

Breakfast in Baghdad

I have been working for the Spanish film crew for about two weeks now, and usually I am due at work at seven in the morning. But that day, the 30th of December, I had a call of 9:30, so I was looking forward to a leisurely breakfast and pot of tea in the hotel restaurant. All of the gang was there at different tables: the assorted activists, journalists, and human-rights hardcases that live in our hotel. Everyone was sleepy and cranky from lack of caffeine. I had just taken my first sip of tea.

And then WHOOM. The windows rattled as a bomb exploded, somewhere very near the building. Everyone scrambled for cameras and jackets, and we hit the stairs as a herd, taking the steps three at a time. I jumped into a jeep with a Hungarian reporter friend and two soft-spoken cats from Polish National Radio. "This is actually the first time I've tried to witness one of these," I confessed to one of the Poles as we pulled into the street.

"The thing is", he replied, "when you do this, it is nothing original. When a bomb explodes, every journalist in Baghdad arrives."

And he was right. We saw a reporter for Al Jazeera fly by on a minibike, a video camera slung across his back. "Follow heem!" bellowed the Hungarian, and the driver lurched the vehicle across a cement embankment and we shot down a side street after him. Within two minutes we arrived at the scene.

A bomb had exploded on Karada, a crowded street of shops and food stalls. The target was a passing American convoy, but the device had missed, and instead killed an Iraqi man. He lay dead on the street, covered with a cloth and a piece of cardboard. Another man was staggering around, bleeding profusely from his shoulder. Journalists were everywhere, pushing through the crowd, jockeying for position. American soldiers stood nervously in the street, trying to look calm.

The crowd was getting angry. One man kicked a French photographer in the chest for pushing too hard in his attempt to take a picture of the corpse. Someone yelled in Arabic, "The sahafin (journalists) are agents of the Americans!"

Another man shouted at the Humvees that were approaching. "Go home! You only make people die!"

The whole scene made me glad that I am not a news photographer, one that has run to where "the action" is, and to push and shove to get "the shot". Sometimes it is fine, but other times it is vulgar and obnoxious, and can get you kicked or killed. I would rather try and make films, which is more difficult and takes more time, much more time, but allows you to be broader, and not to just focus on the flash and the bang. That morning, I filmed plenty of footage of the journalists on the scene, as well as the carnage and the crowd.

I returned to the hotel just in time to deposit my camera and hail a taxi to get to work on time. Needless to say, I didn't get to enjoy my leisurely breakfast. But there will be more pots of tea, I imagine. And for sure, there will be more bombings.

La Espalda del Mundo

The Spanish crew are good people, and fun to work for. Like a Mexican film crew, they are laid-back and like to joke a lot while working. Unlike a Mexican crew, they are rude or oblivious to the Iraqis around them.

They are a quite well-known bunch, back in Europe. Their last film was called "La Espalda del Mundo", or "The Back of the World", a documentary that was filmed in highland Peru, Turkish Kurdistan, and on Death Row in Huntsville, Texas. That film won several prizes at various festivals.

Their style is very formal, and very European. Which means that they invade a woman's house with two camera operators, two sound recordists, two producers, a translator, and two drivers who are usually hanging around somewhere smoking cigarettes and waiting. Then they spend up to two hours lighting the woman's kitchen, and then tell her to go ahead and begin cooking while they film her. Then they tell her to stop, and change camera angles, and tell her to begin again. It all starts to look a lot like a dramatic film: Take One, Take Two, etc.

The film is about life in Baghdad before and after the war. They were here in February, and they are now filming the second part of the piece. They have a stridently anti-war, and anti-American stance on the whole affair, so I don't think the film will get much play in the U.S.A.

We've been filming a lot of people who have lost family or friends in the bombing. We shoot in hospitals, where all the doctors are around twenty-five years old, all the older ones having been fired for being Baathists, adding to the sixty-percent unemployment in Iraq.

We talk to children who were burned when bombs hit a hospital next to their school. A teacher who lost six of her family and half of her students in two weeks. People cry in front of the cameras at times. Life here in Iraq is very, very hard for most people, and they are very, very tired.

Today we interviewed the family of a twelve-year old girl who had been severely wounded when her house was hit by a cluster bomb. They have even preserved the blanket that she was sleeping under when the attack came. There is a hole the size of a basketball in it, where the shrapnel tore into her side and broke her arm. She told us about her experience, completely in Arabic, but I needed no translation. It was a heartbreaking story, and for the first time after a month in this broken, torn, tragic place, I started to break down my own self. Of course I had to keep quiet, though, because, we were recording.

Is this where the proverbial "Devil's Advocate" comes in? The voice that says: in every war there are accidents. In every war, civilians are, unfortunately, hit and wounded and killed. It simply can't be avoided.

Well, that is supposed to be the job of the filmmakers and the journalists, to tell the other side of the story. Most of them, needless to say, don't concern themselves with such things. In the U.S., we rarely hear a word about the civilians, only the military's stories of laser-guided missiles and precision bombs. And when I think about all the people back home, especially in my home town of San Antonio, with its four military bases, wearing their "Operation Iraqi Freedom" T-shirts and "Support The Troops" pins, it makes me sick. Freedom in Iraq, at the moment, is a daily struggle for survival, and supporting the troops is a meaningless slogan.

The Air Defense Ministry

Several days ago we filmed in the former Air Defense Ministry building. It was a colossal, palatial affair, with an Olympic swimming pool and marble-plated walls.

Now, it is mostly a pile of rubble, with some of its former imperial glory remaining in the form of rain-streaked walls and crumbling concrete diving platforms, thirty feet high.

We were there to interview one of the families of people that have since moved into the abandoned space. There are at least two hundred Iraqis living there now. Clothes-lines criss-cross the former exercise plaza. Fences around dwellings are constructed from locker doors planted in the ground. Spraypainted on a wall it says "Bakery" (in Arabic of course), with an arrow pointing to a small improvised house. And there indeed, in what was formerly the parade-ground of the ministry building, a family runs a bakery, daily making

the round flatbread that Iraqis eat with every meal.

Our specific focus that morning was a group of boys that climbs a mountainous pile of debris every morning and digs out the useable bricks. The whole city was drowning in cold, thick fog when we arrived. Palm trees were barely visible hovering in the distance as the two kids picked their way over burnt and blasted columns, twisted rebar, and mounds and mounds of crumbled rock and plaster. They pulled out the intact bricks, and loaded them into a plastic-sheet sling while we filmed them. Then they hauled them down to the mud path that used to be a street, and past the huts and houses carved out of the ruins. They brought the bricks to their father, who cleaned them off and, with their eager help, set about mortaring and arranging them into a wall of the house he is building for them to live in.

So, here at ground zero of American imperial dreams, some people are making a home for themselves, out of the ruins of violence and terror.

New Year's Eve

It was almost like the similar event the day before, only in the evening. I had gone with my friends to a party being thrown by three Italian women who work for Bridges to Baghdad, a human-rights group that has been doing work here for several years, long before the recent war. We had just poured glasses of wine, and were settling down to drink them, when another explosion rumbled the building we were in. This one was bigger than the previous day's, much bigger, and so again about half the people at the party grabbed cameras (I bring mine everywhere I go in this town, so I don't miss anything) and hit the street.

We were some of the first to arrive on the scene. A car-bomb had detonated on a small street and had destroyed a posh restaurant on the corner, as well as mangling every parked car on the block. The street was literally on fire. Shops had huge holes in their front walls where debris had blasted through. It was utter carnage. I started filming, keeping both eyes open.

Iraqi police were running everywhere, and already people had set up a hose and were trying to put out the fires. At first, no one minded us filming, but then they started telling us to move back and get away.

The street where the bomb had exploded was very near the headquarters of Reuters and other news agencies, so it didn't take long for a whole mess of reporters to show up, followed by the ubiquitous American Humvees and soldiers. They started clearing the streets of everyone.

It was about then that someone pointed at the ground and waved me over. It was a human foot, severed from the rest of its body, lying in a pool of blood among pieces of blown-apart automobile. Maybe it was the driver of the exploding car, I don't know.

Then the owner of the restaurant came out to give an interview, and was swarmed with cameras and lights. I didn't figure I needed to hear anything, so I found the rest of my posse and we got in our car and left, skirting around an armored vehicle that was trying to make its way down the narrow avenue.

Later we heard that the chief of the Baghdad police had been killed, and thirty or so people injured. The restaurant was frequented by local government officials and foreigners, so the resistance apparently still picks its targets well.

Happy New Year, everyone.

David Martinez
1/02/04
Baghdad