

Senate submission: Supporting statement for John Martinkus detailing the circumstances of his 2004 kidnapping in Baghdad and the response of Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Friday the 15th of October 2004 was the first day of Ramadan in Iraq. Everything was closed and I spent the day translating tapes in my room at the Al Hamra hotel. I was booked to leave on Sunday the 17th and to be honest I couldn't wait. Three weeks in Baghdad had been long enough and as well as the by then usual daily attacks on US convoys, mortar attacks and car bombs, the attacks on places like the Sheraton hotel and the suicide bombing of the Green Zone café and market in the previous few days had been signs of the growing strength and audacity of the resistance. It was my third trip to Iraq that year and as I had been reporting the space within which western journalists could work independently had shrunk dramatically every time I returned. At the start of the year in January, February and March I had travelled the length and breadth of the country unarmed, in a car, and down south to Basra and back to Baghdad by rail. I had driven several times to Fallujah and through Ramadi and had also travelled by road to Karbala and north to Kirkuk, Sulaimaniyah and Erbil. At that time there were only some parts of the country, mainly in the Sunni triangle, where extra caution was needed.

By the time I returned in June and July the situation had deteriorated immensely. Travel by road through the west to Jordan was out of the question as the whole area from the western outskirts of Baghdad through Fallujah to Ramadi was outside of the control of the occupying forces. On that trip I remember driving out to Abu Ghraib jail to follow a story and film some interviews and was greeted by an incredulous US army military reserve captain who couldn't believe I had simply driven out there in a local taxi. They were under near constant attack every night and at that stage had started to be supplied by Helicopter even though they were only thirty kilometres from Baghdad. By the middle of the year it was not safe to travel outside of Baghdad. By the time I returned for a third stint for the year in September and October there were substantial parts of the capital itself where it was no longer safe to travel. This included the sprawling Sadr city slum which had risen up in the Shia revolt led by Muqtadr Al Sadr in April of that year and was still then firmly controlled by the militiamen of Muqtadr's Mehdi Army. The other area where it was getting almost impossible to work was the whole western area of Baghdad where attacks on foreigners, both troops and contractors, was making it exceedingly dangerous for journalists. The space that we were able to occupy and function in as journalists trying to report on the situation in the country had become confined to several fortified and guarded hotel complexes, the green zone and wherever in the city our drivers and translators felt safe enough to take us that day. The only other way to report on the growing violence was to embed your self with US military units which had the negative effect that as a reporter you would never speak to an Iraqi who wasn't getting a gun pointed at them or who wasn't a direct employee of the US military.

It was a frustrating time for a journalist because as the general deterioration of security in Baghdad and across the country became the story our ability to effectively tell that story was diminished by restrictions placed on us by ourselves, our

organisations, and the US military. As we were trying to deal with a situation that was fluid new dangers and hazards presented themselves every day. It was a fine line between getting the story and getting killed and the dangers came from many directions.

With most of my work finished in Baghdad for SBS Dateline I wasn't taking any chances and I gave my driver the day off as I saw no reason to leave the secure hotel compound. My work the following day, October 16, was confined to organizing some people to be brought to my hotel to ascertain whether I should interview them for one of the stories I was working on and also to make one brief trip outside the compound to film the exterior of a building that was relevant to a story I was co producing with Dateline colleague Thom Cookes. I was only supposed to be gone for little more than an hour and, as you always do in these places, I informed another colleague and friend Michael Ware (then Baghdad bureau chief for Time Magazine) of roughly when I would be back.

It was almost as soon as my vehicle left the front gates of the compound that I realised something was wrong. There was a black car behind us that seemed to be following us. As our vehicle turned the first corner, not more than five hundred metres from the guarded hotel entrance, it happened. Down the side street we were turning into another black car had been parked on the curb and I saw it move into the centre of the road to block our path. There were large potholes in that road and often cars would weave and drive slowly to avoid them. This car in front was pulling into one of the potholes, not avoiding it, then it stopped. It was that second I realised something was wrong. I was being ambushed. I was being kidnapped. Then things started to happen almost in slow motion. Two men were leaping out of the car in front pulling handguns from under their shirts and running towards us. I was screaming at the driver, Saif, to reverse. My translator Hussein was in the front passenger seat yelling. The car behind us had also stopped and there were more people getting out. My driver looked in shock and didn't react and then the two from the front car were at the door.

They were yelling and waving their pistols. I was screaming at the driver to reverse and ram the rear car as the two of them tried to wrench my door open from the outside. I was holding the armrest to try and keep the door closed as the two of them tried to open it. Everyone was screaming and then the armrest broke off in my hand and the door flew open. The two armed men piled into the back seat. I grabbed with both hands the gun pointed at me by the first man and with all my might turned it around so it was facing into his crotch. I was trying to get my finger inside the trigger guard. I was trying to shoot him.

Everybody working in Iraq back then was aware of what had been happening to hostages. We journalists working there then had all seen the beheading videos and we often discussed it. In September and October of 2004 there had been a whole series of high profile kidnappings that, because they had only just begun and had ended with the victims very violent and public death, had been covered very extensively in the media. Some of us there in Iraq, myself included, had said it would be better to die as they tried to take than allow them to film your grisly death later and use it as a statement. It was what I was thinking at that instant. This is it. I have to fight and maybe die right now or it will be too late.

As I held on to the gun the second man forced his way into the back seat. He was moving his gun from my head to the head of the driver and the head of Hussein, my translator, both still in the front. At least one of the men from the rear car had his gun pointed at the driver from outside and they were all yelling for him to start driving. I was screaming at the driver to reverse. We were so close to the corner that one burst of speed, even if we rammed the car behind us blocking our way, would have taken us back on to the main road where I knew the Australian soldiers from the Embassy compound would have been able to see us from their observation post. But he followed their orders and started driving slowly forward around the front vehicle that had ambushed us.

About 100 metres down that side road there was always an Iraqi police post. As we drove slowly past it I tried to yell out the window. I still had both hands around the gun of the man next to me holding it down but when I yelled he put one hand over my mouth and in the struggle I lost my grip on the gun. That was it. They had me. They drove towards the highway that leads to western Baghdad and Fallujah.

They kept their guns low in the traffic. The first clear thing they said to me through the translator was "Shut up. Keep quiet. We are Iraqi mujahedeen. We want to interrogate you. We are not criminals. We do not want money. Don't do anything stupid. We will not harm you". My phone rang. The number was that of Salah, another translator I worked with, he had gone to confirm my airline ticket that morning. I pulled it out of my pocket and answered it yelling that I had been kidnapped. One of them snatched it away instantly. He took off the battery and removed the SIM card. On the highway we slowed down in traffic and a US convoy was going in the opposite direction. My eyes followed the convoy for a second thinking of escape. I was actually weighing up my chances of being shot by either my captors in the car or by the Americans if I ran toward them or even if they would stop at all. The man nearest me saw my eyes and clamped his arm down across my chest holding on to the door, pinning my arms down.

We turned off the highway into a suburb in western Baghdad. It was surreal. There were schoolchildren walking in the streets, shops open, normal things. They drove around the streets for a long time to disorient us then turned into backstreets. The man next to me was still holding my arms down and pointing his gun at me and the other man was still pointing his at the back of Hussein's head. We were trying to talk but they kept telling us to shut up. We pulled up at a house and they ordered our driver Saif to get out of the car. Another driver got in and a man carrying a submachine gun got in on the passenger side. His face was terrifying. He had a hard look in his eyes when he turned to me and indicated the driver being led away and drew his finger across his throat in a slitting gesture. I felt sick and at that moment thought it would be better to be already dead.

We started driving again and went around and around the backstreets. My translator had stopped talking and the hard faced man in the front was giving sharp orders to the driver. We pulled up in a side street and they ordered us out of the car and walked brazenly carrying their weapons into a two storey building that was being used as a soft drink bottle depot downstairs with crates of empty bottles stacked everywhere. They took us to a small room upstairs. There were bars on the windows and a grubby mattress on the floor. I noticed immediately there was a length of chain on the floor

and I tried not to think about it. A few moments later they pushed Saif our driver into the room. He looked pale and shaken and they told us all to sit on the mattress on one side of the room whilst they came and went from the other side with one of them remaining with a gun at all times.

We were told we were to be interrogated by their leader the 'emir'. That word terrified me because I knew it was what only the very religious groups used to refer to their leaders. We were searched and they removed my satellite phone from my bag. Even though it was Ramadan I was allowed to have a cigarette before they came back and told us the leader was coming. We were blindfolded and our hands were tied behind us and we were lined up along the wall. The cloth they used for the blindfold was thin and they looped it twice around my head before tying the knot in front of my eyes. I could just make out shapes through it and when his back was turned I touched it to move the knot so I could just see through where it was tied across the front. Then they tied my hands and placed me against the wall and the leader came in to the room and sat down in front of us.

His questions directed to me through my translator Hussein were in Arabic and began simply with who I was and why had I come to Iraq. I answered as simply and straightforwardly as possible. Hussein, who had worked with me on one of my previous trips to Iraq in June and July that year, was very knowledgeable and helped me provide the details of who we had interviewed and where and when. He quickly began to stress my role as an independent journalist who had nothing to do with the coalition. I told the leader through him how I had been to Fallujah in February and who I had met there. In early 2004 Fallujah was the centre of the Sunni insurgency. In this period it was totally outside of control by the US military who had pulled back to the town's outskirts after the failed assault in April and had not yet staged their massive operation to retake the town. Hussein and I also told the Emir about the stories that I had been working on in September and October. I directed them to my notebook containing the names of those I had interviewed. I told them how I had interviewed the spokesman for the Association of Sunni Clerics, widely believed then to have links with the insurgents. I even directed them to the press release I had in my bag from that meeting which was a report of the protests the Sunni Clerics were trying to lodge with the international community regarding the civilian casualties in a recent US operation in the town of Samarra. Basically I tried to come up with anything I could think of to make this leader understand that I was not a part of the coalition. The leader said that if I was lying I would be killed. That if I worked for the coalition I would be killed as would my driver and translator. That if there was any evidence against me I would be killed.

I don't know how long the interrogation went for, possibly close to an hour. I kept talking. In the end the leader got up and said he would go and check some things and a decision would be made. He left the room and our blindfolds were removed and our hands were untied. They took one of my business cards and made the driver and translator write down their details. I was allowed to smoke a cigarette and one of the gunmen got me a soft drink. We waited and Hussein told me he thought we had convinced him but he didn't know, they had told him to wait. Hussein told me that whatever happened he would not leave me. There were a lot of things, he told me later, that he could not tell me then about what was going on. They were waiting for orders and, my translator later told me, they were planning to take me to Fallujah.

It was roughly an hour or so later that they told us the leader had informed them he had checked me out and was satisfied I was a journalist. Immediately the attitude of the guards changed and we were moved to another slightly bigger and cleaner room. We were told that we would be released in the evening.

On the surface things improved. The gunmen smiled and two of those who had been involved in my capture told me through Hussein that they were sorry for my capture, they had made a mistake, they thought I was working for the coalition. They said they thought I was either a CIA agent or maybe a member of Mossad. The conversation kept going, friendly on the surface, but with menace and suspicion in the questions. Unbeknown to me at the time they were still talking about plans to take me out of Baghdad, to Fallujah. They were still talking to each other about making a video. We were stuck in a limbo where they still guarded us but told us everything would be ok... we were not targets of them and they had made a mistake in picking me up. How could I believe them. They had just grabbed me at gunpoint in broad daylight right in front of my hotel in the busy centre of Baghdad. I just had to keep talking and keep up the exchange proving over and over again to every new guard that came in that I was not of any value to them. I was terrified of being handed over to another group. I had heard much said in Baghdad how hostages are passed from group to group in Iraq eventually ending up with either the highest bidder or the group with the most power. I didn't know if this endless talking and interrogation were part of a game to keep me calm and prevent me from trying to escape whilst my captors were busy striking a deal over my fate.

The endless questions from my captors revealed they had been following my movements for at least three days. They knew I had been to the other secured hotel complex in Baghdad popular with journalists and contractors that contained the Palestine and Sheraton hotels, two days previously. They also knew that I had been three days before my capture to the fortified Green Zone, the home of the Iraqi interim government and the majority of the foreign presence in Baghdad. They also revealed to me that they knew of my background reporting in East Timor and Aceh in Indonesia and they asked me many questions about those conflicts. Even that was double edged. I knew of supposed Al Qaeda statements that had condemned Australia's role in East Timor and I still had no idea what sympathies or links these people who were holding me had.

I needn't have worried. They themselves began talking about how they refused to believe that the supposed Jordanian born terrorist Zarqawi, whom the Americans were then accusing of being the mastermind to many of the attacks in Iraq, even existed. They believed that he had been killed in Kurdistan during the initial stages of the war in 2003. I had heard that story before. It was often told by Iraqi nationalists in order to prove that it is they themselves who were responsible for the resistance to the occupation, not the foreign Al Qaeda linked groups the Bush administration was then blaming for the majority of the violence. The men who captured and detained me dismissed Zarqawi as an American invention to justify the continued attacks on Fallujah.

I asked my captors, who claimed to be from Fallujah, about foreign fighters. They admitted there were foreign fighters from neighbouring countries but, significantly,

they were under the control of Iraqi groups. Maybe the reason I am still alive is because I was captured by a group of Iraqi Nationalists, not those linked to Al Qaeda.

After dark they moved us to another house. We were blindfolded and made to lean forward in the back seat. We drove for roughly fifteen minutes and pulled up into a garage where we were led still blindfolded into a house. It was near a highway and I could hear explosions and gunfire all night as there was fighting going on. They told me the sound was of attacks on US convoys using the highways that intersect on the western outskirts of Baghdad. They did not remove our blindfolds until we were inside a room.

When the blindfolds were removed I was in a comfortable room. It was air conditioned and there were pillows and mattresses around the walls. In the corner was a widescreen television on which was playing Al Jazeera. My original captors were talking to other men, one of whom, was older and appeared to be the leader. They started laying out food on trays before us. It was the end of the day. The fasting for Ramadan was being broken. The older man with a beard turned to me and offered me food. It was chicken and I managed to get down a few mouthfuls. He said, "now you have broken the fast with me you are my guest ...not my hostage. I am sorry due to the security situation we cannot release you tonight. But in the morning you will be set free". I was relieved but then the questioning started again. It was all about Australia this time and its position on the war. I explained Australia's historical allegiance to America since the Second World War and the questioning went on and on along the lines of why does Australia support America. He asked me if I had done military service. I explained our army were volunteers. He was suspicious. He was former Iraqi military and had been a prisoner of war after the first Gulf War for four months in a camp on the Saudi border.

Things seemed relaxed but every time the television went back to a story they stiffened, waved me silent, and stared at the images, which unfortunately for me, went back to pictures of the aftermath of US bombing in Fallujah. Their mood darkened every time that came on. We waited and talked and at one point the leader came back into the room and looked at me and then accused the other guards saying, "who has beaten him". It was in a way funny. I have a distorted lip from an old car accident and he had thought someone had beaten me without his permission. I tried desperately to explain that it was a pre existing injury.

All night we sat there. I think maybe I dozed off for an hour or so but the constant explosions outside and the awareness that maybe I would be killed in the morning kept me awake. You can't describe what goes through your mind. I tried to think of a recent break I had in Tasmania with my girlfriend on a camping holiday but it was too painful. It was better to just think of nothing. I had tried the old trick of humanising myself to my captors by showing them a faded old photo of her that I kept in my wallet. One of them from Fallujah had quite willingly pulled out a photo of his three year old daughter. I had held it and said "she looks beautiful". He had replied "she is dead now from an American airstrike in Fallujah", then his face hardened. I felt foolish and my effort had backfired.

The next morning they kept saying we would be released any moment but they were waiting for the camera and then the tapes. They wanted to make a video of my release

for propaganda purposes. I agreed and even offered them my own camera to hasten the process. They were waiting for the guys who made the videos. After hours of waiting they arrived and then they told me to go into the next room. My heart sank and I thought I would vomit in fear and dread. On the wall was the same flag with the star that I had seen in a recent beheading video and the men were standing in line with their guns held across their chests and their faces covered. I was told to sit on a stool in front of them. The men directing me from behind the camera looked like they had not one ounce of humanity. I was thinking "it has all been a lie, they are not releasing me, they just wanted to keep me calm before they kill me". The tape started and with my Press ID in front of me I read the prepared script. "My name is John Martinkus. I am an Australian journalist for SBS Network and I came to Iraq to report on the occupation". Every moment I expected to feel the knife against my neck. Unlike most people in Australia and the west I had recently seen those beheading videos of foreign hostages in Iraq. It was part of my work to report that war. When I had watched them with other journalists at the hotel I couldn't help but avert my eyes at the final moment as the sword struck. They were horrible and sickening. At that moment I felt that that was what was about to happen and I tried to be strong and not break down. The filming went on and they read out a statement in Arabic. I didn't know what it said. Then it was over and I was ordered back to the other room where Hussein, who had watched the filming, told me their statement in Arabic had really said they were releasing us.

But then our guards blindfolded us again and made us kneel. There was someone here demanding to see us. It was another leader from another group and the questioning started again. I ran through the, by then, well rehearsed story. I said everything I had said the day before in the first interrogation, which by then, felt like a lifetime ago. At the end of it all this man seemed hesitant in his reply and Hussein repeated his answer to me about my release back to me. "You appear to be an honourable man and your work here in Iraq is honourable but unfortunately you are Australian and Australia is part of the Coalition. I will have to consult with my leaders. I don't think you will be released today. Or maybe not tomorrow, or the next day, good luck". Then he left. As the Hussein repeated these words to me I came very close to losing my nerve and breaking down, All this time I had tried to appear tough and defiant, as though I had done nothing wrong and had nothing to fear, as though, as I said repeatedly, they had no reason to kill me, my death would not help their cause, but when that man said that to me I hated him and suddenly felt I could not cope with any more of this uncertainty. I felt he had taken my last shred of hope for a quick release and used it to torment me. I can remember clearly the sheer animal waves of fear and hatred that swept through me as I suddenly saw this going on for days and weeks ahead of me.

Then the impossible happened. The same guard who had struggled with me over the weapon in the car when they snatched me came back in to the room and said in a hushed voice for me to put on my shoes. He told me through Hussein we were leaving as soon as this man left the building. He said "we took you and we are responsible for you and we will take responsibility for releasing you". Then in a matter of minutes we were in the car with the blindfold back on and my head between my knees. We were driving. Then they wrenched the blindfold off my head and told me to sit up. As soon as I had sat up a police car went past. Then the most ridiculous thing happened. We were pulled over for a registration check. The police checked the papers and didn't notice the sub machine gun held low by the driver. They waved us on and I thanked

god. The same people who had kidnapped me in the first place were trying to save my life. They felt responsible. Word was getting out among the resistance that they had captured an Australian and they told me they had to get rid of me as soon as possible or they would be under pressure to hand me over to others. Those men saved my life. They dropped the three of us off near the street of my translator's house. Our fates had been intertwined. If they had killed one of us they would have had to kill us all. They handed me back my bag with my camera and my dismantled phone in it. As soon as I could get my trembling hands under control I re-inserted the SIM card into my phone and called my friend, then Time Bureau chief Michael Ware, at the hotel and after much heated discussion about where I was and what had happened to my old translator Salah agreed to come and pick us up immediately.

It was a nerve wracking drive back from western Baghdad to the Al Hamra hotel. Salah, who I had worked with for months earlier in the year and who had accompanied me unarmed all over Iraq, just kept muttering “the animals, the animals” as I told him what had happened. Grid locked traffic was a common feature of driving in Baghdad. US military roadblocks and police posts constantly caused traffic to grind to a halt and as we drove back through Karrada in the central business district the traffic moved slower and slower until we came to a complete halt. My nerves were reaching breaking point. We had no idea if we had been followed but what we did know now was that the whole area near the Al Hamra hotel compound was under surveillance by insurgents. The ease with which they had grabbed me the day before made me incredibly anxious as our car inched forward in the traffic on the main road that ran past the hotel and the Australian Embassy compound. We came to a complete stop a few hundred metres from the checkpoint that was the entrance to the hotel complex secured by armed guards behind concrete blast walls. US Humvees had blocked the traffic and there were soldiers on either side of the road. I later learnt a car bomb had been detonated in that street earlier that day. (1)

I couldn't stand it any more and despite Salah's pleas to stay in the car I got out and strode quickly up to the checkpoint. Before I could make it I was stopped by a US soldier telling me I could not enter the hotel, the entrance was closed due to the bomb. I couldn't believe it. I quickly told him what had happened at the same time trying to call Michael Ware to tell him to come out and get me let in. The soldier looked at me like I was crazy and had no intention of letting me pass until I saw Michael Ware in shorts and a tropical shirt yelling at the military on the other side of the checkpoint. I was finally waved through back in to the relative safety of the Al Hamra compound after agreeing to brief the officer shortly.

Michael Ware was beside himself. He had been frantically trying to contact any insurgent contacts he could to try and establish who had captured me and how to get me released. He had been aware that I was kidnapped both from Salah's cut off call to me and then by my failure to return from what I had told him would be a short trip. He had no idea however that the kidnapping had taken place so close to the Hamra and almost as soon as I had left the day before. As I told him the story I quickly realised how successfully unnoticed my whole kidnapping had been and how it was several hours until the alert had been raised. Michael had been in touch with my management and with the Australian government representatives in Baghdad but no one had really known where to start looking for me. By the time I was confirmed as

missing I was already under guard and being interrogated in a house in Baghdad's sprawling suburbs. Years later I spoke to a former SAS soldier who had been in Baghdad liaising with the Australian embassy when they were informed I had been kidnapped and were put on alert to try and find me. He said they had had absolutely no idea where to start.

One of the first things I did as we stumbled into the Time magazine office in the Hamra complex was call my employers. I quickly recounted the whole story to them. It was during this conversation with my immediate boss, Dateline Executive Producer Mike Carey, that I told him how I had been looked up on the internet by the insurgents to verify my identity. It was his comments later to Associated Press that led to the headlines that I had been "googled" and that was the reason for my release. I remember asking him if he had made my kidnapping public and was relieved when he said no. I told him what I had agreed with the insurgents. That I would not talk to the press until I was out of Iraq. I had agreed with this because I was concerned for my translator and my driver and their safety now the insurgents knew who they were and where they lived. Information they had had to provide them to verify they were who they said they were and not working for the coalition.

I then sat down and had a beer and ran through the whole sequence of events to the journalists in the Time office. I remember them watching me carefully. The adrenaline, the exhaustion, the elation at my release and what I later realised was shock must have made me talk at a rapid rate and what I was saying had a very big impact on their own security given as it had happened so close to where they lived and worked. I don't remember this but a colleagues account of that conversation recalls me crushing a beer can in my hand in anger as I spoke of my captors. (2)

I went over all the details of the story several times to the Time journalists and felt their concern about the surveillance of the Hotel and their own vulnerability growing. The car bomb attack on the road outside that very day had also increased the sense of siege. It was whilst I was talking the Australian Embassy called Michael Ware and asked to speak to me. I remember quite distinctly waving to Michael that I didn't want to speak to them. I could hear him telling them that I was fine and that I was leaving Iraq the following morning. I told Mick to tell them what had happened and that they were not to release any information regarding my kidnapping or identity until I was out of the country. I didn't want to endanger my translator and driver any more than was necessary and I thought if the insurgents, who were obviously watching the hotel, saw me with the Australian officials they would take reprisals on my staff. As far as I was concerned they could wait. I also knew from the recent experience of American freelancer Paul Taggart, who had been kidnapped on October 10 and released two days later (3). After his release he had been taken to the US embassy and had not even been allowed by US officials to come and collect his gear from where he was staying before being whisked out of the country. I knew exactly why the insurgents had not wanted me to talk to the authorities before I left Iraq. They didn't want to be identified and the fact they made it clear they knew where Hussein and my driver lived was a tacit threat against them should I lead authorities back to them. For my part, regardless of any agreement I had with those who had kidnapped me, I did not have enough faith in the US forces or the integrity of the staff at the Australian embassy to immediately tell them about what had happened. The information could have been used to launch a misdirected or heavy-handed operation,

of the type we had been continually reporting on that year, (4) that would only further endanger my staff.

It was for the same reason I turned down the offer from SBS for assistance from foreign contractors they said they could engage in Baghdad if I deemed it necessary. Given that I was no longer in immediate danger and planning to leave Iraq first thing in the morning I declined the offer and preferred to remain where I was with friends at the Time magazine office until I headed to the airport in the morning. I also didn't want to incur any extra expense from SBS. I had managed to get myself out of a very difficult situation at no expense to my employer and I was determined to keep it that way.

The US officer who had allowed me back in to the Al Hamra compound then came to get the details of my kidnapping. I went with him and Michael Ware back up to my room in the Al Hamra hotel. I remember him shaking his head in disbelief as he took down the details of where and how the kidnapping had occurred nearby the previous day. I also remember a sharp look from Michael when I began to give details of the house where I had been taken. He was thinking along the same lines that I was. We didn't want them to launch a raid that would then lead the insurgents back to my staff and his but at the same time I wanted to make sure that other journalists and the authorities were aware of the dangers this incident revealed. My management at SBS had told me not give my story to any other journalists. They simply had ratings and news value in mind and wanted to save the story for themselves. But back in the Al Hamra hotel I felt obliged to let the other journalists know and I spoke to a few of them in my room asking them not to publish too many details until I had had a chance to get my story on air. The only in depth interview I gave before I left Baghdad early the following morning was to an old friend and colleague, Richard Lloyd Parry of The Times of London, whom I had shared many dangers with in East Timor in 1999 and who I knew I could trust. After a very nervous night at the Time house where I was mostly too wound up to sleep I went to his rooftop suite at the Al Hamra where I think he simply asked me one question and recorded my account of the kidnapping. True to his word he delayed publication of that article until I was back in Australia (5).

I remember leaving his room and virtually leaving the Al Hamra compound immediately. I was travelling in one of the Time magazine cars with my trusted translator Salah and this time we did have an armed Iraqi guard in a vehicle following us but I recall very specifically the feeling of dread as we headed once again out to Baghdad's west on the airport road that the insurgents had bragged to me about attacking as we had listened to the explosions of the fighting in western Baghdad during the night.

To get to the civilian entrance of the airport then you had to wait in a long line of vehicles at the outer checkpoint. When you finally arrived you were searched and your bags were searched separately and then you had to board a bus to the main terminal as civilian cars were not allowed past the airport perimeter. As I was waiting in the terminal to check in at the chaotic counter where bribes often ensured you a place on the only commercial flight then flying out of Baghdad to Jordan my translator Hussein approached me and we embraced. He had come to say goodbye.

Hussein and the driver Saif were the only people who had shared that painful ordeal of the kidnapping with me and knew exactly what had happened and how close we had been to getting killed and who knew how agonising the protracted process of our negotiations with the insurgents had been. He told me that I should try and not spend any time alone in the next few days and that we had been very lucky. It was then he started telling me about how they had wanted to take us to Fallujah and how he had not told me all of what they had been saying at the time. “We were very lucky. We have had a very bad experience. Look after yourself” I remember him saying as we parted as I checked in. It was only as I watched the passengers begin to board the flight that I finally began to feel that it was over and that I would actually get out of Iraq.

Jordan

I had just walked out of Amman’s Queen Alia airport and lit a cigarette when I had an awful flashback sensation. A car pulled up in front of me and stopped abruptly and men started getting out. I heard someone say “there he is”. It was a group of wire service reporters who ran over and started taking photos and asking me questions. It was a horrible sensation. I just wanted to get away and lock myself in the airport hotel and get some sleep before my connecting flight. I was in the process of trying to answer their questions in the shortest way possible and get away when another car pulled up with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation correspondent Mark Willacy. I headed towards him, a familiar face, as a way to get away from the others. I had met him before briefly in Baghdad and I just wanted a ride to the airport hotel but he wasn’t going to let me go without a quick interview to camera. His first question alarmed me. “What do you think about the comments of Foreign Minister Downer?” I asked him to read back exactly what Downer had said regarding my kidnapping.

(6) ALEXANDER DOWNER: In this particular case, the journalist went out to investigate a story, I understand, and went to a part of Baghdad that he was advised not to go to, but he went there anyway, and journalists do do that sort of thing, but he was detained, but just for 24 hours and subsequently has been released.

I was furious. The Australian Foreign Minister was either misinformed or lying about the circumstances of my kidnapping in Baghdad and had chosen to make a public statement that amounted to a pre-emptive strike upon my credibility when he knew I was in the air somewhere between Baghdad and Amman before I had even had an opportunity to tell my story. I could only surmise that Downer, a staunch defender of President Bush, who repeatedly denied the situation in Baghdad was deteriorating sought to discredit me and my story before he had even heard it because he knew it would reflect the precariousness of security in Baghdad. I asked Mark to turn the camera on and repeat the questions. After a few quick questions about the kidnapping we had this exchange:

MARK WILLACY: Alexander Downer tells us you were in a place you were not supposed to be and that's why you were taken.

JOHN MARTINKUS: Well, that's ridiculous, because I was in the street outside the only hotel in Baghdad occupied by journalists which is directly across the road from the Australian Embassy. I was nowhere dangerous, I was doing nothing

dangerous, I was not putting myself at risk. I was grabbed by insurgents, who are very well organised and know exactly what they're doing.

(7)

The way these comments were interpreted back in Australia over the next news cycle was basically oppositional to Downer. He had said one thing, I had said he was wrong and then that was held up for discussion over a number of programs over the next day or so with anyone from then opposition leader Kevin Rudd, officials from the Journalists union and my own management at SBS being forced to defend my reporting and my conduct in Iraq. In a way Downer's basic strategy worked. By calling in to question my story before I had even told it he had put me in to a defensive position from which I had to firstly explain the circumstances of my kidnapping and then explain it's significance in terms of how bad the situation had got in Baghdad. It was a political move on his part to shore up his position on the Iraq conflict that demonstrated how that government treated sections of the press as political opponents to be ridiculed and discredited and not as sources of information. It was a role that I was totally unprepared for as a journalist whose job, as far as I was concerned, was to report fairly and accurately on what was going on in Iraq.

The next twenty-four hours were a blur. I realised later that I had felt like this one other time in my life after I evacuated from the siege of the UN compound in Dili, East Timor in 1999. It was a light-headed feeling of total exhaustion accompanied by a racing mind and an absolute inability to relax and a feeling of detachment from one's surroundings. I was basically in shock. Something else happened in Jordan that totally threw me. After the interview with Mark Willacy I used his satellite phone to call my girlfriend for the first time since I had been kidnapped. She had told me she was pregnant with our first child. Meanwhile management had changed my booking and when I spoke to them I had to turn around and get straight back on a plane through Bahrain, Singapore and on to Sydney.

Flying back to Australia I was totally oblivious to how much media attention my kidnapping and my rebuttal of Downer's dismissive remarks about it had generated. When I arrived in Sydney my only thought was to get out of the terminal as soon as possible and have a cigarette. As soon as I walked out of the departure gates at customs I was overwhelmed by a group of photographers, TV cameras and journalists. My boss Mike Carey was there along with my girlfriend, my brother, my colleague Mark Davis from SBS and a large group of reporters. I walked the short distance outside so I could light a cigarette and then stopped to answer questions. Which were rapidly fired at me. I was asked what I thought about those who had taken me hostage. I tried to be fair. ""They're fighting a war but they're not savages. They're not actually just killing people willy-nilly. They talk to you, they think about things." (8)

I was asked why I was not killed and other hostages were. I replied that "From their perspective there was a reason to kill (British hostage Kenneth) Bigley, there was a reason to kill the Americans; there was not a reason to kill me (and) luckily I managed to convince them of that."

I was asked about Downer's comments about where I was when I was kidnapped. I angrily replied, "Alexander Downer doesn't know his geography very well....I was actually across the road from the Australian embassy when I was kidnapped. He

should apologize to me, actually - personally.”

I wanted to get away from them and I think I started to walk away when a reporter asked me what I thought was a question that revealed just how far removed the rhetoric about the Iraq war was in Australia from the reality of the Iraq that I had just come from. “Do you think Iraq is on the road to reconstruction?” To which I replied almost laughing at the absurdity of the question. “No it’s on the road to shit”.

I found the hostile attitude of some of the reporters aggravating. I felt like telling them to go to Iraq themselves and try and report. I was at the end of my tether. SBS had a car ready and I was quickly walked over to it. I piled in the back with my girlfriend and the SBS security consultant and we began to drive away with cameras still trailing us. An Iraqi man who had been waiting came and threw a bunch of flowers on the car and I thought how sad it was we didn’t stop to pick them up and thank him.

That night I finally managed to get some sleep in a hotel bed. The next day I had to go into SBS to pre record an interview for Dateline, the program I worked for, regarding the kidnapping for that night’s edition. As I got in to the taxi I could hear the radio. It was John Laws talking about Downer’s latest comments regarding what I had said the previous night at the airport. He was referring to me as “a so called journalist” and saying that I “obviously sympathised with terrorists”. What Downer had actually said was in response to a page one article in The Australian that morning.

(9)

ALEXANDER DOWNER: I just could not believe he said those things. I was just appalled. For me, I mean, that is exactly what people should not do. They should never unintentionally, or intentionally in this case, let us be charitable and say unintentionally give comfort to terrorists in this way. It's a terrible thing to have said. I was absolutely astonished when he said that...

RADIO ANNOUNCER: Well, you'd say there was a reason to kill Bigley, there was a reason to kill the two Americans, there was no reason to kill me, that's what he said.

ALEXANDER DOWNER: Well, I mean, exactly. I just... I... just is pretty close to the most appalling thing any Australian has said about the situation in Iraq.

I had been asked a straightforward question as to why other hostages had been killed and why I wasn’t. The fact was I had not been killed was because I was not associated with the coalition forces as the other high profile hostages who had been killed were. It was a simple grim reality of the situation in Iraq that if the insurgents deemed you to be part of the coalition or working for them they saw you as a legitimate target. It was my understanding of this reality that contributed to my ability to negotiate my way out of that situation. But that wasn’t what the Foreign Minister wanted people to understand. He wanted to paint me as a supporter and sympathizer of terrorists. A charge which was rapidly multiplied by a swathe of conservative commentators.

The most hysterical of these was a series of opinion pieces written by right wing commentator Andrew Bolt of The Herald Sun.

(10) *John Martinkus could have been beheaded but was safely released. In Iraq’s*

propaganda war, some journalists are better alive than dead.

AUSTRALIAN journalist John Martinkus said he was going to be killed by the Iraqi terrorists who grabbed him on Sunday – until he convinced them he was on their side.

“I was not hurt and treated with respect once they established my credentials as an independent journalist who did not support the occupation,” the SBS filmmaker told Reuters.

An SBS producer, Mike Carey, confirmed on 3AW yesterday that Martinkus told the terrorists he sympathised with them – “as you would” to save your life. As I sure would, too.

And then, added Carey, his captors got onto the internet to check him out.

Did they? I guess they liked what they saw, then, or Martinkus would be as dead as the two Macedonian brickies who were beheaded in Iraq that very weekend.

In fact, it would have been easy for the terrorists to think Martinkus, brave as he is, was more useful to them as a sympathetic reporter than a dead infidel

Two days later, spurred on by the condemnation of my comments by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer he intensified his attacks.

(11) JUST when I feared I'd been too hard on SBS journalist and activist John Martinkus, he opens his mouth.

Martinkus, unlike many other hostages, was freed this week by the terrorists said to have snatched him in Baghdad on Sunday. And on Wednesday I noted that he said he would have been killed if he hadn't persuaded his captors he was on their side and hated the American "occupation". Once the terrorists checked out his anti-American writings on the internet, they let him go, seeming to believe he'd be more useful to them alive – as useful as too many Western correspondents are.

They didn't have to wait long for a reward. On arriving back in Sydney, Martinkus declared that freed Iraq was "on the road to s---". The terrorists are winning. But, worse, he seemed to excuse the terrorists who recently, on video, sawed off the heads of three screaming Western civilians. "They're fighting a war but they're not savages," he protested. "They're not actually just killing people willy-nilly. They talk to you, they think about things. There was a reason to kill (British hostage Kenneth) Bigley, there was a reason to kill the (two) Americans (kidnapped with Bigley). There was not a reason to kill me." I think we've now heard what that reason not to kill Martinkus was.

It seemed suddenly I was guilty of such things as describing insurgents as disaffected Iraqi's. The underlying tone of the criticism was that because I had tried to describe

the “terrorists” as people who had their own reasons for fighting against the occupation I was therefore supportive of them.

When I had arrived in the office that morning I could sense an extreme sense of disquiet. To be honest my immediate superiors were scared. They were scared of such condemnation by Alexander Downer and they were scared for their own positions. On the surface they were supportive but in reality they were not going to back up the logic of what I had said they were simply going to try and quiet down the issue and avoid a confrontation with the foreign minister. Phil Martin, then head of news and current affairs, began “speaking on my behalf” and unbeknownst to me had already told the ABC that morning that I would not be commenting further on the issue. His defence of my statement was along the lines that I was exhausted which was true but it also ignored the fundamental reality of what I had said. In the office I was told not to speak to the press and I agreed thinking that the interview I would do with Mark Davis for that night's program would be enough.

Such was the outcry about my perceived support for terrorists that when I was interviewed that afternoon for *Dateline*, Mark Davis addressed the question directly to me.

(12)

MARK DAVIS: Well, you're very aware of the fate of others...

JOHN MARTINKUS: Of course. Of course.

MARK DAVIS: ...and that would have been wearing on you at the time. You've described your captors, you said that they're not – they're not monsters, but it's pretty monstrous to be slashing the throats of truck drivers and engineers which they have done and I'm assuming that it's the same group or an associated group.

JOHN MARTINKUS: Yes, it is a monstrous thing and there's no way anybody could support that kind of behavior and you mentioned some comments I made when I arrived back yesterday at the airport and I think some of them have been used out of context. All I was basically trying to say there was I wasn't - I wasn't killed because they didn't see me as a target. They didn't see that - they realised that I didn't - they realised that I didn't work with the Americans. From their perspective, anybody, Iraqi or a foreign national, who works with the coalition is a combatant, is a justified target in their campaign to basically terrorize the foreign presence there into leaving.

I felt I had to tell the whole story one more time in print just to get it on the record and to finally end this insidious speculation that the government was driving through friendly media outlets to discredit me. I chose to publish this in *The Bulletin* magazine the following Monday because I had worked for them often in the past and trusted them. I sat down to write the piece back in my Melbourne home exactly a week after being kidnapped in Baghdad. It was very hard to write as I was still very vividly remembering all the details and how terrified I had been. When I gave it to *The Bulletin* I remember the assistant editor Kathy Bail calling me with some changes recommended by the editor Gary Linnell. He wanted to move the section where I

cursed one of my captors to the intro to, I suppose, make me seem more antagonistic to those who kidnapped me. I agreed but have always regretted that as it changed the tone of the piece and was not my intention and as a few friends remarked to me later it did not sound like me at all.

I also published a clarification called “a message to Alexander Downer” alongside the story.

(13)

John Martinkus responds to remarks made by the Foreign Minister about the circumstances of his kidnapping.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and others seem intent on painting me as someone who condones kidnapping and murder. Some clarification is necessary.

In no way do I justify such actions, in any circumstances. I survived because my captors came to believe they had no reason to kill me. It was my position as an independent journalist which saved me. To note this is in no way to justify their decision to murder others, which I have unreservedly condemned.

I was also incorrectly accused of being in the wrong area. In fact, I was kidnapped in the area the Australian government chooses to house its diplomats.

This I naively thought would be the end of the matter but unfortunately it wasn't. The perception that I was a left wing activist or that I was sympathetic to terrorists was something that was raised again and again by those in the media who had followed the government of the day in condemning my statements and ridiculing my experience in order to detract from the central truth of what I was saying about the deteriorating situation in Iraq in 2004.

What the furore surrounding my kidnapping revealed to me was that in October 2004, after the fourth electoral win of the Howard government, prominent individuals in the Australian media had become so supportive of and defined by their close association with the Howard government that objective reporting of issues such as the Iraq war had ceased to exist. A serious dialogue in some sections of the Australian press about what was happening in Iraq and what Australia's role in that war simply never occurred. In the case of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan it meant that as both situations deteriorated into a civil war in Iraq in 2005 and 2006 and the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan from 2005 onwards the commentary and analysis offered by many Australian outlets on these conflicts mirrored what the governments of the US and Australia were saying which was an approach that was contributing to these problems. The issues raised by journalists in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2004 and 2005 were precisely those which were being addressed in the counter insurgency doctrines that were being discussed and implemented in 2007 and 2008 at the highest levels of the US military. But at the time to even broach the topic of what was motivating the Iraqi insurgents was enough to bring down a wave of condemnation for being seemingly sympathetic with terrorists from the kind of right wing opinion writers who proliferated in the Howard era.

Whilst the government and it's sympathetic mouthpieces in the Australian media were loudly condemning my statements and questioning the circumstances of my

kidnapping the Australian Federal Police and a representative of Britain's MI5 came to the offices of SBS in Sydney to seek advice regarding the case of kidnapped Care Australia NGO worker Margaret Hassan who had been abducted on October 19. I told them everything I knew about the insurgents who had kidnapped me and who they seemed to have loyalties to in order to help them formulate a negotiation strategy for her release. Tragically she was later killed by those who had abducted her. According to the International Committee to protect journalists 57 journalists have been kidnapped in Iraq since 2003. Seventeen of those have been killed, thirty five including myself have been released and the whereabouts of five is still unknown.

On October 25, 2004, Australian troops near the Australian embassy in Baghdad were directly targeted for the first time in a car bomb attack on their armoured vehicles near where I was kidnapped. Three soldiers were wounded. (14)

In a revealing statement of what Foreign Minister Alexander Downer thought of journalists in Iraq he claimed the media had been tipped off about the forthcoming attack and were at the bomb site within two minutes of the attack. (15)

But the reality was the main hotel housing foreign journalists in Baghdad, the Al Hamra, was across the road and the journalists would have heard the massive blast. It had already been announced the Australian Embassy would be relocating to the relative safety of the heavily fortified Green Zone across the Tigris river.

I have never been contacted by DFAT in relation to the kidnapping and they have never sought my side of the story. In 2005 it was brought to my attention that DFAT was still referring to my kidnapping as an alleged incident and I had to seek recourse through the management at SBS to have those statements retracted.

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