted to do and still stay involved in the daily lives of my children. I started a pre-school in Moscow. I made birthday cakes, organized parties, hid Easter

eggs, set up play-dates. A year and a half later, we moved to Almaty in Kazakhstan, Central Asia. We had a house with sporadic heat, electricity and gas. The children were doing their homework by candlelight, and I was continuing with my part-time schedule. I worked for the *Christian Science Monitor* and *Platts Oilgram*, a business publication. When I finally broke a story, Reuters offered me a full-time job -- a freelance reporter's dream. I turned it down. For the first time in my life, I had found something more important than reporting. I loved picking raspberries from the garden with my children, loved taking them on picnics or down to the dilapidated playgrounds in downtown Almaty and just watching them grow. As long as I could do that and work on features, at the time that was enough for me.

I started working full-time for AFP when the family returned to the United States in 1999 and we realized that we could not really survive on just one salary. AFP was shift work: one week I would work from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., another week I could be on from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m., or worst of all, from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. I tried to be an uber-mother, ironing clothes, doing the shopping, trying to keep on top of my children's schoolwork while working ridiculous hours. I remember getting back from a late-evening shift and waking up my seven-year-old son at midnight to erase and redo his homework. My temper started to fray, and the small cracks that had existed in my marriage for years started to multiply.

Journalists, like any others in stressful careers, will see that stress affect their marriages. From just anecdotal evidence I have gathered, it seems that as a foreign correspondent, if your relationship is not rock solid, and if both partners' roles are not crystal clear and mutually supportive, chances are your marriage will end up in

divorce. Journalism is all about deadlines, about seeing things that others don't see, about getting to stories that can be thousands of miles away. This means breaking off dinner dates, vacations, and traveling for long periods of time. The only way relationships survive, to prevent alienation, is through constant contact, through sharing what each other is doing, seeing, experiencing. On my return from my second trip to Iraq, I called a family meeting to talk about the importance of all us staying in touch. I was upset that during my weeks in Iraq I had received only two brief emails from my husband and nothing from the kids. Everyone nodded. Nothing changed. Years later, my oldest daughter managed to tell me that all three kids could not bring themselves to contact me during the time I was in and out of Iraq because it just hurt them too much. If they just pretended I wasn't gone, or that I didn't exist, it was so much easier for them.

I was never gone for long. Three weeks, two weeks, at the most eight weeks. It just felt like a long time. I spent 10 years working part-time as my kids grew up, taking short trips around East Africa from our base in Kenya, then brief forays around Central Asia from our home in Kazakhstan. It was a good balance. When I was back to full-time reporting in Washington, and I thought my children were old enough, I leapt at the chance to start international reporting again. It started with a fellowship to Asia, exploring South Korea, Vietnam and Indonesia. Then in 2004 I headed to Iraq, and in between my trips there I also covered the elections in Mexico and the rise of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Everything was great. I was happy and pumped to be back doing what I love. But I was not prepared for how much I would miss my children, and I was too obtuse to understand what it would cost them.

In 2004, I was over-the-moon happy that I was covering the lead story of the time, but my kids were at an age that they started to realize I was gone. After my second departure to Baghdad, my youngest daughter, aged 11 at the time, wrote this to herself. I found it later.

Living a Life

Left there in the taxi's hot dust. Nothing to hope for but the prize at the end.

The prize coming to you at the end of three cold weeks.
The touch of her hand wiping my tears kept me safe ... in the moments
I stood there

I felt nothing here, nothing moving, it was all wiped away in a painting. Not soothing, the Plane flying above. A familiar voice and a soft whisper in my ear. "Don't cry my darling" it said. "Live a life". "I thought I was" I spoke back. But the voice left, just wind was heard now ... I missed it, already.

So quickly, she left with a kiss and a hug. The prize is a family member.

A caring mother returning to her loving daughter silently.

The time was supposed to travel fast, not for the girl.
Lying bored in bed, not stories to hear, or hugs to handle. Just living a life ... of a journalist's daughter.

What my children could not know, what no one knew, was how much I missed them in return and how difficult it was to be far from them. During the course of multiple trips to Iraq, I interviewed a lot of women, mothers who had lost their sons. I watched one mother slowly sink down a rabbit-hole of despair until she spent all her waking time glassy-eyed in front of the TV in the corner of a room. During those times, and actually pretty much all the time, my children were always uppermost in my mind.

Iraq was mostly a young and male-dominated environment. During my years of coverage, although I met many female reporters, I did not meet any other journalist

who was a mother. I did not pay much attention to this at the time. But it was hard being unable to express the anguish I felt, either to other reporters in the field, or to friends back in the United States whom I felt did not agree with the work choices I was making.

After three years of covering Iraq from the street, I was embedded with U.S. forces in 2007. For most of my time with the Stryker Brigade Combat Team, I was the only journalist, and the only woman journalist. It was a slightly disconcerting experience. I could feel the distrust seething around me. I remember always walking with my shoulders pushed back, my head held high. I was fighting for respect while trying to understand the war from the soldiers' perspectives. It was a whole new world for me, thousands of miles away from my world as a mother of three young children in Bethesda, Maryland. And sometimes those worlds collided.

Camp Striker was a camp within the larger Victory Base Complex on the edge of Baghdad. It was miles of sand-colored tents, sand-colored ground, mud and gravel. I lived in a CHU – a Container Housing Unit, basically a tin can kitted out with a bed, a chair, a closet and an air conditioner, squashed next to dozens of other CHUs where the officers stayed. Compared to how most soldiers were crowded into their tents, it was pretty luxurious living.

In the spring of 2007, my son was 15 years old. As I recall, I had found out that Nicholas, my son, had arrived at the house of a friend with blood all over his face after having been mugged outside the Takoma Park Metro station in Washington. He was fine now. My stomach fell to the floor. I wasn't there, oh my God, I wasn't there.

Cell phone connections were notoriously bad in the camp. I wandered around different groups of tents, into more open spaces, frustrated, holding my phone in the air to see how many bars I could get, and tried calling home. I finally got through to my husband, who handed the phone to my son. Nicholas sounded shaken. He and two of his friends had left the 7-11 store in front of the Metro station and found themselves surrounded by three grown men who corralled them in the parking lot. The assailants had demanded the boys' wallets and then told them to take off their clothes. Nicholas refused and was punched in the face. He threw his baseball cap at them and ran. His friend tossed a wallet and ran right after him.

All I could keep thinking was that I had not been there to protect him, had not been there to take care of him.

"I am so sorry, Nicko, so very sorry," I said over and over again. "You're OK? You sure you are ok?"

"I'm fine, mom."

Later that year, I was back at Camp Striker for my second embed, this one just over six weeks long. It was late August, early September, and hot. The temperatures hit 120 degrees during the day, and the entire place felt like a convection oven. I had been on patrol, and I was tired. September-October is homecoming time in Bethesda schools, but my eldest daughter had said she did not want to go. But then she changed her mind, and in a phone call told me she needed a car to the school, another to the dance, and a ride back, all at particular times. I scrambled, made calls to all my friends in Bethesda, cursing the phone as I kept losing the connection, muttering to myself like a madwoman as I walked around the camp with the phone in the air. I

finally got through to an AFP colleague with children of his own. He organized and paid for the entire night of private cars – my daughter’s homecoming night was saved. But being a long-distance mother sucked.

A close friend of mine once told me, "You can be a mother, or you can be a reporter. But you can't do both at the same time." Her advice came down the phone line after I had called her seeking moral support, trying to deal with the guilt of leaving my three young teenage children to cover the war in Iraq. I didn't agree with her at the time, but she was trying to make me see things from the perspective of my children. I could cope with the two roles – they could not. Others have been a little more brutal, suggesting I had abandoned my children to work as a combat reporter. The reality is that the general expectation in society is that mothers stay home – you can work, but you are not expected to leave the country, let alone undertake any risky assignments. I have never heard any such criticism of fathers who are foreign or combat correspondents.

From 2004 to the end of 2007 I traveled three or more times a year, mostly to Iraq. I was also attending night school at Georgetown University to get a Masters in International Relations. My marriage was on the rocks, my children were stressed, and I was at the pinnacle of my career. I worked hard in the office, and I worked hard at home trying to keep everything together. I went to my youngest daughter’s middle school and asked them to be sensitive when discussing the war in Iraq while I was over there, and to keep an eye out for her. The teachers were great. I asked my children to try to be proud of me – I wanted to be a good role model. It was too much

to ask of three young teenagers whose mother had decided to risk her life at work instead of staying home to protect theirs.

Once, back at Camp Striker, I had walked in on one of the majors watching a video of his two blonde baby daughters that his wife had sent him. He and his wife talked often. Most of the soldiers there did, reaching out to their families, their girlfriends, their wives, their children, almost trying to touch them through the computer screens. They would take turns sitting at the computer, logging onto Skype night after night, telling their loved ones everything was fine, just another day in the sandpit, nothing to worry about. Their wives would say the same, nothing to worry about, oh, the plumber came today, no, nothing major. Some told funny stories about their families, they all ribbed each other. When the battalion was extended from 12 to 15 months in Baghdad you could almost feel the soldiers' nerves cracking. I was lucky: I was there only weeks at a time.

On several occasions I tried to switch careers – hence my masters at Georgetown. But I was repeatedly turned down by every think tank and international organization to which I applied. When my marriage finally collapsed in 2008, I quit the *Washington Times*, stopped working as a journalist, and stayed home. I promised my youngest, who was 15 at the time, that I would not travel again until she turned 18. I got a job as a cashier in a neighborhood toy store. When it closed, I got a job as a cashier and bagger in a nearby organic food store. At the same time, print journalism in the United States was also collapsing. Newspapers were laying off staff. Others were closing down their presses. Online journalism, with all its social media permutations, seemed the only place with a future.

I had sworn I would stay home, but it was hard. The war in Afghanistan was raging, and one of my best and bravest journalist friends was there covering it. She was the one in the eye of the storm, and I was in suburban Bethesda carrying grocery bags for shoppers. When my friend and I finally talked, she said: "Sharon, there will always be another war."

At age 49 I went back to school, to the University of Maryland, to get a master's in journalism to pick up new skills. As my son would say, I was "schooled." From dismissing Twitter as a teenage waste of time, I became a convert. Creating websites was an adventure, although not one I did very well. But Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, and interactive multi-media journalism all rolled around my head as an incredible way to communicate, to tell a story. My new skills and past experience landed me a job with Voice of America as an editor in 2010. I was jumping with happiness. When I was chosen to be the bureau chief in Islamabad, covering Pakistan and Afghanistan, I was overjoyed. I reached out to my children, now aged 18, 20 and 22. I wanted their blessing. They all said to go -- they were proud of me. I got on the plane to Pakistan to be a reporter: it was like falling in love all over again.

Chapter 4: Ethics

"For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel – the spiritual texture – of great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity."

– Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*¹⁵

Journalism ethics should be clear, absolute. Media organizations go to great lengths to detail the ethical rules and regulations that their reporters must follow. The Society of Professional Journalists has ethical guidelines that, as they point out, are voluntarily accepted by thousands of journalists worldwide.¹⁶ Having a clear code of conduct is the only way journalists and media organizations can guarantee the accuracy, fairness and credibility of their reports in the face of an increasingly suspicious and cynical audience. I agree with these guidelines, and I accept that my responsibility is to the reader. But reporters also have responsibilities to their sources, to those being interviewed, and to their own safety.

In difficult situations I have bribed officials to be able to move from one place to another. I have given customs officials batteries and cigarettes when it seemed impolite not to. Those are all easy decisions. But things can get harder. When I moved to East Africa in 1988, there was quite a bit of turmoil in the region. In Ethiopia, one of the biggest stories to break was that of the emergency airlift of some 14,500 Ethiopian Jews to Israel in just 36 hours. A day before the story was made

¹⁵ O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 81.

¹⁶ Society of Professional Journalists, "SPJ Code of Ethics," last modified 1996, <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

public, a colleague of mine was told of the massive airlift by a diplomat, then asked to maintain secrecy to protect the lives of the thousands who were being moved out of the country.¹⁷ My colleague asked my opinion about whether he should break the story regardless of what his source had asked and risk the lives of thousands. A previous airlift in 1984 had been stopped when news was leaked to the media and published. My call was to respect the request for silence, and he agreed. The story was front page news the next day – albeit with a different dateline – and he had missed his scoop.

Sometimes journalists will overreach in their desire for a story, or even for their desire to include factual details that will enrich the story itself. Again, it is an ethical call to decide where the boundary lies between relating the truth and endangering a source or all those connected to the source.

Still in East Africa, for weeks I had been trying to score an interview with a former Vietnam War pilot who was flying relief aid into the warzone of southern Sudan. I had been calling the pilot's wife for days, making friends with her to get to her husband. I was a 30-year old freelancer with the excitement of an exclusive story almost in my hands. A Vietnam vet living in Africa flying dangerous under-the-radar sorties to deliver aid to war victims in southern Sudan – this was a great story. I walked up to the gate of his house at 3 p.m., just as we had agreed, wearing a t-shirt and jeans, carrying a notebook, happy. A woman came tearing out of the bungalow, screaming at me down the short driveway.

"You filthy f@*&kers! What is wrong with you? You bastards!"

¹⁷ Joel Brinkley, "Ethiopian Jews and Israelis Exult as Airlift is Completed," *The New York Times* (May 26, 1991).

The shockwave of her anger hit me so hard I couldn't move. What? Was this the wife? What had happened?

"Uh, Ma'am?"

"Get the hell out of here, never come back, I never want to see any of you again! DO YOU HEAR ME?"

"Uh, yes. Uh, mmm, is something wrong?" Hah. Understatement of the year.

I left, totally confused, my great story gone.

What had happened was that another journalist had been pursuing the same story and apparently got there a few days before I did. There had been a long comfortable interview inside the pilot's house. At one point his short-wave radio came on and there was an exchange, you know the "Alpha, Charlie", "Do you copy, Roger, out" type of talk. The reporter had been taking notes, and he included the exchange in his story. It was a great detail, it made the piece immediate, added a touch of dramatic reality, it was great. But it happened to be confidential, it happened to reveal important flight information about a man illegally flying supplies into another country. It directly affected his life and that of hundreds of others. From my ethical perspective, it was an irresponsible and unnecessary use of a quote. The story was dramatic enough without it.

But the question of when to use a quote and when to ditch it is a difficult one, and it is not something that is easily taught. How do you measure the importance of what has been said against the impact of publishing it? Years later I was to face the same question in Iraq while walking at night with an American soldier around a military base in a sprawling gray gravel area known as Camp Liberty, in Baghdad.

We were talking about the war, the United States' constant attempts to bring some semblance of stability to a country spiraling out of control in war of Sunni against Sunni, Shia against Sunni, gangsters, government kill squads, tribal loyalties, and religious extremists of all types. And he just said, "If it was up to me, I would bomb this place, bomb it into a plate of glass." It was a great quote. The soldier had just spilled it out, finally letting his true feelings about Iraq show through. He hated the country, hated the people, hated the whole situation. In his view, there was no other solution to the war but to destroy the whole place and start again. And it captured all the frustration of the American forces in one small sentence. It was going to lead the story I was writing on what the soldiers really thought about the conflict and their chances of "winning." I had the soldier's name and rank. He knew he was talking to a journalist. It was all by the book. But I had a creeping unease about using it. He had spoken in a moment of despair. Did it really reflect everything he felt? Was it even up to me to decide that? I knew what would happen if I used the quote. The soldier would be hauled up in front of his superiors, he would be disciplined for talking too much, his entire unit would suffer. Did I really need that quote to get the point of my story across? Did I really need to harm someone for one juicy quote? Where did my responsibility lie?

A few days later, it happened again. I was bumping along in the back of a Stryker – an eight-wheeled armored fighting vehicle – after yet another 12-hour patrol. My head was heavy, my eyes closed; I was awake, but it looked like I was napping. The soldiers started talking amongst themselves.

"I had it in my f@#*king hands, man, this haji's brains, in my hand."

I cracked my eyes open. Haji was a term a lot of American soldiers used to describe Iraqis. I don't remember the response, just that moment, the fascinated horror of the young soldier next to me, his hands out in front of him. I closed my eyes, repeating the quote to myself in order to remember it.

I never used either of those quotes. At times I have regretted that decision. In the end, I think those moments would have said so much, they would have reflected aspects of the war more accurately to a public back in the United States that was still infatuated with the idea of a heroic military bringing peace to Iraq in a way that hundreds of my words couldn't. I just couldn't bring myself to destroy the careers of young men who were speaking candidly in the trust that their words would never reach the printed page, even though my professional responsibility was to my reader, not to the soldier. But sometimes when you are out in the field, things are not that clear, things get ambiguous. The line between being responsible for someone's life and responsible to your public becomes foggy. As I said, looking back, maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was right.

It was 2007 and American soldiers had been getting blown up in Iraq for five years. For some of the soldiers, this was their second year-long tour in Iraq, and for others their third tour in a war zone, having started in Afghanistan in 2001. For me, the spring of 2007 was my first embed with US troops. After spending four years covering the war from the streets of Baghdad, dressed as a Sunni Muslim and ducking away from soldiers in case they got a little trigger-happy, I was now on the other side, riding in the same Stryker armored vehicles that I had once avoided.

I was clueless about the military – and they about me. The soldiers didn't trust me, and I didn't much trust them. Officers tended to spew a steady stream of upbeat propaganda about winning the war. Soldiers were wary about saying something that would later damage their career. And most were convinced that "the media" were liars, out to malign the military. But eating, living and patrolling side-by-side started to change the dynamics – that, and having a good sense of humor.

“Why do you media never write about us out here? Look at the TV back home, there is nothing there about us. It's all about Anna Nicole Smith.” With this complaint about news media priorities – favoring the drug-overdose death of a celebrity model over the hard day-to-day realities of the war – Staff Sgt. Brian Long was challenging me across the narrow space inside the sealed-in back of a 19-ton Stryker. There were maybe about two inches of space between our knees. I shifted my weight, trying to make the body armor more comfortable. Impossible. I stared back at him.

“If you were back home, what would you rather watch?” I asked, rhetorically. “A pretty blonde with big tits, or some soldiers marching around Iraq?”

The soldiers sitting on either side of Long leaned away to turn and look at him, smiling.

"Uh, tits."

"Yeah."

Long and I were fine after that. I would ask him about the war, then say, can I quote you? He would say, yeah, go ahead. Staff Sergeant Long became my "point man" on many of the urban Baghdad military patrols that I went on that year. Where

he stepped, I stepped, when he ducked, I ducked, when he hugged a wall, I hugged a wall, and when he ran, I ran. We also had spent a lot of time on the base, just talking about life. He was funny, he was kind. But I never wrote about his personal life, the stories he told me about bull-riding when he was a teenager, or of watching the truly terrible comedy "Joe Dirt" together under an army tent, and laughing hysterically. It just didn't seem necessary. In short, we became friends, breaking the rule in the journalist code of not getting close to those you write about. But life rarely falls into easy absolutes. Without going beneath the surface, without a degree of empathy, without trying to really understand who and what you are writing about, even sharing experiences, you will never produce worthwhile journalism. The hard part is, having established that degree of understanding, to then decide whether or how much to expose that person's intimate thoughts to the world. Where that ethical line falls for others, I have no idea. But I think at some point all foreign correspondents hit that line, and each one has to make his or her own decisions.

On June 10, 2007, Staff Sgt. Brian Long of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division – the Stryker Brigade Combat Team out of Fort Lewis Washington – stepped on a roadside bomb in Baghdad and was killed. He was 32.

Ethical responsibilities don't just belong to journalists. They also belong to editors, to diplomats, to all those who interact with journalists for their own ends. In reality, we all use each other. Journalists use connections to get to a story. They sometimes feign interest to get more information. They feign impartiality when everything inside is screaming this is so wrong. And those who want a story told will

call journalists in, give them some information, manipulate the telling of the information, or just outright lie. Diplomats often spew words that are mostly meaningless. Politicians craft their messages. Volunteer workers forget that perhaps those they are protecting are not always in the right. People sometimes tell you what they think you want to hear. Others will spin a great tale of anguish that is perhaps something they heard from someone else, but they are convinced it's true. It can be really hard to sort through it all, so sometimes you just have to see it yourself.

In 1988, one of a series of genocides took place in Burundi, a few years before the world-renowned Hutu-led tribal massacres in neighboring Rwanda that later horrified the world with their ferocity and body count. But in 1988, spurred on by years of violent animosity and elitism, the mass killings between Hutus and Tutsis surged in Burundi. I was stringing for a Danish newspaper at the time, and I had asked the editors repeatedly if they wanted the story. By the time they said yes, most of the killing was over. I straggled into the Bujumbura airport with my press card. The customs man looked at my papers, then looked at me.

"You're late. Ha ha ha, you must be the last journalist to arrive." Nothing like being mocked at the airport as you arrive to cover a massacre.

I started working right away, walking, interviewing, trying to understand what was happening. My good friend, Reuters photographer Hos Maina, was there. He had hired a helicopter and photographed bodies floating down the river. He was getting ready to leave. I decided to stay. It was a complex story, a horrifically brutal one. Within a few days I was traveling across the country with another journalist to the site of the massacres. We stayed in one "hotel" that was so dank, I felt my skin retreating

from the walls. We slept on shelves made of dried mud in light-less rooms, tiptoeing to the hole in the ground that served as a toilet across the way. I couldn't wait to leave for the villages. But when we got there, you could almost feel the blood seeping out of the mud-and-thatch huts onto the ground. A nun described how she had tried to hide some villagers from rampaging machete-wielding men by putting them in an underground room. Women with dead eyes looked at us blankly as we asked about their families, then looked over at the soldiers hovering nearby, then just looked down. There was this sickening fear everywhere that you couldn't really see, couldn't really touch. I wasn't sure who had been killing whom here. I wasn't sure it wasn't the military standing right around us who said they were protecting the villagers.

One army officer finally took us to a mound, a clearing in the banana trees.

"Here, right here, there is a mass grave. This is what we found when we liberated the village."

But I didn't see any disturbed ground. There were no traces of blood. I mentioned this.

"We covered it all, of course," the officer said.

"Dig it up." I couldn't believe those words came out of my mouth. The last thing I wanted to see was a bunch of rotting, mutilated bodies. But I didn't believe him.

"What?"

"Dig it up. Dig it up. You say there is a mass grave. Show me."

He didn't.

Having learned from my early reporting experience in the Maghreb, I decided to go see the story from another angle. I crossed into neighboring Rwanda and headed down to the border where thousands of Hutus had fled the violence in Burundi and were lying wounded in bungalow clinics. I decided to interview one thin, old woman, wearing just a traditional cloth sarong, with a worn-out bandage around her arm. While I was talking to her, she started to unwrap the gauze to show me what had happened. I sat in front of her, the daylight and heat coming in through a window, watching as the gauze started to cascade off her arm, until the very last piece, which was stuck in a spear hole that went right through what had been her bicep.

I moved onto another room, the children's section, and stared at a small boy whose stomach was outside his body, only slowly realizing what I was seeing, that his stomach had been sliced open by a machete. I walked out, needing one more interview. I spoke to a couple sitting together on a metal cot with a thin colorful sheet on top. Her arm had been cut off near the shoulder. His head was sliced open, stitched back together again.

I don't remember what I asked. I don't remember what they said. I had seen both sides. They were equally disturbing. I no longer believed what the Burundi military officer had said about liberation. But it was hard to understand where all the truth was.

One aspect of ethics that comes up outside of journalism circles is gender. There are the nudge-nudge wink-wink stories of female reporters sleeping with someone to get information, or hiking their skirts up to get a story. I find these stories funny, reflective only of the prejudices of the person telling them or asking if such

stories are true. The truth is that all journalists, male and female, use everything they have to get to a story, or to get out of the story when they have to. I have seen both men and women turn on the charm to get what they want, a door opened, an invitation to a dinner, a ride with a rebel commander, an emergency lift out of a gunfight. My turn came in Juba, the main city in southern Sudan.

The descent into Juba was my first experience in downward spiral flying. I was sitting in the cockpit of the cargo plane, strapped in tight. The pilots were American, at least one was a Vietnam veteran, all were wearing Ray Ban sunglasses. I felt like I was in a James Bond movie. Suddenly the plane tilted to one side and entered a tight spiral down to the tarmac. The G-force was so strong I couldn't even lift my arms. Apparently it was a way to avoid getting hit by missiles. Go for it, tilt that plane!

After only five days in Juba, I had to leave. I had crossed some unspoken line, and I had been told to leave the country or else. The American pilots didn't fly in every day, and I had to get out. I went out to the airport. It was hot, airless, hundreds of people, women with children, even nuns were in the low building that passed as an airport, desperate to escape the war that was edging ever closer. I was never going to get out. I looked around and saw the plane approaching the tarmac. It was the same relief plane I had flown in on. In a moment of total selfishness, I ran out of the building and onto the tarmac, meeting the Ray Banned pilot as he was stepping out. I threw my arms around his neck. Forget the nuns, I needed to get on that plane.

"Please get me out of here."

"Jump in the cockpit. Don't worry."

It was not my most glorious moment. Yes, I used every ounce of gender power I had. The fear of spending weeks in a Juba jail had erased any ethical consideration that I ever had, such as letting the nuns go in front of me, or the women with children. I was a terrible person. But I was alive, and I was getting out of Sudan.

Back in the 1980s and 90s, I carried cartons of cigarettes, pack of batteries, bottles of whisky to give out when I had to -- sometimes to customs agents, sometimes to local officials -- or when I wanted to, for someone who helped me without expecting anything in return. I have never paid for a story. Some media outlets do. I have never pretended to be anything but a journalist. Some media allow their reporters to go in "undercover." But I have skirted the truth about whom I worked for. At one point in Iraq, working for an American newspaper was tantamount to suicide. Sometimes I said I was a Brazilian working for a newspaper. Technically, that is correct. I am a dual American-Brazilian citizen, and I was working for a paper.

There are some ethical lines journalists are told never to cross. Never get intimate with a source. Never carry a weapon. Never accept gifts. Never lie. Never fabricate. Many of these guidelines were developed over the years to establish before the reader that the truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality and fairness of the reporter's work have not been compromised. Overall, I tried to live by these standards.

Some media organizations have gone as far as to say that a journalist cannot belong to any social or activist group outside of work without alerting the editors, or that reporters should refuse even an offer of a cup of coffee when visiting officials, or activists, or anyone with an agenda. In the field, this is absurd. Try turning down an

offer of a cup of tea in a Middle Eastern home or a meal set before you by a poor family in a yurt, and see how far you get. It is seen as deeply offensive. I think it is up to the good sense of the journalist to be able to differentiate between receiving a case of whisky from a source that you are about to quote and sharing cups of coffee from someone you are interviewing. And just because a journalist belongs to an environmental group or volunteers at a hospital does not mean that journalist is so hopelessly compromised that he or she cannot write a balanced report. If you were to take that argument to a logical extreme, fathers would not be able to ever write a story involving children, gay reporters would never be able to report on any LGBT issue, and so on. Journalists' life experiences can enrich their reporting by giving them insights that others may not have – these essential parts of who they are should not be considered liabilities. At some point, all journalists have to work hard to make sure that their personal beliefs and biases do not interfere with the impartiality and fairness of their reporting. It can be very hard to do.

Sometimes this is made even harder by those facilitating the reporting. Embeds with the military, for example, are by their nature biased. The military developed the idea of the embed to allow journalists to have access to a story, while at the same time controlling most of what those reporters can see and write about. The forms that a journalist has to sign in order to be accepted on an embed with NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan these days include not being able to record restricted military areas, installations, maps, equipment, vehicles, flights, units, methods of attack, or interact with detainees, or take images of wounded personnel. The result is a very pasteurized version of what war really is.

In Iraq, those journalists who published what the military considered negative reports were barred from ever having access again. One AP reporter who dared photograph a dying soldier in Afghanistan was kicked off the embed and banned from any future embeds. Even damaged vehicles are on the banned list of things that may not be photographed. Without images of dead and wounded, of civilians screaming from bullet wounds in the crossfire, of soldiers crying in exhaustion and anger, of destroyed vehicles, missing legs, blood and fear, what emerges is a sanitized picture of war. The problem with this is that the reader – unless directly linked to someone in the conflict – will never really understand the terrible cost of war. So have journalists, in their efforts to have relatively protected access to one side of the conflict, failed in their job to transmit the true face of war to the public? The only alternative is to enter the war from the street and tell the story from the perspective of civilians caught in the cross-fire, or even from the perspective of whoever is fighting from the other side. This can mean an extremely high degree of risk. Look at Syria, where dozens of journalists have been killed, injured or kidnapped while traveling with rebel fighters in their war against President Assad.

For me, Iraq was in many ways a turning point. It was the first war I had covered where journalists were no longer considered untouchable. Instead they became targets and bargaining chips in an ever-dirtier war. Some didn't understand the change. In an effort to help journalists cope better with the pressures they would have to face covering conflicts, some security companies began developing what are known as “hostile environment courses.” Journalists are subjected to a series of situations from mass casualty scenarios to being kidnapped. In the course I took, I

was subjected with my fellow trainees to a mock kidnapping scenario. We were ambushed while driving through the Virginia countryside, bags were tightened around our heads, and we were force-marched, blind and stumbling across rugged ground, then thrown onto the concrete floor of a building and made to lie down with our arms bent backwards, a light stress position. One journalist started yelling, "journalist, journalist, let me go!" only to get thwacked. The scenario ended with each of us getting jerked up by the arms, led out of the building, still blinded by the bag, and forced to kneel, then to feel a gun barrel at the back of the neck. The bag was then pulled off, and we were left facing a video camera. It was a sobering and frightening experience. What my fellow reporter learned was that yelling "journalist" in today's wars is an invitation to getting your face punched in, or worse. Kidnappers are a very nervous bunch, so one does not want to add to their stress. And chances are they already know you are a journalist – that's why you were taken hostage: easy target, no weapons, no defenses, high profile, instant international recognition. Hell, journalists are a kidnappers' dream.

Iraq was the first time I was truly frightened. Videos were circulating of westerners getting their throats slit. Daniel Pearl, a reporter for the Wall Street Journal had been kidnapped and beheaded two years before in 2002 by al Qaeda in Pakistan. Later, in 2005, Steven Vincent, a freelancer for the *New York Times*, was abducted at gun point and killed in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 150 international and local journalists and 54 "media support workers" were killed in Iraq from March 2003 to December

2011.¹⁸ Others were captured and held for ransom or for use in exchange for prisoner releases. There were so many different armed factions fighting for power in Baghdad that it became an extremely difficult place to navigate. Even the loyalties of the police and Iraqi army were never very clear. Fixers would sometimes shrug their shoulders, ask what you would do if your kids were being tortured and all you had to do was turn over a journalist to free them? Good question. I was nervous as hell. In order to understand the choices I made, it is important to understand the environment.

At one point, in 2004, I needed a ride from downtown Baghdad into the so-called Green Zone, the heavily-fortified area in central Baghdad where the Iraqi government met, and where most non-military US personnel were ensconced. Living in the squat Baghdad Hotel sandwiched between Abu Nawas street with the Tigris river on one side and the main Al-Saddon street on the other, was a Star Trek meets Vietnam assortment of people, women police trainers, medics, Kurdish businessmen, American communications experts, soldiers and US security teams, all carrying guns, and me. I hitched a ride with one of the security teams, jumping into the back right seat of the large four-wheel drive. The American driver had a gun on his left leg, a gun next to his right arm, and another stashed under the seat. The man in front of my seat had the same, but his gun was cradled on his lap. The one to my left appeared just to have one weapon. They were all young, in their early to late 30s.

We drove tensely down Abu Nawas, the driver checking the sunlit rooftops for snipers, and making sure the normal crowds of Iraqi workers were out on the

¹⁸ Frank Smyth, "Iraq war and news media: A look inside the death toll," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, March 18, 2013. <https://cpj.org/blog/2013/03/iraq-war-and-news-media-a-look-inside-the-death-to.php>.

streets. Empty streets meant a bomb had been placed in the road. After a while, I was glancing at the rooftops and staring intently at the streets, too. But it was on the ride back to the hotel that one of the guys handed me a gun.

"If something happens, just start shooting." Shooting? Me? A gun? What?

I was terrified of guns. I had no idea how to hold one, let alone shoot one.

The young guard turned to me. "If you're going to ride with us, if you are going to hang in a war zone, you need to know how to use a gun. Are you ready to kill someone?"

I felt the gun in my hand. Am I ready to kill someone? I returned it.

Back in my hotel room, I sat on the hard bed, stared at the industrial carpet, and kept asking myself the same question over and over again. I am a journalist in a war zone. I'm a kidnap target. I have no protection. Should I have a gun? If I did, would I use it? What if I didn't have a gun, and we were caught in a gunfight, and everyone else was killed and I was just sitting there like some glazed-eyed goose? What if I was about to get kidnapped and my throat slit on a video with a black cloth backdrop and people shouting Allah o Akbar? Would I use it then? Could I at least use it to kill myself?

On my return to Washington I signed up for an Izaak Walton League of America course in guns. I explained what I wanted: I needed to learn how to hold a gun, experience what it felt like to shoot a gun, learn how to strip it, clean it, and put it back together. I had no desire to carry a gun, and I still don't. But the security guy was right. I had no business being in a war zone if I was that clueless. Fear of guns is

healthy thing – it keeps you aware of what is happening around you. Fear out of ignorance is well, ignorant.

But the question of whether a journalist should have the right to protect herself in a war zone where she is no longer considered a non-combatant – but instead is seen as a justifiable target – still bothers me. If a journalist can hire people to protect her or him, that's great. But what about reporters who don't have those kinds of funds? Should they just not enter war zones? That would mean that war reporting would become something that only the elite media would do. Traveling with heavy security also curtails what a reporter can do, whom she can see, where she can go. The question kept whizzing around my head until I ended up with recurring nightmares: I would be traveling down the desolate airport road into Baghdad -- once considered the most dangerous strip of road in the world littered with bombs and armed attackers – and my security team would get shot up, and I would be hovering around like some annoying gadfly, not knowing what to do, watching an insurgent pump bullets into the heads of my bodyguards. In other versions of the dreams I would be the hero, picking up a gun and saving everyone. Thankfully, after five years of covering the war, neither ever happened. But I still don't have any answers.

Chapter 5: Fear and Its Consequences

"After a fire, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the soil – everything. All around you things are purely living, and you among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble. You feel an intense, out-of-skin awareness of your living self – your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it."

– Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*¹⁹

Fear comes in many forms, even shapes and sounds. It is contagious. It can seep in through your nose, your ears, your skin, reach into your brain and just take over. Mostly fear snakes in before you go into a danger zone, before you get on that plane, just before you take that first step out. Then it disappears. Once you are on the plane, once you are in a story, all that disappears. There is only you and the story, only you and the events around you, and somehow it is in those intense moments that you really feel alive.

Fear can also be your best friend. Fear makes you hyperaware, and that can save your life. It also helps you to plan carefully, to always have a fallback, to think of all the what-ifs, and to work them out in your head before you go out. Fear also leads you to make deals with whomever you pray to, deals that you normally forget once you are safe. It also forces you to come to terms with yourself, with death, with possible mutilation. Conversations between combat journalists are strangely disconnected from the usual coffee house banter. I remember one such exchange with a good friend and fellow reporter:

¹⁹ O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 81.

Me, in Baghdad: "I'm fine if I step on a bomb and I'm killed. I mean that's fine. As long as I don't end up without my legs and arms."

My journalist friend: "Yea, it's not a bad way to go. At least it's fast."

Me: "I just don't think I would want to live like that, that's all."

Her: "If I get killed, I don't want my mother to have one of those open-casket funerals. I don't even want her to open it at all. Do you think you can take care of that for me? Because she will, you know, she'll want to open it."

Me: "Sure. Yeah, of course."

I am not a particularly brave journalist. My prickly sense of danger lights up pretty quickly, and I am not the kind to throw myself into the line of fire. I have always been very aware of being only 5 feet 2 inches and just over 115 pounds. I am never going to be able to strong-arm my way out of a fight. So my idea is to be careful – not to avoid the story, but to be wary. Sometimes this tastes of cowardice, sometimes it tastes right.

For example, in 2005 I was traveling with a photographer down by the border of Venezuela and Columbia. We had been briefed on the area and knew it was rife with FARC rebels – the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – along with drug runners and all the human debris that piles up and seethes along war-zone borders. That morning we had just finished talking to refugees camped on the Venezuelan side of the line. The photographer wanted pictures of the border to bring the divide to life. The driver of the United Nations jeep that had taken us to the refugees balked – he would not go. So we walked. It was a hot, sunny day, and lots of people were out. It's a crowded border, and the crossing at one point is a bridge.

Groups of uniformed students were walking over it. Everything seemed so normal. I am Latina by heritage, and I was dressed like every other Latina there, tight jeans, plain shirt, flat shoes. But my colleague was wearing Birkenstock sandals, had a ring in her nose, and thousands of dollars' worth of photography equipment strung around her neck. She looked like the poster girl for a hippie travel magazine. I could just see the dollar signs light up in the eyes of the FARC, who are notorious for kidnapping people for ransom. As we started to walk, I started to slow down. This was not a good idea, I thought to myself, until I just stopped walking, one meter onto the bridge.

"Come on," she said.

"No. I am not going any further. I don't think this is a good idea." I wouldn't budge.

"Come on, this is ridiculous. I want you to come with me."

"No, you want to go, go ahead. I'm not stopping you, but I'm not going."

She went on, but came back after just a couple of minutes, clearly frustrated with my refusal to budge. She later complained to my editor that I was a coward. My editor replied that I had been in conflict areas for almost 20 years and I was still alive. Enough said.

There are times when what you feel is more like fear mixed with horror. It's when you know you have to push yourself deeper into a situation, ignoring the sticky tendrils wrapping themselves around the inside of your stomach. You really want to know what is happening, you really want to understand, and you have to see things and feel them in order to write about them. I remember an instance in Tajikistan, when I went to visit psychiatric clinic that "housed" patients.

The doctor was sitting across the table, white lab coat, all very professional. He was talking about how the psychiatric clinic had fallen on hard times after the collapse of the Soviet Union, how they really didn't have enough funds to go on, and how more people were coming in with nervous breakdowns. The cost of the end of the USSR and the birth of Russia in places like the Pamir Mountains in Tajikistan was very high.

I was diligently taking notes, but I wasn't really listening to what the doctor was saying. I just couldn't take my eyes off the huge horse-size needle stuck in his lapel. After about ten minutes, I couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"What is that needle for?"

"Needle?" He followed my eyes. "Oh, the needle. Well, you know, sometimes I have to use it, stick it into a patient, to see if they still react."

Oh my God.

He led us into the clinic. Clinic is the wrong word. He led us into a low building, with no windows, claustrophobically thick, solid walls. It was cold outside, and there were small fires in niches in the walls to heat the rooms, the yellow-reddish light from the fires forming strange shadows across the whitewashed walls. There were six cots, and women just sitting there. No books, no shelves, no paintings, no pens, no papers, no clothes, no chairs, no rugs, no hair brushes, nothing but six cots with six women in a low-ceilinged room. The air was oppressive. Going down the next corridor was like walking through a short tunnel into a lower ring of hell, strange noises drifting all around. We reached another room, this one full of men, then at the end, a large cage, also full of men, aimlessly wandering in circles.

The doctor opened the cage.

"You can go in. They won't hurt you."

I was thinking of that large needle, of being in a cage with mentally disturbed men trapped in a building with no windows. It was a living nightmare. I almost started screaming.

"No, thanks, that's fine. Shall we leave?"

Although I had covered several conflicts and traveled through a lot of uncertain territory, Iraq was the first time I experienced bombs, mortar fire and sniper fire. Nothing I had done would come close to Baghdad, which quickly descended into an ugly urban war. In 2004 I was staying at the squat, ugly Baghdad Hotel, some 200 meters from another hotel that was a favorite of journalists and a favored target for shelling – the Palestine hotel, and its neighbor, the so-called Sheraton. The first mortar shells started landing as I was sitting in a worn-out armchair in the Baghdad Hotel's upper lobby, the only place the internet seemed to work. I was so involved with trying to send a story, in small one-paragraph snippets over Yahoo chat, that I didn't really feel the first shake. The second time the building shook, I thought it was an earthquake, and I thought it was silly that all those people were running around. By the time the third mortar hit, an ex-Marine staying at the hotel saw me sitting now alone. He ran over, grabbed my hand.

"Let's go, darlin'" He was from Texas, and really did speak like that.

I held onto my computer and he pulled me racing down the stairs into the basement.

"What's going on?" I'm a little slow sometimes.

He looked at me, almost laughing.

"We're getting' bombed, darlin."

Bombed. As soon as that realization hit me, I started shaking. About a minute later, it was all over, and I was fine.

The second time was a few months later, and I was by the pool. Ironically, the Baghdad Hotel had a gorgeous pool. The temperature easily hits 110 degrees and higher in Baghdad, and I was hot and tired. I had decided to take a few hours off from the gun-filled mayhem of the city streets to relax. Suddenly, the entire hotel and ground shook. Mortar shell. I looked around at the assortment of security guards around the pool. There was an Italian ex-Foreign Legionnaire with a giant cross tattooed on his back, sitting with his legs in the pool, another two guards sitting lazily in the shade, and one Vietnam veteran nearby. No one even looked up. So I kept on sunbathing. Another shake, this one a lot more powerful. The guy with the tattoo said nothing, but he got up and walked inside. The two guards started to move. A third blast. I watched the entire glass window that flanked one side of the pool literally ripple in the blast wave. We all went inside. That third mortar had landed just in front of the hotel, the fourth round landed just behind it.

The bombs didn't frighten me, perhaps because I was lucky enough never to actually see one land. But in the course of my four years of covering Iraq, I heard and felt a lot of bombs. Every day and night you would hear those blasts, you would see the shattered metal. I did, however, discover how much of a non-hero I am the first time I was shot at. It was 2007, during my tenth visit to Baghdad, and my first experience at being embedded with the US military. This was at the height of Gen.

David Petraeus's surge, and we were patrolling in the unhappy Sunni areas of Baghdad. The images of Petraeus striding self-confidently through what appeared to be secure city streets were staged: prior to the General's visit entire streets had been blocked off by US soldiers, houses had been searched, US snipers were on the roof. I know, I was there.

One particular patrol that I joined had gone on for hours. We had gotten up in the middle of the night, settled into our body armor against the unforgiving walls inside the Stryker vehicles, and were driven to a certain part of town. We climbed out of the back of the vehicles around dawn and started walking the eerily empty streets before the city had a chance to wake up. By mid-morning we had entered a house where people had been held hostage, presumably by insurgents. Photographs of a once normal family were scattered everywhere, filthy clothes were strewn on the floor, along with upended broken furniture, some ammunition, some bomb material. I took photographs. We talked to the neighbors. Nobody knew anything. We kept on walking until later that morning, we found an IED, an improvised explosive device, and called in the bomb disposal team. We filed into another empty house, the soldiers checking the rooms and windows, their guns ready. Three of us crouched in the kitchen as the radio came on.

"Fire in the hole."

I covered my ears.

"Fire in the hole."

Kaboom! The bomb blast shook everything.

Once it was over, it was time to leave.

We were to leave the building one by one, directly out of the door to the right, hug the wall, and run toward the Stryker. But we had been in the house a little too long. Baghdad was full of anti-US snipers at the time, and it didn't take them long to scramble over to where a military team was and try to kill an American soldier. In each Stryker there are two crew and nine soldiers, and in this case, me. The soldiers are all roughly the same height, some perhaps a little taller. I am a good eight inches shorter than most soldiers. I was third or fourth in line to go out. It must have taken the sniper that long to steady his aim. I rounded out of the door and heard that faint whipping noise and crack! as the bullet whizzed over the top of my head into the wall. I immediately spun to the left, pushed the soldier to my left out of my way and jumped back into the house. The military reacted, secured the area, and I came out and ran to the safety of the Stryker. I pushed someone out of the way, for God's sake, to save myself. War holds up a pretty honest mirror, forcing you to see just what kind of a person you can be in the face of extreme fear.

There was a time when I thought that my very strong sense of self-preservation existed only when I was in Iraq. Wrong. I have been reminded again and again what a non-hero I am. My already cautious character has become even more careful after years of combat reporting. I no longer rush into anything that twitches looking for the big scoop. And I certainly don't rush towards any explosions. Anyone who has been out there will tell you: there is always a second blast, there are always gunmen even after that blast ready to pick you off. So in the mass casualty scenario during my "hostile environment" training in Virginia, all my fellow students were rushing towards their screaming wounded fellow journalists, checking for wounds,

bandaging, applying tourniquets. Me? I was very slowly walking in from the edges of the scene, checking the trees, checking the cars, not trusting anyone or anything. I don't know how I will react if anything like those scenarios ever happens in real life. I don't think anyone ever does.

Often, the consequence of fear is anxiety. Anxiety I have found, does not usually emerge when you are in the field. Rather, anxiety comes when you have already been there, you know how dangerous it can be, and you know you are going back. In mid-2007, I had volunteered to return to Iraq again. My editors had offered to send someone else, a young journalist. I had two quick reactions to that. One, it was criminal to send any inexperienced journalist into Iraq. Two, this was my story, I had lived it, breathed it, dreamt it, for four years. Iraq was deep inside my skin. I just couldn't let it go.

But somehow I felt I had used up all my brownie points. My good luck had held out this long, so I really shouldn't tempt it again – that this time I was going to get killed. Previous times, I had had nightmares. Before one visit, I had curled up into the lap of my now ex-husband and asked him, if my legs get blown off, will you still love me? Yes, he had answered. But this time was different, I was just scared. Still uncertain of whether to go, I went down to New Orleans, a town of delightful balconied buildings, smelling of fresh coffee and fried beignets in the morning and stale whisky and beer at night. New Orleans also has a great World War II museum, called the National D-Day Museum. It is filled with planes, artifacts, oral histories, posters and photographs. I stood in front of one of the large black and white photographs of the landing on the beaches in Normandy, taken by a journalist who

had been traveling with the US troops. I stared at the picture for a long time. If there had not been a photographer there, that moment – with all its horror and glory – never would have been captured. It would have been held deep in the men's memories, and finally disappeared, bit by bit, as they died, as my father's did. I went back to Iraq. I had to.

My next-to-final trip to Iraq was in the fall of 2007, again embedded with U.S. troops. I remember the American soldiers looked like Robocops, heavily armed, heavily armored, and seemingly all-powerful. On one patrol, I stood by a little awkwardly as a team of soldiers raided an Iraqi home in Baghdad, going through closets, pushing aside tacky flowery dresses, then finally pushing one man against a wall, hands behind his head while they shut the kitchen door behind them to question another man. I looked at the women herded outside with their children, waiting to see if their men would be released or taken away. Two soldiers stood at the gate, hauling up phlegm and chewing-tobacco juice and spitting on the ground. I took a deep breath, and suddenly inhaled the untouchably beautiful perfume of roses planted along the house, facing orange trees near the outside wall, an odd moment of beauty in the middle of all the bombs, all the guns, all the civil war hell that Baghdad had become.

One of the Iraqi men was eventually taken away, a tall, proud Sunni man. I had watched the war from the streets for four years. I knew many Sunnis, many Shia. I had watched the country break apart between them, aided by vicious crime gangs and extremists fighting for money and power. And I had watched the U.S. military try to figure out what was going on around them, using all their power to hold back a

sectarian war, a vicious al Qaeda network, religious suicide fighters, nationalists, all while fighting desperately for their own survival. But seeing this one man, standing in the dirt, naked cracked feet in cheap brown sandals, hands zip tied behind him, staring blankly at one of the hundreds of grey blast walls that scarred his city – a city where students had not that long before rocked to Pink Floyd – was a moment of incredible sadness. It all seemed so hopeless.

Iraq had been a slow burn. Every moment there was a story in itself. At one point I roomed with a fearless American policewoman with an amazing wrap-around body tattoo and an incredible heart. She was caught in a huge bomb blast that smashed her glasses and was forced to walk blindly through glass and concrete trying to rescue people screaming for help. At another point a Kurdish businessman looked at me and quietly explained that Iraq was a place of "guns and roses": if people worked with him they received roses, if they betrayed him, he killed their entire family. I rode in cars with American, Lebanese, Ukrainian and South African security guards. I had a long conversation about loyalty with an Albanian Serb mercenary. I played cat-and-mouse with Iraqi police officers, and I was the mouse. I watched Iraqis slowly descend into insanity. I listened as young American government employees came to Baghdad, stayed in the Green Zone with its restaurants and swimming pools, and lectured me on the saving graces of democracy.

From 2004 to 2007 I traveled to Iraq eleven times sometimes for a week, sometimes for eight weeks. For almost my entire time there, I was under threat of bombs and kidnapping. The story was violent, scary and exhilarating. You could not trust anyone. One of my first drivers, Hayder, was joking around and said he had

received his degree from the "School of Kill," but he was not kidding when he told me that while he worked for me during the day, he worked for "the other side" at night. Another driver with whom I often traveled and trusted, turned to me and said, apologetically, "I have two kids, Sharon. If they take my kids and ask that I hand you over to get them back, I will. Please understand." The Interior ministry, where we were supposed to register ourselves and our fixers had death squads running around the city. We never wrote real names. Police were corrupt and would have handed anyone over to the highest bidder.

I was not the bravest of reporters. Many others were much more courageous. They pushed the envelope, got photographs and stories that exposed all the horrors of that war. I did things my way, wrote hundreds of stories. I went out during the day, at night, alone with one driver, sometimes with teams of security. Over the years I traveled south to Basra and up north to Kurdistan and back to Baghdad. I dressed like a Sunni woman, and sometimes like a Shia. I wore covert body armor as I trudged from polling station to polling station in the heat with two Iraqi male fixers, praying I would not be discovered to be an American reporter. I dodged a kidnapping with the incredible help of a Lebanese security guard who threw me on the back floor of a car bristling with guns and drove me to a safe house. I explored streets, neighborhoods, homes, and wrote what I saw. I spent the last year with the US military. It was history in the making.

A Final Trip to Baghdad

After that, it took me years to work Iraq out of my system. And in 2011, I went back in a trip that was to be my final exorcism of the fears that had built up inside me. I had completed all the course work for my second master's degree and was thinking about the thesis that lay ahead, but I knew that I would not be able to carve out time to work on it. I knew that the theme of fear and its consequences would be important, including the degree to which my life as a correspondent would be consumed not only by attention to the details of life around me, but also by incessant attention to the details involved in staying safe and alive. I decided to capture these experienced directly, by writing emails to my thesis adviser back in Maryland. They are here, verbatim.

November 11, 2011

I am going home to Baghdad. It's been four years. I'm not scared this time. I am excited.

The plan is to cover the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Iraq street point of view. Someone else will embed with the troops.

At first I did not want to contact my old Iraqi team -- you never know what they have been through, or how their allegiances might have changed. But I did. They will be waiting for me.

Covering any story for a long time makes that story get under your skin -- as you know. When it is intense, when you have lived through deep fear together with someone, even a stranger, it gets under your skin even deeper.

I want to see what the streets of Baghdad look like, If the gray blast walls and concertina wire still encircle the streets; or if the ice cream cafes are back, and the sweet shops are doing business, or if the potato chip man who used to sell two-foot high bags of homemade chips is still on the corner of Karrada.

There is still a lot of fear -- one of my good contacts is too afraid to set foot inside Baghdad and has sent his family to live near Tikrit, Saddam's home town. He himself is in voluntary exile after his home life was shattered by the Shi'ite -Sunni violence years ago.

I plan to meet him in Basra instead -- a southern town where I was once dumped on the border with Kuwait by a disgruntled businessman.

That time I spent the night in a hotel room with an extra mattress boarding up the window and a gun under my pillow, my Iraqi protectors in rooms on either side and across the hall.

I owe my life to many people.

November 15, 2011

It's been four years since I was last in Iraq, and five years since I was working the Iraqi side of the story in Baghdad. I am hearing different stories about how safe it is, and am also beginning to recognize some of the more inflated tales.

I have to organize a cameraman, a driver, a fixer and a translator. And security teams. I need to judge how safe it is to conduct TV interviews on the street, and find a place to stay.

Thank God for contacts. A colleague who worked for the Chicago Tribune had kept in touch with his driver and fixer. They are both free to work with me in December. I have been emailing back and forth for days, trying to explain the stories I want to do.

I also want to be less conspicuous, so I sent them my height and weight and asked them to go with their wives/sisters to buy me some Iraqi clothes. That should alleviate things somewhat.

A Western security company is renting out rooms, so I can sleep easy at night, as well as file material with their Internet connection. But it won't work for my Basra trip, so for that I called another Iraqi I know in Dubai and he is calling his friends to make sure I have a safe hotel, car and driver.

The biggest challenge has been the cameraman. I have found several -- but their rates are really high. Anyone who wants to make money, should learn how to shoot and edit video. The base rate is \$500 a day, with extra for editing. I should have taken more of those courses at UMD. A lot more.

Unemployment is high in Iraq, as it has been for years. So the local cameramen are trying to make as much money as possible. Understandable. But one is insisting on \$1,000 day, arguing he cannot carry the tripod and camera by himself. And extra for editing. I will carry the tripod.

They are also citing increased danger over this US pullout period. It is not a good idea to travel somewhere unstable and be dependent on a cameraman who is solely out to make money. I want to rethink this cameraman, but I only have 10 days to organize all this.

And Iraq is a cash-only economy - so whatever I need I will need to take with me. On previous trips I walked around with up to \$10,000 hidden on various areas of my body. I found that so awkward!

Finally, I am in London, so not able to get my Iraqi visa. That will also require some help from old-time friends when I return to Washington.

So: I am having a great time! I like pulling all these threads together and watching a complex project come together. For some reason, it's a good kind of nervous. I will update you....

December 2, 2011

Getting ready to leave for Baghdad:

It's like jumping off one of those super-high bridges and soaring into an abyss with nothing but a rope tethered to my feet, but it's all in my mind. My heart is racing, but no-one can see it. I am so nervous. Not scared, but just nervous. I have had to switch fixers and translators because the one I hired bailed out, and now I am working with someone I have never seen before, who is asking for all sorts of letters and documents.

Things must have changed in Baghdad - before you just went around town with hired guns, and filmed and interviewed in whatever neighborhood you figured you wouldn't be shot in, then got the hell out. Now, the fixer is getting permits to film in every single location, from hospitals to schools, to the street. It's like the country went from dictatorship to chaos to police state in time-warp speed.

I have been running around trying to remember everything I will need: cash (in the thousands), flak jacket, helmet, chocolate, granola bars, batteries, toothpaste, socks, jeans, two pairs of shoes, notebooks, camera memory cards, tripod, no -- forget tripod, too heavy -- I am trying to pay all my bills, halt newspaper delivery .. then I had to sit down and write a goodbye letter to my children just in case something happens. This is the first time I have done this, as they are all now of age, and I am no longer married. How do you say goodbye to your kids? How do you say everything you want to say in one page, leaving them with the emptiness of having their mother die?

I have not told my mother or my brother that I am going. My mother is 83, and why would I worry her? My brother would just roll his eyes and say something about being my being unable to settle in one place, and be a normal person.

As for me, my biggest worry is that I won't be able to do well as a journalist, that I won't produce everything that I am being asked to produce: three full TV pieces, 6 shorter pieces, Video-elements (short 30 secs to one minute), reporter blog, photos, nat sound - all in 10 days, two of which I hope to be embedded with the US troops.

I leave tomorrow. Arrive in Baghdad on Sunday. I will write from there.

Thoughts on arrival in Baghdad:

It's been four years since I stepped onto the dusty streets of Baghdad.

Before getting on the plane to Iraq I started making all the deals that we all make when entering a world of fear: Dear Lord, please get me out of this alive, I

promise to be a good woman; Dear Virgin Mary, protect me because after this I promise I will try to work at anything but war.

The cameraman and I came by a Royal Jordanian airbus - there were only three women on board, and I was the only non-Muslim. The airplanes no longer do corkscrew descents, which is when the plane hard banks to the left or right and comes down towards the airport in a tight corkscrew flight pattern. Today we just glided in. Good sign.

The airport was the normal zoo of people, all dressed in black, including a number of Chinese workers who looked kind of stunned. We zipped through pretty easily, and were picked up by our security company. We put on our flak jackets and started the drive from the airport to the International Zone, once known as the Green Zone.

It's a dusty ride, the palm trees have been stripped, the land has been stripped and there is nothing to see but dust, road, some cars, and lots of Iraqi security personnel.

The six-mile drive took us over 45 minutes and led us through a maze of checkpoints, reinforced with concrete, blast walls, and barbed wire. Although there are officially only two points, we actually went through six, each with various degrees of security manned sometimes by Iraqi army, sometimes secret police and army, and one with canine security.

Each time we had to show our passports, and at least two we had to get out of the car. In one I was led to a small concrete room to be searched. Then I had to stand

separated from everyone in another concrete cube with dark yellow plastic strips for a door until all the car and bag searches were over. It's a world of dust and guns.

Once inside the IZ (International zone), we were debriefed by our security company. Kidnapping is up -- apparently the militias are targeting westerners to make some kind of political point before the Americans finally leave altogether. From others I am told targeted killings are up. Driving around in the Red Zone (anything outside this reinforced area) is dangerous. Being a journalist here is dangerous. Filming is dangerous.

Welcome back to Baghdad.

I sat back on the couch inside the blast walls of this little compound, and just wondered what it is that drives me to do this. I still haven't figured it out.

For now, I am safe and sound. And for that, I am profoundly grateful.

Re-reading these emails, clearly I am somewhat of a drama queen. That doesn't make any of the emotions any less real, just that I feel kind of embarrassed exposing them all.

December 5

It's three in the morning and I can't sleep. I would say it's because of the hard bed, the hard pillow, being in a new place or something like that. I slept really well in the fluffy king size bed in the luxurious Marriott in Amman just last night. But I think it is more than the lack of softness.

I know tomorrow will be better.

December 6

Has it really been only one day? It feels like we have been going on for much longer than that. We got up early, after both having slept badly. We went out into the Red Zone without any security, just in a local car, with a local driver, the fixer, and both of us dressed like locals. We were both nervous as hell, but settled in pretty quickly.

This is the height of the Shi'ite Ashura commemoration - it's a time of bombs, typically. The Shi'ites work themselves up into a religious frenzy by whipping themselves with chains and knives, and the Sunni throw bombs. Throughout the day, the sound of religious chanting blasted out from radios - the graffiti on the walls are covered with black and gold banners, and posters of the Shi'ite martyr Hussein. There is a lot of tension in the streets, and entire neighborhoods have been blocked off. The government imposed an overnight curfew.

My problem is I don't fully trust the fixer. He is always trying to boast of his contacts, shows photos of himself with important officials, tries to cadge contacts off others and is incredibly condescending. More dangerously, I don't think he really knows what he is doing. Foreign journalists depend heavily on their fixers, and many establish long-term relationships. Without good local fixers, incoming journalists are pretty much lost unless they have their own local contact networks and speak the language. But as foreign journalists, we also learn quickly to read people, and see who we can trust, and who we can't, who can deliver, and who can't, or who is good, but what his/her faults are - you need to do this to survive. And this fixer makes me uncomfortable. When I'm not directly working, I am trying to get another fixer.

Today was catch-as-catch-can. We managed to interview a judge, who was not very forthcoming; a young girl who tried not to cry when she talked about the death of her sister; film a police checkpoint, and some of the Ashura celebrations. I took everyone out to lunch at the Sheraton - a once-fancy hotel where Saddam's sons used to party. It's a strange place, lots of gold color, no soul. I detest it.

Later, in the dark, on the way back to the IZ, we stopped in the crowded area of Karrada - this is the market street, there are shops with everything you need to buy, from bathroom pipes to potato chips. It's all done under colored lights and bleak light bulbs, to the sound of hundreds of conversations, and radio music. We interviewed a couple of men on the street -- well, the translator did, as I didn't think it was a good idea to start speaking English on that street. The cameraman is getting too comfortable and I kept moving him on every 20 minutes. We are getting repeated warnings of increased risks of kidnapping. Someone really wants to make a statement and has decided that kidnapping a foreigner is just the right way to do that.

Journalists are pawns in the game.

By 1:00 am we were still trying to upload and send the video from the roof of the compound where we are staying. We recorded and re-recorded the audio some 8 times because of some strange buzz sound. We turned off the fridge, turned off the heater, recorded under a blanket ... anyway, it finally worked.

So, one day down - nine more to go.

December 8

There was this moment: I was flying over the Iraqi holy city of Karbala, strapped into the seat of a Russian-made MI-17 helicopter surrounded by Iraqi officers, and I looked out of the window and saw millions of pilgrims walking to the shrine of Imam Ali. I just started to smile. This is what it's all about. I mean, who else gets to do this on a Tuesday afternoon and actually get paid for it?

The Tuesday started off pretty humdrum, except for the anxiety that came with my making the decision that it was too dangerous for us to go into Baghdad. It was a religious holiday, kidnap threats were up, and I was getting mixed signals from my (now-ex) fixer about whether we could join the Iraqi military for the day or not. My cameraman was annoyed, and I felt like a coward. I stuck to my decision. There is risk, then there is stupid.

An hour later a call came through that Iraqi army Gen. Qassim Atta had approved our trip, and he would be in one of the International Zone helipads within minutes. We rushed and made it there just as the blades were starting up. We climbed onto the helicopter - but it couldn't pull off the ground. Too many people. Fine, I would let the cameraman go - we needed footage. I and four officers got off.

I ended up in the Iraqi Helicopter Operations Command Center having tea with the officers. One slipped me his email - his family was in the U.S. and he wanted to talk privately. I managed to knock over my glass of tea thanks to my habit of waving around my hands when I talk. But, as the officers started to relax, they began telling me (off the record) what they really thought the Iraqi army was up against:

incompetent young soldiers, a rocky government, overzealous neighbors. It was really interesting to hear these older officers finally just talk.

Two more helicopters were ordered up, and we all returned to the helipad, and headed down to Karbala on the holiest day of the Shi'ite calendar, Ashura. I love helicopters, which is strange because I get sick as a dog on airplanes. Helicopters are really cold, at least military ones are, because the windows are open for the gunners to lean out and point their guns and potential threats. I was completely chilled by the time we flew over Karbala several times, and I stared down at the thousands of people carrying green flags crowding down the main avenue toward the gold-topped domed shrine.

Shortly after, we landed on a local helipad, coming down low over a number of houses, stirring up clouds of dust for several blocks. Everyone then just sort of milled around in the sun, teasing and telling jokes, taking photos of each other until a communal plate of rice and meat was brought out and we all dug in. The cameraman and I kept trying to get in touch with each other, but cell phone coverage was spotty. Never mind, I knew he was pretty safe.

Within an hour we all squeezed into military cars and drove straight into the city. Everyone -- absolutely everyone -- was wearing black, and every single woman was covered from head to toe in black robes called abayas. And they were all staring at me, then turning away, then the men started staring, not looking at all pleased. Angry, in fact. Well, I had not known we were going to Karbala, so I was not wearing any head covering. The officers had wanted me to visit the shrine, but without an abaya it was impossible. I couldn't even leave the vehicle. So we pulled into an Iraqi

military compound. At the end of the compound was a room set out with a table in a U shape, with place settings all the way down, plates of cucumbers and tomatoes, but no chairs. Suddenly General Othman pulled up and everyone jumped to attention, and I was invited in to share a holiday lunch with him and his troops. I stood next to him -- everyone stood because as I said, there were no chairs -- and we both started grabbing chunks of marinated grilled chicken and rice from the tray-sized plate placed in front of us. A feast! He was at turns amused and irritated by me. I didn't recognize him and I just thought the whole event was great.

A few hours later, I was back in Baghdad, day over. It was the best day. The cameraman and I put together some short pieces for our Muslim audiences. But the best part of the day for me was not the news at all. It was just being able to see a completely different world, share food with people I would never normally meet, ride in a helicopter and see the sand-colored cities of Iraq from the skies. It just doesn't get any better than that.

December 10

I switched fixers, and I'm back in the groove. The first fixer made me so uncomfortable, and more nervous than I already was about working here. So, new fixer, new mood. The new one is more honest, definitely more excitable, but miles better to work with. We have done more in one day than we have done in two days with the previous guy. After coming back to the safe house, I realized that I was so much more at ease, and really back in the groove of reporting, and so much happier.

There are still challenges, but they are technical. I have only worked with a cameraman twice before, and those two were really professional, judicious in their shots, and needed very little guidance. Quite the opposite, they would tell me what they needed. But the current guy is faster, but more of an inshallah kind of shooter - just film everything and something will work out. This has already failed us when time was tight. I am partially at fault - I need to give a lot more direction, and say what I want. So, I am learning all about television and those particular needs.

Reporting is very hard to describe - it's all go, go, go. Dig out someone to interview, work the interview, work it again, give up and get another one. If those don't work, get another one. The ones today may not be great, but there is something there. It is just such a great rush to find a 21-year-old Iraqi rapper, and get him to talk about the situation in Iraq, then hear him and his two friends free-style in an Iraqi garden -- with a sheep wandering around, a ping-pong table off to the side, next to a towering Iraqi mansion with reliefs carved into the yellow stone walls. I like the pace, I like the work, I just like everything about it.

Back at the house, we got invited out by our security team to the only local restaurant in the International zone. The IZ is totally different than the crowded streets of Baghdad full of lights and movement. It's really quiet here, no shops, no cafes. But it was a beautiful night, clear skies, almost full moon. A young Asian woman showed us into the closed-door private room so they could relax and have a beer. I don't drink (although last night I put down two sips of Baileys after a horrible time trying to send our material via sat feed to Washington) but others do. We laughed a lot, talked about motorbikes and Monty Python movies.

And I guess the question would be - why are there Asians in the IZ? Because they get hired by Americans and Brits to work here, as they appear to be more trusted than the locals. Thousands of Pakistanis, Indian and Nepalese men and Filipino women were brought over here to work in the US military bases by companies like KBR, or to work for security companies doing office work. There are many stories of their terrible living conditions, I don't know how many were true. A lot of the women worked as "girl friends" - one thing that doesn't change much from war to war.

Sunday, December 11

The great thing about working as a print reporter is that you are responsible for no-one but yourself. You can move fast, change quickly, do quick mental and physical U-turns. And in a safe place, like Turkey, or even running with guerrillas, it would be fine working with a TV partner (cameraman) because there's not much that can go horrifically wrong.

My personal problem is that I covered this war at its worst, and I cannot shake my paranoia about kidnapping, about personal safety, about the constant danger of getting blown up. And I am traveling with someone who never saw that side of Iraq, and who blends in quite well. The result is that we are in this constant passive-aggressive dance of how much we expose ourselves.

But the young Iraqis I am working with are also getting very annoyed that I won't sit down in a restaurant for a couple of hours. That was a recipe for death in the old days. Maybe it is fine now. But my security company is telling me there are

concrete threats of kidnappings. It can be hard to judge these things, and I always err on the side of caution. What story is worth a life?

December 12

One thing I have learned in the past four years is to recognize when I am wrong, and to allow myself to apologize for it. I have never found this a very easy process. Particularly the part of recognizing a mistake. I'm so used to leading, to making decisions, that sometimes I forget to really listen to others.

The highest honor in Iraqi culture is to be invited into someone's house, to meet their families. I was welcomed to the house of our new fixer, and given a pretty gift by his aunt. But I repeatedly refused to go out to a restaurant with the fixer and the translator despite their assurances, because I was scared - I didn't really listen to the fixer's statements that we would be fine. I guess I did not trust his judgment, and he understood this to mean that I did not trust him.

This is my war hangover. My experiences in Iraq from 2004-2007 were overall really frightening. It sounds terribly dramatic, but unfortunately, it was true. And I have found it hard to shake my past on this trip, and just see Baghdad for what it is now. This has cost me dearly in terms of good working relations -- which is all important.

Coming to Baghdad then, has been much harder for me than I ever thought, in ways that I never expected. I never thought I would be this nervous. I never thought I would allow that to cloud my judgment, even if it was always to err on the side of

safety. I still believe that no story, no outing is worth losing one's life -- but at the same time, you cannot be frozen by fear, or so tied up with nerves that you fail to see the new realities. I don't know if that is what PTSD is about, because I don't really know what PTSD is. But I do know that I have to break out of this, learn from being here, and make sure that I make things right before I leave.

December 16

Hi, I'm back in the land of milk and honey: Jordan.

There is a huge Christmas tree in the lobby of the Marriot, full of fist-sized gold and red balls, a skinny Santa Claus giving out lollipops, and a girl-elf in the shortest red velvet miniskirt that you could imagine skipping around, and some appalling Arabic versions of Christmas carols coming out of the speaker system.

Coming here from Baghdad is not as much of a mind-warp as it has been in previous years, but it's still really odd. Two hours away, the city of Baghdad is a dusty, crumbling mess, with a police post or army post on almost every corner, and bomb victims in the hospital or morgue. A bomb went off just 200 meters from where we were in the Palestine Hotel a couple of hours after we left. Two policemen were killed.

But Baghdad is not as dangerous as it used to be. Once I got over my 2006 violence hangover, and started to relax, then things improved dramatically. We drove all over the city. We went and bought sweets at a local store. We went out for lunch at a really bad fried chicken place -- but we were seated upstairs all the way at the back and our driver knew the owner.

Even so, driving around, the driver always put the windows up when we were speaking English. We were not allowed to film anywhere without permits. We got surrounded by yelling police when we started filming at the hospital, and that was with the permit. Apparently the permit needed another permit to make it work. Even taking a photograph was a problem - the security is so tight against terrorist attacks, or at least that is what they say. It just felt like being in a police state without the safety of being in one.

Also, once I started to relax I started to enjoy myself again. I really went to Baghdad, and saw it again, and did seven stories.

All in all, it was good. Circle closed.

Coming Home

I'm OK now. At least I think I am. Let's say I am OK within some parameters. I am no longer terrified, my nightmares have subsided, and my anger has gone. Yes, my heart still races before I get on a plane to places like Kabul or Baghdad. Bomb, suicide attack, kidnap, shooting possibilities crowd into my mind before every trip, but I put my shoulder against that mental door and slowly push it closed. Catastrophic thinking is useless. But, as a good friend of mine keeps telling me, a degree of fear is a good thing, it keeps you sharp, keeps you always thinking of a way out.

Of course, that kind of thinking doesn't always make sense when you are sitting in a cafe in rural France or in wandering around a crowded market in London. But it is not always easy to turn it off. After my first or second stint in Baghdad in 2003, I remember spending two days in London, and my eyes kept going to the rooftops to look for snipers. Totally ridiculous, because I am not trained on what to

look for – but I had been driving around the streets of Baghdad, some with picturesque names like "Sniper Alley" or "Suicide Run" with young security types who constantly searched the roadsides and rooftops for anything that looked even slightly different, and I had picked up the habit. Streets that were suddenly empty meant an IED or an imminent suicide bomb attack. Alleys with no side streets were kidnap traps, and any car sweeping up fast behind you was a potential attack. Driving under bridges was hazardous – people were dropping grenades on cars from the bridge – so you would drive in one lane going under the bridge and veer into the oncoming lane coming out. Sitting in restaurants was dangerous, speaking English was dangerous, looking Western was dangerous, telling anyone where you were going was dangerous. Information was being bought and sold so that people could be kidnapped and ransomed. Anyone caught working with the Americans had their head sawn off, and videos of the executions went viral on people's cell phones. Fear and paranoia were the subtext to everything. Going from that to shopping for groceries in Bethesda in a matter of flight hours is a difficult mind trick.

Trauma is defined as “a deeply distressing or disturbing experience.” The problem is, it can be hard to understand when you are actually experiencing it. At first, I thought trauma resulted from the actual events – for example, when the hotel I was staying at in Baghdad was mortared, twice. The first time, I had no clue what was going on. I thought it was an earthquake. The second time, I knew what was going on, but no-one else seemed to panic, so I didn't either. There are images and sounds of actual events that I did not react to at the time, but that have remained in my head, such as seeing people in a rural clinic in Rwanda who had had arms cut off with

machetes, and just healing slice marks on their heads and backs, or hearing a bomb go off on a gritty grey morning in Kabul. Thankfully, I have not seen as much of the blood and gore and death that many other journalists have seen, so I have been spared that level of trauma. But there are other levels, and it comes out in funny ways.

I cannot watch gory movies. The graphic and gratuitous violence revolts me. For a long time I could not enjoy fireworks. The sound was too jarring and upsetting. I startle easily. I won't watch suspense movies, because suspense creates an anticipation of mental or physical violence that I have no desire to re-live. For a few months after I stopped covering Iraq, in 2008, I worked in a small boutique toy store in Maryland. The store offered helium-filled balloons, and one day I was filling a balloon when I overdid it and the balloon exploded. My mind went completely blank, a white light filled my eyes, and my body was instantly drenched in sweat. I was immobilized. It was all over in a few seconds, but I had to move away.

Most journalists that I have talked to agree that it is not the idea that we might get killed in an act of random violence that is the problem – we have all pretty much made our peace with that. It is the constant uncertainty while surrounded by targeted violence, the kidnappings, the pointed execution of journalists, the knowing that you have become a pawn in a larger conflict. The days that a reporter could throw up her hands and shout "journalist" and be set free as a non-combatant are over. In today's conflicts, journalists are fair game or even high-value targets. Anxiety comes from knowing that the road you are traveling on has bombs sprinkled all over it and thinking that you are playing the odds, or from sensing the panic of others. One of the most frightening experiences I had was traveling in a violent Sunni neighborhood

area of Baghdad in a Humvee with some young shell-shocked soldiers in 2007. Every abandoned thing on the road was a potential IED, every person a potential enemy. I had headphones on so I could listen to their conversation, which was a disjointed mess of "Bag on the road, on the right, BAG ON THE ROAD" as the driver veered to the left, "DEAD DOG DEAD DOG" and the vehicle veered again "Watch out for that Haji, what's he doing, move MOVE." By the time we arrived at our destination, I was adrenalin-exhausted. Essentially it is the constant anticipation of violence, the constant fear of what could happen, the near-misses – bombs, guns, kidnappings – the constant running on the edge that starts to work on you.

I think it's important to point out that most journalists, especially those pretty low in the hierarchy of things, or those working under the constant pressure of news organizations cutting their budgets, do not travel with much, if any, security. We are not armed. We are normally on the ground in a defenseless position. We often travel in local cars, with local drivers, stay in local housing. There is really no one to call who will magically send in the troops to get you out of a bad situation. We consciously accept these risks. No one is forced to report from hostile environments, and those of us who do, must come to terms with what comes with that. This is not to say that news organizations do not bear a responsibility for their reporters – it is just to point out that we, as reporters, must understand, be prepared for and ready to accept the psychological cost that such reporting can inflict. A lot of what we as journalists go through is shared by other non-combatants, such as workers for aid organizations and other NGO's – non-governmental organizations.

During one of my trips to Baghdad, I made casual friends with one of the young American State Department people working there. We met up one night back near Washington, DC, in Bethesda, in an Argentinian restaurant that had great hanger steak and tango. Her anger was edgy, but I recognized it. She was staring at everyone in the restaurant, the diners, the newbies trying out their tango moves where the tables had been pushed back, and just hated it all. She hated the disconnect: how could these people be so carefree, so unaware and so uncaringly unaware of what was going on in Iraq? How dare they?

Her mental disconnect, her feeling of alienation, anger, and inability to process the different worlds of imminent danger and peace is very typical. I have spoken to soldiers who feel the same thing. For journalists who stay in conflict areas for long periods of time, navigating the dangers or uncertainties becomes a way of life, sometimes the only way of life, that reporters understand and feel comfortable with. They understand all the signals, language and movement of on-the-brink situations, sometimes better than dealing with the pissed-off clerk at the local downtown supermarket in a western city. They make long-lasting bonds of friendship with others in the same situation. And they become less and less able to explain their lives, their reality, to those back home.

I once interviewed a chaplain who was with US soldiers deployed in Iraq during 2007, the height of the so-called military surge there to bring an end to the horrific urban and country-wide sectarian war. After the interview we just chatted, and I told him I disagreed strongly with the US military's advice to its soldiers, and its advice to soldiers' spouses back home. The chaplain in Iraq encouraged the soldiers to

speak to him, but not to "worry" their spouses by sharing all their fears, worries, anger, anxieties with them. Instead, whether on Skype, or email, or phone calls, the somewhat bland conversation between spouses or loved ones always centered around the mantra that everything was OK, and light banter about others. Spouses in the bases back home were encouraged to do the same, not to talk about the loneliness, the difficulties, the fears and anger of their own. The result, I told the chaplain, was that in the course of a year, people who were once close to each other and understood each other became completely alienated from each other and incapable of understanding the changes each had gone through. Over the years, I have talked about this with soldiers, NGO workers, and journalists. Although I have only been able to gather anecdotal evidence, what I have seen is a breakdown in relationships due to this complete lack of understanding of what the other has gone through. A military spouse contacted me after the death of her husband in Iraq, desperately wanting to know if he had talked to me of his real feelings of being over there. He had not, and I could not help her. Many people tell me they are perfectly capable of compartmentalizing what they have gone through and settling once again with their spouses or partners. But when I dig deeper, most of them admit there is an emotional void between the two. Sometimes this is irreparably damaging to a relationship, sometimes it is just damaging.

So how does trauma develop? From what I have seen, it happens at a different pace depending on the individual and the experience. For me it was a slow boil. I was fine after my trip to the Maghreb in 1986, when I explored Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. I think I was OK after my trip through Malawi to Mozambique back in 1987,

but a little shaken. But it was that very intense trip to Juba, southern Sudan, in 1988 that I think pushed me a little closer to the brink. I was only there about a week. But during the course of that week, I talked to starving refugees and to war victims in a tiny rural clinic. I listened to a priest beg for help over a short-wave radio. I was arrested by the Arab militia, stood trial in a bare room with a militia fighter behind a desk, sitting on a wood chair, listening to a young Oxfam worker defend me and eventually gain my release, and I finally got on a relief flight back to Nairobi, Kenya. I arrived back at my house in Nairobi with my nerves strung out. And we were out of toothpaste. It was such a banal, insignificant thing, and I had a huge temper tantrum. I had lived through a week of incredible risk, and my spouse had done a week of office work and had a maid to help. Was it too much to ask for there to be toothpaste? It was, of course, a ridiculous display of anger and frustration on my part, one that I did not understand at the time. Unfortunately it would happen again, and the distance my anger created between me and my husband would get wider.

It culminated after one of my 11 trips to Iraq, and I really don't remember which one. Each trip was marked by a different level of fear and experience, but they were all very intense. Most of this kind of reporting requires the journalist to deal with constantly shifting events, to very quickly adapt to fluid situations, to react quickly to danger or even the threat of danger, to sleep in different places, to wake up and be ready to move within minutes. The underlying mode is one of no control over your own life. What that created in me was a very deep need for certainty and sameness at home, which at the time was in a comfortable house in Maryland. I pulled up to the house in a taxi, grabbed my bags and dragged them upstairs to my

bedroom. Everything had been moved around. The bed, chairs, chest of drawers were all in new places. Nothing was the same. I completely lost it, and I started shouting at my husband to put it all back to exactly the same way it had been for all the years we had lived there. Something in my life had to be constant, and my bedroom, my sanctuary, was that something.

Outbursts of anger, the inability to tolerate change, being depressed, easily startled, losing interest in what was normally enjoyable – as in the case of my State Department friend – are all symptoms of what is known as PTSD, or post-traumatic stress syndrome.²⁰ Everyone deals with their experiences differently and not every journalist suffers from PTSD. Sometimes they suffer from a build-up of stress, sometimes from anxiety, sometimes from alienation, and to alleviate these symptoms some drink a lot of alcohol, some do drugs, some do both. Some search out a degree of serenity in nature. Others find serenity in their relationships.

"Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?"²¹

Just as journalists experience trauma, those that they are writing about are very often victims of trauma, but with no escape. This means that many reporters are not only living the traumatic experience, but they are interviewing those suffering from the same experience, but much more acutely. On the one hand, this can help the reporter better understand and write about the situation. On the other hand, we often create artificial distances in order to be able to write. The extreme, of course, is

²⁰ "What is Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?" National Institute of Mental Health, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>.

²¹ Edward Behr, *Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?* (New York: New England Library, 1985).

illustrated by the title of the late Edward Behr's memoir of life as a foreign correspondent: *Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?*²² In the push to get the story, the quote, the sound bite, we end up asking horrifically insensitive questions. I am personally not comfortable interviewing people who are clearly very recently traumatized, even though I fully understand the power of raw emotions in such stories. Most recently on a trip to Kabul to cover the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan, there was a gun and bomb attack on a housing compound that included an NGO building. The shell-shocked survivors walked into the Serena Hotel where I was staying with nothing but their beat-up clothes and broken shoes. I knew who they were, knew it was a great story, and all I could bring myself to say was, "Are you OK?" I went to my room, then, angry with myself, grabbed my audio recorder and went to find the group. I found them in the business lounge, just talking. And I just could not bring myself to intrude on them. I wondered if they needed to call home. And I asked if there was anything I could do for them. "A bottle of Scotch?" was the answer. I smiled. No Scotch in Afghanistan, or at least none I could get my hands on. It was only the next morning at breakfast that I introduced myself as a journalist and asked if they would agree to be interviewed. The answer was a polite no.

I have often kicked myself for my own inability to push harder in these situations. That does not mean I don't ask, when I think it is the right time to ask, and often people are willing to talk. But to interview when feelings are raw, when people make a lot of very emotionally charged statements, I feel is a sensitive issue. It makes

²² Ibid.

for a great read, a great TV scene, but it does not make me feel like a great person. I believe there are ways to interview people when they are able to show their emotions, and it can take time and encouragement, and there are times when people need to talk about events, or want to talk about events. But to push recently traumatized people into this kind of confession is not something I can do.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

"Sport is where you see the fibre and character of your adversaries, and you get to know yourself better; you learn to master your anxieties, frustrations and learn fair play. Sport is winning or losing! I go after every ball. I only lose if I don't manage to win. But after the game, I don't care if I won or lost."²³

I wish I could say I had always wanted to be a journalist. But I didn't. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I got a degree in English Literature and had this vague idea that I wanted to travel and help people. The Peace Corps sounded like a good plan. I was in New York, working a secretarial job on Wall Street when I called my father to tell him. My father said offering to help others was a terrific idea, but not for a self-serving year where I would feel all good about myself and the people I had been with would be left behind. Instead, he offered me a one-way ticket to the Bolivian Altiplano to help villagers learn English and improve their lives. Length of stay: 10 years. Suddenly, I didn't want to help people that much. I decided to be a journalist. I traveled to Brazil, thinking that anyone would love to hire me. After almost a year of sporadic unemployment that ended with my writing the English subtitles to a Brazilian porn movie, I moved back to New York. A few months of secretarial work there and living off cheap kimchi and rice and beans, and I was done. When my father called to tell me there was an opening at the local *Anglo-Portuguese News* in the area where I grew up in Portugal, I flew home.

My family was very Roman Catholic conservative. My father was born in 1912, grew up through World War I and its aftermath, lived through the Great

²³ Antonio Horta-Osorio, "Portuguese Talent" *TAP Portugal Magazine*, September 2013, 34.

Depression and served in World War II. My mother broke all the rules of her strictly patriarchal family in southern Brazil by leaving to work with the Brazilian Air Force in Rio de Janeiro and marry an American many times her senior. Like all the women in her family, she stopped working when she got married. None of the women of my father's family ever worked. I think my parents figured journalism was a good-paying hobby that I would continue until I got married, had children, and came to my senses.

Journalism was a revelation to me. I am intensely curious, but not gracefully so. I love meeting new people, but I am hopeless at cocktail party banter. I want to hear people's stories, the events that matter to them, their emotions, what makes them do what they do. I really don't care that much about their golf games, the latest mall sale, or what their dog ate on the street (unless it's funny, of course). Journalism allowed me to bypass all my social ineptness and do what I wanted to do. I could travel, ask people the most intrusive questions, challenge them in ways I never would have dared otherwise, and it was all sanctioned by my work. Journalism allowed me to be me. I am the absolute happiest when I am in the middle of a story, whether it's talking to a woman in a Portuguese slum, or a political internee at a hospital, or a man crippled by polio in Pakistan, whether it's running to jump onto a helicopter or traveling in the cockpit of a cargo plane. There is something so intensely free about those moments, when it is just you and the story.

So why do combat reporters do what they do? Everyone has their own personal reasons. But really, it's the job. It's what they signed on for, it is what they do well and what they love to do. It requires a lot of focus, a sense of curiosity, adventure, embracing the unknown, conquering fear, as well as planning,

organization, the ability to move fast, and the ability to wait. It exposes the best and the worst of you, and the best and worst of all those around you. Foreign reporters rarely turn down a story. They push themselves to the limit, often working 15-hour days, day after day, sometimes week after week. In a combat zone, there is never a day off. Relaxing becomes relative – and extreme. There were some fun dance parties in Iraq. Kabul has a great underground bar scene.

Stories and places become a part of you, they mold you. Working a story is diving into a kaleidoscope of colors, people, emotions, and history. The story envelopes you, scenes fill your mind, smells enter hidden corners of your being, sounds crawl in through your pores, adrenaline takes over, adrenaline leaves you. Those are the moments, the hours or the days, that you become you. Working a story is an intense and focused experience where nothing else matters – nothing else can matter – except those you are living it with.

It is important to note that little of the work combat or foreign correspondents do would be feasible without the help, support and dedication of local staff. Any news organization only works as well as its network of local stringers, freelancers, fixers, interpreters and drivers. What is a fixer? A fixer is a local person who becomes your anchor in that community. They have all the contacts, know the streets, and can resolve almost any situation that arises. I have heard fixers described as a journalist's lifeline, best friend and problem solver. In volatile and uncertain places, the fixer is the one person you can trust. Many fixers and translators have been threatened and killed just for working with Western organizations. Over the course of my life, my

drivers maneuvered me safely through sectarian combat zones, my fixers got me interviews I never would have had otherwise. They have kept me safe.

There is also the kindness of strangers and friends. I have been taken in, fed, cared for, and had local details explained to me by people who had known me for only a few minutes. A young woman working in an advertising agency in Casablanca, Morocco, invited me into her home, where I stayed for five days. Another woman invited me to stay with her in her very humble home in the old Arab quarter of Algiers. In Sudan, an Oxfam worker saved me from getting thrown into jail. In Kenya, my fixers rescued me from bureaucracy I never could have worked through on my own. In Pakistan, one local correspondent spent patient hours explaining Pashtun culture and the intricacies of militant tribes. In Iraq, many drivers and fixers went out of their way to help me dress correctly so I could remain unobtrusive, they talked our way through numerous militia checkpoints, protected me at all times, took me into their homes so I could understand their lives, and gave me a window into the country and the conflict I never would have had otherwise. In Afghanistan, local journalists spent time feeding me as well as recounting the complex history of the country. In Portugal fellow journalists gave me the leg-up I needed.

I cannot imagine my life other than it has been. All the challenges, the fear, the dust and the dirt are part of a life-long adventure and a life of discovery. Looking back, I'm amazed at everything I have done. I have tried to take photographs of myself recently in these amazing circumstances. When I got an interview with Abu Bakr Bashir, the imprisoned spiritual leader of Jammāt Islamiye in Indonesia, I

snapped a picture of the two of us. I have pictures of me with the guerrillas in Mozambique, of me in Iraq, and of me in Afghanistan.

Taking the time to pursue a master's degree and write this thesis has allowed me, and sometimes forced me, to reflect on many personal aspects of my life as a reporter. That reflection, in turn, allowed me to privately exorcise some of the bitterness I had accumulated along with my experiences, to sift out what was important from what was not in terms of personal and professional development. I did not include all of those experiences in this thesis, but I did try to choose some of the moments that were the most formative.

This thesis also gave me a way of reaching out to other journalists and others who work in volatile areas of the world to discuss issues that we face almost daily but do not always talk about, such as how to cope with sexual harassment, fear and death. I think that having those conversations in the context of writing in an autobiographical format allowed for a level of intimate and truthful discussion that would not have been possible using a more academic approach. In one of my conversations with my daughter in the course of writing about the difficulties in my career, she looked at me and asked why I didn't talk about why I loved the work. And that has reminded me of all the fun I have had, of all the funny moments, of the fascinating people and cultures I have been able to explore, and all the amazing adventures that have happened along the way. I have realized that it is important to keep that aspect of the work as foremost in my mind as the challenges, and I hope that this thesis has managed to strike that balance even while discussing topics that are

substantive. All in all, it has been an extraordinary life, and although it has come at an extraordinary price, I would not change it.

I hope that this thesis will go some way toward deepening the public's understanding of what goes on in the field for reporters covering combat and other volatile situations and writing about what happens in the forgotten corners of the world. I hope that it also will encourage all news organizations to work with their reporters to prepare mentally and physically for challenging assignments, provide them with better security and support during those assignments, and recognize that reporters may need time to heal after assignments without seeing that need as a sign of weakness. I believe that it is no longer enough to simply dismiss the personal cost of journalism by saying that is the life reporters have chosen. No one says that anymore about police, firefighters or soldiers, and it is time to accord the same attention to the human cost of delivering the news as has been given to those who make the news.

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