Within a fortnight, all that turned out to be bullshit. I was a plane to Macedonia and then Israel.

First, Malcolm Downing, the Senior Desk Editor, asked me to fly 50,000 Deutsche Marks to the producer in Skopje. I rang Sue immediately and left the same afternoon. Talk about a U-turn. Malcolm said he would talk to Bob, and Tony Loughran told me to leave as soon as possible. The left hand didn't know what the right was doing but suddenly I was back in the game.

Sue asked me if it was safe and so begun what would become a familiar routine of me palming her off nonchalantly – over the years she would only ever watch the news if she knew I was heading there. This was the first time I had ever been a courier, and out here the BBC credit card would get you nowhere. If you needed fuel, hotels, fixers or bribes, cash was the only dollar that counted.

Crucially, I was trusted. One man standing in my way had been overridden by the immediacy of the demands of news, and that was just the beginning: over the years, I flew to Jenin in Israel, Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, Kenya, Brussels, Borneo and even Peru to lay the groundwork for a series on CBeebies!

I was quickly learning who to hang out with to fulfil my dreams. But of course, the stakes were suddenly raised on 11 September 2001. Everything changed overnight. The world was at war with Osama bin Laden and I now had a front-row seat.

When the planes flew into the Twin Towers, I was in Paris being courted by a ballistics company. I had seen a French reporter in Israel wearing a special type of flak jacket that I knew we would need going forward. This was my new life, being wined and dined on the Champs-Élysées, living it up on the BBC, but ultimately 9/11 was the moment which would define the next decade of news-gathering for all journalists and also for myself. Just like the IRA bomb, for those in the field, bad news was good news.

As I raced to get home, my journalist colleagues were trying to get to the States, eventually hiring a 747 together with ITV and flying to Canada, before tearing down through North America in a hire car. Certain teams had already been deployed to Pakistan without my knowledge and I got straight on the phone to Tony to tell him I had to get there. I was told that a freelancer had to go – I was needed in London as the link between News and the teams on the ground – but that was bollocks. They were trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. I didn't get further than delivering kit to Stansted.

In place of myself I had to send an old mate, Tony Rippon, but I made sure he only stayed a week and a half! Then I called him home, having blagged it to the news team that they needed more kit, more sleeping bags, and more meals. Sooner rather than later, I was on that plane to Islamabad.

This was to be the first time I met John Simpson. Over the next decade we would be close to inseparable on such trips. I then got summoned home – they didn't want me out there more than two weeks. We were all simply waiting to get into Afghanistan. We had only just met, but as I flew back to do bloody paperwork, John told me it was ridiculous: someone with my experience, which he had not been used to having in tow previously, had to stay with him on the ground.

A decade of Health and Safety was getting underway at the same time that the world changed forever. Apparently, it was more important for me to complete the paperwork on sitting upright on a BBC chair than it was to penetrate a border by nightfall as guns and missiles rained supreme all around.

When I returned, Tony told me that Bob wanted me back. It wasn't my role to chaperone John as he famously 'liberated Kabul'. I had to fill in the forms and tick the boxes back at base. As the new era dawned in the West, I had to fight the internal war too. The world was watching America and her allies. The War on Terror had begun.

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Over a year later, in February 2003, I went into work in London as usual, but with an extra spring in my step. I knew from my days in the Army when it was all kicking off and it was obvious from the headlines that the US and the Brits were going to invade Iraq. This was what I was here for.

The phones had been ringing off the hook but all I had been able to do was prepare equipment – the Beeb were nervous about sending ex-military personnel in before hostilities had broken out. Then Tom Giles called and Malcolm Downing came to see me. Jim Muir, the Tehran correspondent, was crossing the border as we were talking; Stuart Hughes was out there on his first trip to do radio; and John had newspaper columns to write, a book deal in the bag, and needed to file for Panorama. Fred Scott, an American was on board as cameraman ... would I go as the security advisor?

I didn't need asking twice. Within a day, I was on the plane. I told Sue that my return depended on Mr Bush! In fact it was a done deal: by the end of that meeting Dave Bristow at the travel desk had already booked the tickets and Oggy Boytchev had come over to introduce himself as the producer. There was no doubt at all that we were leaving and it couldn't come soon enough. I had grabbed together what I could from the BBC Safety Store – Sat Phones, GPS, sleeping bags, duvet jackets, body armour, helmet and rations. If I thought I needed it, it was in. However, I had gone to work that morning knowing that tension was in the air but unaware that within twenty-four hours, I would be gone for two months. Our planning was shit. But I loved it.

We flew to Turkey, then on to Adana in the south, before taking a twenty-one hour coach journey to the Northern Iraq border. You couldn't fly into Iraq, and the key meeting place for all foreign journalists was on the Salopi border. Although time consuming, this was the fastest, safest route in. When we got there, we still didn't have a BBC coach, and we were kicked off the CNN one – tempers were running high. It took thirty-six hours in all to get from the border to Arbil in the north, Iraq's fourth largest city. During that time, one of our fixers, Dragan Petrovic, heard from Belgrade that he had become a dad. John had promised to get him on this trip after working with him in the Balkans, and Dragan needed the money. He should have been at home, especially as for the next five weeks, we did fuck all.

John was getting frustrated waiting for the war to start, and he was convinced we were in the wrong location. We had nowhere to go, having been given only a four day visa. We ignored its expiry date and decided to sit it out for the duration.

In the weeks up to 19 March, our days would be spent planning, doing the odd bit of local reconnaissance, and generally batting away all the local fixers and car dealers who had got wind that the BBC were camped in the Tower Hotel. Word was out that the great John Simpson was in town. This meant money to the locals. Eventually we forked out an extortionate $3,500 a month for a Hyundai and a Toyota. We also seemed to have acquired a fixer caller Russa and a freelance stills photographer, Abdullah, who had great contacts with the local Peshmerga and – much to my irritation – had wormed his way onto the team. I knew he thought John was his meal ticket (and I mean that literally). Not only would the BBC's World Affairs Editor probably be on the scent of the story, there would be three fine meals a day – and Abdullah was always first to clean his plate. Risgar, the Manager of the hotel, couldn't do enough for us either, even offering me a pistol to take on the road, which I declined. I learned that he was cutting deals with FOX TV too. Clearly, this was a big payday all round.

By night, we would chew the fat, sing some songs and Fred would start up the card school – John the Ace Simpson and Craig the Shark Summers fighting to the death over the jackpot prize ... of toothpicks! We were that bored. To make it worse, Fred had just had a little baby and had spent only twelve hours at home in months. He hadn't even heard her cry. That was the price we all paid just to get the story.

But there was no story. All John could think about was getting to Baghdad but we had no way in yet. He had knocked on my door one night to express his concerns that we simply did not have enough or the correct equipment for the locals we had taken on. This appalled him, and rightly so, but that's often the deal when you leave at a moment's notice. I did my best to scrounge around for extra supplies.

On the night of the 19th the Americans fired Tomahawk missiles into Baghdad. Finally, we were in business – and a good job too, because Bob Forster had already tried to get me home once. I briefed our locals to tell their families our plans and ordered everyone to pack a bag with spare kit so we could move as and when. I also checked the vehicles for road-worthiness. Word was reaching us that morale was low in the Iraqi Army; the streets were quiet and shops were beginning to get boarded up. The war had well and truly started. But it wasn't until the first ten days of

April when we tasted the horrors of conflict ourselves, and in our hunt to get the story, became the very story itself.

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By 2 April, Stuart Hughes had been in Iraq for two months. As the front line between the Kurdish-controlled North and the Central and Southern Territories held by Saddam Hussein began to crumble, Stuart, Kaveh Golestan his cameraman, and a local Kurdish soldier were on the road gathering material near the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

As American bombs poured out of the sky, Stuart and Jim Muir stopped at a checkpoint to get some knowledge of the best vantage point for footage of the Yanks attacking the frontline in the distance. The local Kurdish Peshmerga guide told them it was safe to proceed to another track, one hundred metres on the right, turning left to a second route near an abandoned Iraqi military position. They should pull over there to avoid being 'crested' (visible on the other side of the ridge). Jim was nervous about stopping off-road and parked his left-hand drive at an angle.

Kaveh had sat next to Jim in the front; in the back Stuart was on the right, Rabeen, a fixer, was in the middle, and the local Peshmerga sat on the left. He was the first to exit.

Stuart was next to get out. With one step, his right foot set off the first mine. Jim threw himself down next to the driver's door, believing they were taking incoming fire. On hearing the first detonation from the rear, Kaveh ran around to the front of the vehicle for cover. He threw himself onto two mines, and was gone. Killed instantly.

Rabeen was the only one left inside the vehicle. He had also thought it was a mortar attack, but quickly realised there was no distinctive whistling sound so it must be a mine strike. Then he heard Stuart crying out from the rear right – but he could also see Stuart's legs. Ahead, he saw another body covered in dirt. In the moment of impact, he thought it was a dead Iraqi, only understanding it was Kaveh a few moments later when Jim called out he was going to rescue him.

Rabeen urged him not to risk further injury but Jim insisted. It was too late. There was no pulse.

The local Peshmerga fired his rifle to attract attention. Rabeen pulled Stuart into the vehicle over the bags in the cargo area behind the back seat. Jim dragged Kaveh's body to the vehicle and rested his body across Rabeen, revealing extensive injuries to the abdomen and lower leg. By now there were twenty or thirty locals out on the track. Jim put his foot down, heading for the nearby hospital about five minutes away.

At this point, my phone rang. It was Quill Lawrence, who worked for Boston the World, a radio outfit affiliated to the BBC. Quill was one of the first on the scene. 'Look, there's been a bad accident,' he began. 'I don't know how many are dead. They are on the road to Kifri and I can't get hold of Jim.'

I was two hours away, having dinner with Tom Giles and John Simpson. By the end of the call, I had upped and left. Together with Oggy, I drove like a mad man towards Sulaymaniyah in the northeast of the country, all the time talking to Quill on the phone.

He had pulled a blinder. He had spoken to a US Forces medical unit based just outside the city. Plans were underway to get the guys moved from the local facility, and an escort vehicle was on its way. He also confirmed that Kaveh was dead.

Stuart had had a pain-killing injection and an antibiotic, with a stop at another hospital to give him glucose liquids. We met them in Sulaymaniyah. At the American base, the facilities were the business. I explained to the surgeon who Stuart was, then they asked everyone else to leave. I was to stay to facilitate his evacuation, and for support, while they operated. He was gone for hours – the drugs knocked him for six. I watched from the corner whilst they un-bandaged and took pictures of the remains of his foot.

'It's fifty – fifty whether he keeps his leg,' I was told by American captain Jeff Joyce. 'We'll clean it up but that's as far as we'll go. We're making arrangements to get him out on a helicopter to Germany or Cyprus. We'd like you to sit with him.'

They offered me a sleeping bag as I had no kit. It was going to be a night on the floor for me.

'How are you feeling?' I asked Stuart.

'A bit groggy,' he mumbled back. 'How's my leg?'

'It'll be fine mate,' I lied. 'Don't worry, it's still there, you'll be playing football for Wales soon.'

I thought this was the best thing to say even though I knew otherwise. There was no point stressing him any further. He had asked me if anyone had spoken to his parents and I said Oggy was through to London and they now knew. Moments later, Stuart was out for the count again. I went to check back in with Jeff, who told me London were all over it but Stuart's family wanted to talk to me on the Sat Phone. They didn't know me from Adam but I assured them he would be on his way tomorrow and was in good hands, and returned to sit with Stuart, rolled up in my sleeping bag ...

He was in and out of sleep, and by 0500 the Yanks were in anyway to move him. It was time for me to leave and for him to make that long journey home. My job was done and someone else would take it from here, and that was how I saw it. Nothing like this choked me – I was more concerned about getting back to Arbil. I had seen too much of war and life to get emotional. Stuart faced a long road ahead, but tomorrow was another day for me. That's just how I was, and how I learned to deal with tragic incidents like this. I had done my part and had no personal responsibility to his section – that wasn't my style. It would be months before I would see him again.

As I said goodbye, I had one last question to ask. ‘What were you wearing on your feet?’

‘Sandals,’ he replied.

I’d feared he would say that. ‘How many times have I told you? Why weren’t you wearing boots?’ But now wasn’t the time to criticise. I had said it before and I would say it again hundreds and hundreds of times over the years.

This was Stuart’s first big gig and even though the locals believed that these mines dated from the Iran-Iraq War of the 1970s, and the terrain was now lush and green, our guys had all learnt about off-road driving into places like this on the BBC Hostile Environment Course.

I hated to say it. This was an unfortunate accident, it might not have made a difference, but we both looked at each other knowingly. Stuart shouldn’t have been in sandals.

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‘How’s things?’ they asked when they saw me enter the restaurant.

I had hitched a long, precarious lift back to Arbil. I needed my single bed in this pokey little hotel, my feet dangling over the end of it. I was that exhausted I didn’t care.

‘I am fucking knackered,’ I told the boys, before filling them in on Stuart’s progress. And then we left it. That’s what we did. I told them what I knew and we moved on. A small amount of sympathy, followed by a relevant dose of information, topped off with the next briefing. It’s just how it was.

By the next morning, 4 April, Stuart was hardly mentioned. We had a war to cover and Simpson was itching to cover it. Even knocking on the door of sixty, he still had it, and couldn’t wait to get cracking. The word was that fighting had increased and again, John was worried we weren’t near the story. Rageh Omaar was looking like a star in Baghdad. That had been John in 1991, and he wanted it to be John in 2003. He was desperate to find a way out of here but even with that mindset, there was no way he would be embedded. That, to John, said control and censorship. He wanted to roam, hunt down and sniff out the story that nobody else had. That’s why he was John Simpson.

The next day we found ourselves twenty kilometres east of Al Qasr. One of our tip-offs had come good and we found ourselves spending the night with American Special Forces. I had wandered over discreetly to introduce myself as one of their own and see if they would mind if we took some general shots. Clearly, if they were here, there was a story, as if their laser finders on the jeeps didn’t give it away.

We shook hands and they were cool, so long as we didn't film them or specify location. I assured them that we wouldn't. I could have sold them down the river of course, but you don't want to get a reputation for that – you would never be allowed in again. They told me that they'd lost count of the number of times they had been here. I offered them my Sat Phone so they could call home – against their operational procedure. We shared kebabs and talked squaddie shit all night. I loved every second. As we swapped parachuting tales, for the first time since I had crossed the line from soldier to undercover beef for the BBC, I crossed it back again. I was totally at home and slightly jealous, as brilliant as my new life was. Twenty years of memories of sleeping rough under the stars, staking out the enemy and nailing good over evil came flooding back as I was mixing it with America's finest. Despite the flea-bitten blankets and the odd bang in the sky, I could still cut it, and I still loved it.

Curiously, it wasn't for John. The BBC drivers had taken him back to the hotel, around forty minutes away. His news radar told him there wasn't a story here, and he wanted to head back as he didn't have his medicine for his kidney stones. We would hook up again in the morning, and I told him to be prepared – get kit for forty-eight hours and get ready.

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Sunday 6 April 2003.

None of us will forget this day.

John was back in the village early. I'd had the best night ever. Over in Tehran, Jim Muir had flown in for Kaveh's funeral. Yes, we were sorry for him, but no, we hardly mentioned it. We had work to do and needed to crack on, and in the cutthroat world of news and war, it was the BBC's job to send representatives. We had work to do and John wanted 'colour pieces'. We were five hours from Baghdad.

We were heading to a village called Hawler when Abdullah called me over while John was doing a live two-way back to London. He had heard from Commander Nariman, who had been leaking info to us. The town of Dibarjan had fallen. This meant an about-turn and saying farewell to the Special Forces. It's brutal to say it, but I was sadder at this than at the thought of Kaveh's funeral. No disrespect but that's the military fraternity.

We turned on our heels and chased the story, passing discarded uniforms and blown up trucks on the way. The evidence had been clear and General Nariman's previous information had been accurate up to this point. I drove – and fast too. I always drove. It was a poor excuse for a road. Dust, tarmac, potholes and bumps all the way made the Highways Agency look good. Vast expanses of plain flanked us on either side.

Of course, as seemed the way in these parts, I couldn't know for sure if Nariman was talking to everyone. We hoped this was our story and not everyone's but you could never know until you got there. Sadly, we never did. As we pulled up at the agreed checkpoint, the Peshmerga troops were everywhere – finding Nariman was like searching for a needle in a haystack. Abdullah, Fred and John went off to look, only to learn that a distinguished Iraqi Major had been captured; and then John, being John, was pushing for an interview.

'No film, no film, no film,' the Peshmerga were saying.

Fred returned to our vehicle and urged me to go undercover and film on my mini DV camera at this small pen in a tiny holding by the side of the road. It was like a scene from the Middle Ages – peasants waiting to be slaughtered. I told Kameron, our translator, not to move while I checked the shot. Kam was nervous – we were starting to attract attention, even though it was hard to get close enough, and we were filming covertly. The film never got used because of what would follow, but its significance lies in the conversation I then had with Kameron.

While John was coercing Nariman for the big interview, he told me had been offered a job as a Special Forces translator. He had seen his moment and gone for it, claiming he had been offered double. Oggy let me manage the fixers, drivers and translators: I told him it was the wrong moment, and that as soon as the Yanks moved on, he would be forgotten. I had promised him a bonus when we got to Baghdad but this irritated me. I laid it on the line bluntly. We would always be able to find another fixer. His timing was poor.

As we were about to push off with a bad atmosphere still lingering, two land cruisers pegged it past.

'That's Waji Barzani,' Abdullah said.

Barzani was the son of the man of the Kurdish President! Unbelievably, the US Special Forces were in tow, and we all knew we had to follow. I had heard his name but knew no more. The fact that the SF were travelling with him was more than a giveaway as to his importance. Nariman and Dibarjan – despite the latter being a major crossroads to Mosel, Kirkuk, and Southern Iraq – were no longer the story. When I spotted the SF, my boys and I knew it was our lucky day – sort of.

We passed through three checkpoints in pursuit, at the last, avoiding buried mines in a huge pile of earth. We didn't want to suffer the same fate as Stuart on the day Kaveh was being buried.

The convoy turned out to be twelve vehicles in total. This was big drama. We stayed about a hundred metres to the rear. At this third checkpoint, it just looked like mounds of earth and blockades up ahead, yet there was lush green on the side. We had sufficient time to catch up and we could always spy the tail of the last car through the dust, plus we had walkie-talkies to communicate between the cars. We put Kameron in with John in case there were any problems. Ultimately that decision condemned him, but it was the right thing to do from an operational point of view.

As we drove back up a mound to our penultimate checkpoint, we came to a grinding halt. there was now a long convoy ahead and behind us.

‘I think we should put our flak jackets on.’ I don’t know why I radioed everyone but my sixth sense for danger had kicked in, and I had no idea what lay beyond the next ridge. I could hear noise in the distance. There was no way any of us were walking blindly into an ambush.

The convoy, now some twenty cars long, stopped again safely near a T-junction. The road bent up the brow of a hill – potential danger lurked round every corner. We were caught in the valley. Barzani’s car, hitting tarmac for the first time, had floored it through the middle of the pack. To the right stood a tank, Roughneck 91. This was a relic from the original Gulf War, a stark abandoned reminder two decades on of what had gone before, its barrel pointing down defeated.

I ordered our three vehicles through. John, Fred and Kameron got out to talk to the SF guys to see what the hell Barzani was doing out here. Kameron made for Barzani himself. My concern was the vehicles. Seeing plumes of smoke over the summit of the hill, there was clearly a contact further up the road – I had to make sure all the trucks were turned round to face the way we had come. We couldn’t be staring at the danger.

Fred shouted at me to get the tripod out of the back of the Land Cruiser just after I had turned the first car round. To my right was a local Peshmerga; adjacent to me Tom’s phone rang. It was his birthday and his um had called from the UK.

‘That’s the sound of freedom,’ he told her, holding the phone to the planes in the sky. It was a stupid time to take a call unless it was for work – and we were about to go live. For a second he was caught in the moment, his guard down, and he couldn’t know how his words would resonate forever.

Still concerned to turn the cars around, I looked through the side window of the Land Cruiser.

And then I spotted it.

It wasn’t the sound of freedom at all. And it was coming towards us. I knew that distinctive red nose and grey body. I could see it falling through the air.

We were dealing in split seconds here – each of us powerless, no time for fear past my initial ‘Oh fuck’, not a second to protect myself. Then it hit.

The lights went out.

The next thing I knew, I was picking myself up off the floor, but the Peshmerga villager to my right was gone. In front of me, I saw an arm, then I heard his body shrieking for a few seconds. It didn’t last long. He died before my very eyes.

I had taken a blow to the head – my left hand and right arm were bleeding from the almighty blast. I couldn’t account for any of the team at this point. With the shock I had hit the deck. Robotically, I picked myself up again. I’d been out for seconds. Did I actually hear the noise or had the shockwaves sent me reeling into blackout? I don’t know, but even the echo of the aftermath was louder than fuck. Did I see the bomb? Yes, for that nanosecond. What made me look in that direction? I don’t know. Years of training which hones into instinct or a stroke of luck? Pass.

Thank God I was still alive. I knew immediately what had happened.

It was 1982, and I was back in San Carlos Bay. That was over so quickly too. I heard the air-raid sirens from our ships and two to three seconds later the Argentines dropped their bombs on us.

I knew that sound. This time, I didn’t have those two to three seconds.

Special Forces on the ground had described the target. Less than a kilometre away, we had been charging towards Iraqi tanks engaging with 173rd Airborne. We had been about to wander into that. From the sky the target had become the T-junction, the mass of vehicles and the abandoned Iraqi tank. The pilot had simply got it wrong. I dove to the side of the bank to my left and lay there. I found Tom with another Peshmerga gibbering away, blood running down his head from an intake of shrapnel. I kept asking if he was okay but he just stared at me, glazed in shock.

Tom’s mum had heard it all.

I screamed at him as he ran down the bank towards another small sand bank. He had to hit the deck now because most planes on attack come round twice.

I grabbed Tom's phone because mine was in the car. I had to tell London. 'There's been an own goal.' I had known straightaway. 'The Americans have dropped a bomb on us. Tom, Giles and I are fine. I've gotta go. I'll give you an update when I know more.'

I hung up. There was still no sign of John and the others. I had to get to work. I got up and ran to the vehicles, searching each for bodies. The impact had been less than twenty metres from our vehicle – it was like a scene from a movie, except this was very real. There were bodies everywhere – the flames and the ammunition within them stunk. Some people were burned to a crisp, others were still alive but heading that way. I've seen plenty of bombs and bodies over the years, but that stench never leaves you.

'They're fucking dead,' I told myself. But I stayed calm and level-headed. Surely, there was no way in the world that I could find John, Fred, Dragan and Kameron alive. If that were true, so be it. I wasn't thinking emotionally or as an undercover reporter. In my military head, and as BBC Security Advisor, I had to account for them in whatever state I discovered them. I would take it one step at a time.

As I was sorting through the vehicles, I realised I was heading back the way we came. This was the wrong thing to do. If I was going to find them, the impact was behind me on the right – that's where the American SF jeeps had been. 'Check every body,' I told myself repeatedly. 'Account for everything.' I wasn't looking to save other lives or bury bodies. I was employed to protect John Simpson and I had no idea where he was. I began to call out for Fred. I was probably shouting too loudly because of the blast to the head. Who knew what perception of sound everyone still alive now had?

Still there was nothing. And then, in a moment as surreal as Tom's mum tasting the sound of freedom whilst wishing him birthday greetings, three heads popped up comically from behind the bank. They were safe, and in one piece.

'It's an American own goal,' I shouted at them.

John was livid. 'It's coming back' he shouted. 'I saw the fucking bomb. I saw the fucking bomb.'

Fred had a gash to his head; John had lost a trouser leg so he was full length on one side and wearing shorts on the other, with shrapnel hanging out of him; Dragan had a bad cut where the ankle joins the leg. They were all sufficiently okay for now to continue. There was no sign of Kameron. Nobody had seen him.

‘Have you called your friends off?’ John shouted to the Americans. I had never witnessed him like this before. ‘The world has a right to know what you know,’ he told our ‘friends’.

‘Stay here, John,’ I ordered. ‘And stay together. Here’s my phone. Call London and do what you have to do. I’ve got to find Kameron.’

I don’t know if finding John meant the show had to go on or not. If he had been dead, I would still have looked for Kameron but it gave us all renewed purpose. I could hear John shouting to Fred to ‘shoot this’. He was straight back into work mode, and my God, he knew as we all did that this was one of the biggest stories of the war. As soon as we’d established we were all fine, we were in our element. I didn’t give two hoots about Abdullah – he wasn’t part of my remit. I was concerned for Kameron, but the story was unravelling before us. As I would do many times in the future, I walked that line between story first and danger second.

‘I’m doing a piece to camera,’ John told Tom Giles, what felt like seconds later. ‘Fucking morons,’ he cursed the Yanks before miking up.

At the same time, I found Kameron lying on the bank. The American medics were running down with trauma packs on their back, helping whoever they could.

‘Come over here,’ I shouted to them, but it wasn’t looking good. His foot had been completely sliced off and blood was pouring out of his leg. He, too, made that gurgling sound that I was coming to associate with death.

Some of the medics went towards John and the guys but he was already live on the Sat Phone to Maxine Mawhinney on News 24.

The medic told me to apply two tourniquets on Kameron’s legs above the wound to stop the blood loss – that surprised me. Only one leg was injured but he wanted both doing. I assumed he was more medically qualified that I was so went ahead and made it tight. I then got my knife out to gut Kameron’s shirt but I couldn’t see any wound. Still he carried on fading and gurgling.

‘Have you ever put a Given Set in?’ the medic asked me.

This was a saline drip, and all I had to do was to get a vein up and slide a cannula in. The medic had already made one up.

‘I can’t get a vein,’ I shouted over to Tom.

His veins had collapsed. I knew he wasn’t going to make it.

Kameron was convulsing. The grumblings were getting louder. I asked Tom to sit with him as I had with Stuart. I told him to talk to Kameron and just keep him company but I knew I couldn’t do any more and I had to start to clear the area. Our vehicles were now on fire.

That had to be sorted immediately but at the back of my mind was our conversation earlier about the money, and for a moment, I felt bad that he would die alone. My rare compassion was not for another victim of war – I just wish my last conversation of substance with him had been different. Crucially, even though his leg had borne the brunt of it, Kameron was one of the few in the car without a flak jacket. We didn't have enough to go around. That was the mistake. It was the sandals all over again.

As we loaded Kam onto the vehicle, I knew he was gone.

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'This is a really bad own goal by the Americans,' John was live and just in earshot. He was raging inside, but as cool as a cucumber when the red light was on.

(Weeks back, we had offered to give our co-ordinates to The Pentagon but they simply weren't interested. It would be nice to think this wouldn't have happened if we'd been embedded, but then we wouldn't have been chasing Barzani across Iraq.)
Just then, someone spotted a body in the back of one of our enflamed vehicles. That awoke something inside me to save the story, let alone the body. I ran to my car to discover it was a sleeping bag wedged against the back window, but I had to rescue the remaining broadcast equipment. There was no point at all us being here if the videophone and all the footage were going up in smoke.

I managed to get the hatch open but it was like a furnace in there. I climbed inside to cut the rope to free the two spare jerrycans. I ran to John, threw them just to the right of the camera, then turned and went back to the other vehicles through the flames. Fred shouted to me to save his gear.

All the cars were burning now – the third one looked seconds away from explosion as I grabbed our personal bags along with John's diaries, notebooks and fucking Tilley hat. It was like a barbecue out of control but the smell was horrendous – nothing is more ghastly than the smell of burning fuel and smouldering flesh combined. I blocked it out of my mind and concentrated on the vehicle. All our lives were in those trucks – my focus was now totally on preserving the story and not human life. The guys I was concerned about were safe; the gear was not.

John was raging again when he finished the live. 'There's gotta be a fucking inquest into that,' he yelled to everyone and no one. 'Was that okay?' he turned to Tom. John had been better than okay. He was at his best, flicking an internal switch from anger and disgust to smooth calm.

It had been a disgraceful error. Forty-five had been injured, sixteen lives lost. The Americans were worried there was more in-coming and wanted to evacuate.
Some of the gear was damaged. Most importantly, John's Tilley hat now had a hole in it. Some twenty-five minutes later, my concern was still the vehicles. Despite that toxic mix of fuel and flames, I could see one of the Peshmerga guys trying to steal the third vehicle; the other two were burnt to shreds.

'Fuck off, this is our vehicle!' I screamed at him.

In the back, he had placed his weapon along with some ammo. I found a hand on one of the seats. I told John to stay with the vehicle as I began to move everything into this car, piling stuff on the roof and clearing the glass from the seats. I had no windscreen left.

By now, all the traffic was coming towards us – the rest of the media had got wind of the story and were piling in our direction. All we wanted to do was leave, heading back down to the original checkpoint.

'What about Abdullah?' John asked.

We agreed to have one last look.

Checking under the vehicles and charred corpses in this scene of devastation we found nothing except the truth. He hadn't even bothered to stick around. That was the final straw for me with him. If he wasn't my responsibility before, he certainly wasn't now. It was time to go. In every sense. Even for battle-hardened souls like Fred and I, it had taken its toll.

'That's it, I'm off,' the American announced through the dust and wind in the front of the Land Cruiser. But he meant, off and out of the country. It was time for him to get back to California to see his little baby. This was just the wake-up call he needed to get off the adrenalin rush and back to the real world.

'Yeah, that was a close call,' I agreed.

It all showed what a difference a day could make, and indeed a week. On the same day that Kaveh was being buried, we nearly met the same fate. Just a few hours ago we had been buddying up with the very guys who called in the airstrike – and I'd been reminiscing about old times with them. The SF had told me none of theirs had died but I don't believe that to be true. I saw them towing away a Land Rover, in which I knew one of their men had gone down. Meanwhile Waji Barzarni was helicoptered out of there to hospital. His brother fell into a coma.

Despite his war fatigue, Fred continued to film out of the glassless window, the camera always on his knee. But he understood now and he meant it – it was time to go and see his baby. He had come straight from a month in India. All he knew professionally was putting his life on the line for the story – but when it became this real, he had had enough. And even though I was the ex-military guy, the tough man in all this, we both knew it was an epic event to walk away from. It's not every day John Simpson wipes blood from a TV camera lens minutes after a 1000lb. bomb has fallen mere yards away from you, dropped by an F14 on your own side, tearing across the sky at close to 500mph. For now, enough was enough.

Oggy met us at a checkpoint ninety minutes down the road. He told us Abdullah was on the way to the hospital with shrapnel in his neck and thigh. They asked us if we were okay to carry on driving, but we knew we had to complete. He also told us that Kameron had died. It was only what I'd expected.

By 1600 we were back in Arbil. Word had spread that a BBC team had been bombed. I was shattered by the time I unloaded the gear into the hotel lobby – there was nothing left in the tank – but the warmth in the locals' hearts was genuine. It was one of those surreal moments where people still have compassion, even when there's a war on and you have to put yourself first.

Someone sorted a car to take Fred to the UN Medical Facility at Ankawa on the other side of Arbil – his head badly needed dressing. As I saw him off, I sat down outside the hotel with another security guy called Steve Musson to talk it through and I realised just how fucking lucky I had been. I wasn't in delayed shock; I didn't get emotional; yet this was the closest in all my scrapes that I had come to meeting my maker.

Suddenly I found a conscience and thought the right thing was to go the hospital to see Abdullah. It was chaos. Waji was in there too and the locals knew it. For once, our Hotel Manager played a blinder and got me straight through to the doctor, who checked me over. I really wasn't sure if my hearing was still in one piece. Thankfully, I was given the all clear.

Oggy was already there and took me to Abdullah's room but nothing had changed. He had nurses swooning all over him and he lay there playing the hero. There was a small amount of shrapnel and the odd bandage but my God, he was still alive – unlike poor Kameron. When he saw us, he turned into a terminally ill patient going for an Oscar. To rub it in, I passed dead Peshmergas on trolleys on the way out. That was the true level of the mess that the blue on blue had caused. I had done the decent thing – and that was it. I hoped I never saw him again.

There was still work to be done amidst all this. I hadn't even called home, although London had rung Sue. She knew the score. We were up against it – two hours from doing a live into the Six – all of us traumatised but in denial and Fred a whizz kid on the edit but desperate to get out of there. We worked our bollocks off on auto-pilot and John went live on the roof at the top of the bulletin.

Again, the legend was at his best at the end of a day nobody will forget. Afterwards, we hit the bar and I broke my golden rule of never drinking on tour. We downed a beer and raised a glass to our late friend Kameron. Earlier we had also been to see his mother. 'God gave us Kameron and now he took him back,' John put it beautifully. He had been the main breadwinner for the family, yet they didn't really know the danger he was putting himself into – they thought he was a translator for the papers. He had told John he had wanted to work for us out of friendship and adventure – the wailing at the family home told us they'd had no idea he was risking life and limb.

You can only grieve so long in this game. There was no word from Jim in Tehran either. We were so knackered and insular ourselves that we'd barely spared a thought to Kaveh that day. It was extraordinary that all this had happened at the same moment he was laid to rest.

I finally spoke to Sue and of course, she was worse than me. My girls had been told as well. As we hit the sack that night, there was indecision and uncertainty over whether we should come or go. We decided to sleep on it.

In the morning, we revisited the bomb site for Simpson's World on BBC World. We spent half an hour walking round the scene. John asked me for my thoughts as the camera was rolling. I loved it just like the first time back in the bar at Charleroi. I was now well and truly bitten by the TV bug.

But you could see the crater and the scorch marks in the earth. The blood from the bandages where Kam had died was still there. Things like this happen, as sad as it was. In my head I wasn't carrying the same baggage as the day before but I still knew it was time to go home. A translator called Huwer approached us and said that, with all eyes on Baghdad, he could take John and Tom to Kifri. John was adamant that he wanted to continue and told me to go home. Fred was already on his way and Dragan too wanted to see his baby for the first time.

I was split – my responsibility was to John but he had ordered me back. I also had to look out for Fred and Dragan. Ultimately, I took my lead from John: if he said go, then go I would.

On 11 April, we were driving home, overland to the border and on via Istanbul. It had been the right call to go. On the 9th, the Yanks staged the money shot of the toppling of Saddam's statue. John hadn't made it in time for the fall of Baghdad but my goodness, in chasing the story he found himself at the heart of it. As for me, what I was asked to do next couldn't have been more extreme.