# Inside the war zone

**By David Pratt**

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It seems like an age ago. The sights, the sounds and smells. I'm often asked what I remember most about the war in Iraq, and always it comes back to the same thing – people. Not that the war is really over of course. Sure, Saddam's statue was toppled and hauled along the ground while I was there, but then what was that next to the ignominious real-life end of the great dictator's reign two weeks ago?

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, we got him – in the end. This time it wasn't just a statue plummeting from a plinth into Baghdad's Palestine Square, but the flesh-and-blood despot himself, pulled up into the sunlight from a putrid hole near his home town of Tikrit.

Will we ever forget that image of the "beloved leader", bearded and bewildered, dragged from his "underground facility", as American soldier-speak called his pathetic hideaway?

By invading Iraq all those months ago, George W Bush and Tony Blair not only got Saddam, they also got landed with a new and ever-escalating guerrilla war. Just try asking your average Iraqi if they think the war is over. Even as I write this, there are news reports of yet another roadside bomb that has claimed at least 10 more lives.

But enough of the present war. What about the one gone by? What memories, images and anecdotes of those times stick in my mind and make for after-dinner chat or banter in the pub?

I certainly recall the night it all started. For if waiting on war is bad enough, its arrival is always a moment of mixed emotions.

"The bombs are falling on Baghdad," shouted a young Kurdish soldier, grinning wildly as he stumbled into the darkened room over the bodies of his comrades and journalists sleeping on the floor of the front-line post where we had spent that damp and miserable night of Thursday, March 20, seeing out Bush's deadline for war. "Do you think the Iraqis will now start shelling us here?" he asked a few minutes later, his initial euphoria melting before our eyes.

There it was: the two faces of war. One minute, the gung-ho warrior's anticipation of a fight then, next, the harsh realisation of just what that means. The chain reaction had

begun. The war was barely a few hours old but all the familiar telltale signs of lives uprooted or pushed into the abyss were already there.

What war really means, after all, is children bundled into the back of a lorry cold, wet, hungry and afraid or the shocking image of Ali Abbas, just 12 years old but orphaned in the same airstrike which blew off both his arms. It means the sight of a heavily pregnant woman, weeping after walking for hours alongside her tiny daughter and husband, all traumatised by what they have left behind in Baghdad and what now lies ahead. It means market touts selling plastic sheeting and out-of-date gas masks at exorbitant prices to terrified people seeking futile protection against rocket and chemical attacks.

One image in particular remains fixed in my head: that of an old man trying to reassure his wife that they won't be left behind in the bid to escape the bombardment. She cries, while he fumbles in a puddle for the screws he dropped in a nervous panic while trying to attach the car roof rack that will carry a mere handful of his family's lifetime belongings to a place of safety.

Standing on the roadsides leading out of Iraqi cities and towns such as Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mosul, in those early hours and days, what you heard was not the hellbent ring of "regime change", but the pleas of innocent people caught up in a military onslaught beyond their comprehension.

Those weeks were an indelible and kaleidoscopic mix of experiences. Like the chilling atmosphere I encountered still lingering inside the cells of an Iraqi secret police jail that I visited in newly liberated Sheikhan. Or the sight of spiralling plumes of black acrid smoke from Kirkuk's burning oil wells.

Then there were the bundles of Iraqi dinar notes fluttering from a looted bank in Mosul, and the size and awesome destructive power of the craters left over from a B52 bombing raid in the village of Abu Chit. The bombers' approach was an eerie sound at the best of times. But in the dead of night its menace seemed to fill the darkness, sending a chill down the spine and the mind racing.

At first, it was only the distant hiss of their jet engines that was audible, somewhere in the starry sky above. But always, it had the same peculiar effect on those who heard it. Conversations stopped mid-sentence, teacups stayed poised at drinkers' mouths and cameramen rushed outside or on to rooftops. Meanwhile, the targets themselves – Iraqi soldiers – simply hunkered down and prayed they would see the light of day.

More than anything I'll remember the Iraq war in this way: a series of cameo lives lived – and sometimes lost – in extreme. The intensity of such a shared experience inevitably bonds people quickly and powerfully.

It was Sunday, April 6 when, with photographer Patrick Barth, we joined a convoy of

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Kurdish fighters and BBC journalists heading for the front line at a place called Dibagah in northern Iraq. Almost on a whim, we decided en route to turn off and, instead, head for another village where fighting had been intense.

Had we not made that turn-off, it's unlikely I would be writing this now. In one of the worst friendly fire incidents of the war, two US F-15 bombers killed 17 Kurdish and American soldiers when they mistakenly attacked the convoy. The explosions ripped the vehicles apart, the heat of the blast so intense that it melted the zinc of their batteries.

"This is a scene from hell. All the vehicles are on fire. There are bodies burning around me, there are bodies lying around, there are bits of bodies on the ground. This is a bad own goal by the Americans," said wounded BBC world affairs editor John Simpson, in his now famous report just after the bombs had struck. His translator Kamran Abdurazaq Mohammed was not so lucky – a piece of shrapnel cut off his legs and he bled to death before he could be taken to hospital.

That night, back at our hotel in Erbil, John looked drawn and was limping from a small wound to his foot. Abdullah, an Afghan photographer and another of my friends who was with him, was in hospital with lumps of shrapnel lodged in his body, from his neck to his legs.

Working in any war zone is inevitably a lottery of life and death. How many of my nine lives had gone now? Not for the first time, I wonder why I escaped. Why someone else was the victim and not me. As it was, having cheated injury in one place, Patrick and I had something of our own epic day, crawling for hours under intense Iraqi shellfire through slit trenches their troops had abandoned only hours earlier.

As the bombardment subsided we would be up on our feet for another hunched, heart-pounding dash, eyes fixed on that next place of cover, but glancing occasionally to the ground for the telltale signs of any landmines.

At such moments, in what seems like an eternity, there is little else to think about until, breathless, you collapse into the next hole, your chest heaving like a spent swimmer's.

Sometimes we spent days like this: dirt, sweat, adrenaline, fear, but above all, a profound sense of relief at having repeatedly run the gauntlet of mortar bombs and bullets, and to still be around afterwards to reflect and joke about it with colleagues. At the end of such days, it's not a cliché to say that bad food tastes delicious, warm beer feels ice cold, and the sleep you have is the exhausted, deepest kind imaginable.

After one such afternoon, still filthy and giggling with that uncontrollable nervous laughter that is the early sign of madness from a day too close to the edge, Patrick, from God knows where, procured a bottle of whisky. Hours later, I found him slumped in his hotel room shower still fully clothed and marginally more drunk than myself. "We were

sooo … lucky today," he mumbled before passing out again.

At night, on the satellite phone link home, what can you say to your family and friends about such experiences? My partner tells me some bills have arrived in my mail that I need to take care of. My brother says he is off to watch Scotland play Lithuania. My mother, as always, repeats her now familiar mantra: "Keep your head down and remember Belgium."

Remember Belgium? Since I was a child she has said that to me whenever I'm heading somewhere there might be trouble. To this day I still don't know what it means.

Life, normal life, no matter how seemingly trivial or mundane, is always reassuring and good to hear about from those you love. It acts as an anchor to the myriad emotions tugging in all directions that war throws up and that can so easily pull a person's psyche apart.

A few days before I left Iraq I went to visit Abdullah who by then was out of hospital and sitting up in his hotel bed, waiting for word of his MedEvac flight from the American airbase at Hareer to Germany and an operation to remove the shrapnel lurking dangerously near the artery in his neck.

"Shame on the Americans, and their 'friendly fire'," he complained mockingly in that weird accent that comes from being Afghan but living in Spain. We shook hands and promised to get together soon.

In the end, it took me two days to cross the snowy spring passes on the Iraq-Iran border, leaving the war in my wake and catching a BA flight from Tehran to London.

On board, the stewardess quietly told me a fellow passenger had complained that I smelled. I tried to explain, and she nodded sympathetically. After moving me to a passenger-free part of the near-empty plane, she deposited a cluster of Glenfiddich miniatures on my table. "Bet you couldn't get these in Iraq," she said smiling.

For the first time in almost six weeks, it really felt like I was almost home. Months later, looking back, it's only natural to ask oneself certain questions.

Was the war worth it?

That, I suppose, depends on who you are, and whether the killing will stop and Iraqis and others can look forward with certainty to a peaceful future.

Would I do it all again? The answer, of course, can only be yes. Such experiences are special. They deliver not only great professional satisfaction, but a real personal insight into what makes you, and others, tick.

To anyone watching pictures of the war in Iraq on television and seeing the terrible suffering of innocents who don't have the luxury of choosing whether to be there or not,

such a confession might seem perverse and self-indulgent. But to deny such feelings would, for many of the reporters who covered the fighting, also be hypocritical, if not a downright lie.

In June, Patrick Barth married his Spanish fiancée. I had promised to attend the wedding but in the end couldn't make it. Abdullah, however, kept his promise, dancing the night away despite that huge lump of American metal still lodged in his neck.

Today we keep in touch, our friendships moulded from something that indelibly marked us all. Sometimes the talk is of throwing a reunion party, the next it's of returning to Iraq to cover the "new war". I know which I would prefer. ●

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