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Letter from Baghdad: What a Way to Make a Living

Without a steady paycheck or an expense account, freelancers in Iraq spend their savings, stay in bring-your-own-sheets hotels and face increasingly dangerous working conditions--all for love of the story.

By **Jill Carroll**

Jill Carroll is a freelance journalist in the Middle East.

The cubicle walls are closing in. You'd rather jump off a cliff than cover one more zoning board meeting and just when one of the biggest stories in years is developing in Iraq, those foreign correspondent aspirations seem ever further out of reach.

There's only one way out: pull up stakes, clean out that savings account and get on a plane to Baghdad. It may sound like lunacy, but that's precisely what dozens of journalists have done. The result is a motley group of freelance reporters taking up residence in Baghdad's seediest hotels--including a former brothel--and churning out stories on shoestring budgets in a country the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked the most dangerous in the world for journalists.

Equal parts reporter, salesman and entrepreneur, the freelancer is a different breed of journalist than a staffer at a major media outlet. Freelancers pay for their own accommodations, translators, food and health insurance, and most do it for under \$100 a day.

There are more lucrative ways to work and faster ways to advance a career. But just as athletes do it for love of the game, freelancers in Iraq seem to do it for love of the story.

Colin Freeman epitomizes the type. After four years with the London Evening Standard, he realized the only way he was going to cover one of the most important stories of his lifetime was to hire himself. "Only the very top rung of reporters ever got sent to cover wars or conflicts, not least because of the astronomical insurance costs involved," says Freeman, 34. "When the war in Iraq came up, I decided it was a good way of having a change of scene and that the only way to do it was as a freelancer."

So on April 1, 2003, with the war reaching its crescendo, he quit his job and set off to report from Baghdad. Arriving just after U.S. forces took the Iraqi capital, he moved into a \$5-a-night hotel and

later relocated to a cheap apartment while other reporters were paying more than \$100 a night at high-end hotels.

Before long his acumen with a pitch and eye for a good story landed him in publications from the San Francisco Chronicle to London's Sunday Telegraph. But he had to peck out many stories in his darkened apartment during Baghdad's hours-long power outages. Freeman couldn't afford a generator.

Only a story of this enormity, with nothing less than America's global credibility, the stability of the Middle East and countless lives at stake, could be worth risking personal safety and financial solvency to cover it as a freelancer.

"This war is shaping up to be the decisive issue of our generation, and I want to witness it and as a journalist to help shape the future," says James Brandon, 24, a British freelancer who worked for 10 months in Iraq before being kidnapped and then released in Basra last summer. "In Iraq you can actually stand on a street corner in Najaf or Sadr City watching the mujahedeen preparing to fight the Americans and be able to say, 'This is it. This is the front line in this huge global war of ideas and religions.'" Brandon came to Iraq in July 2003 to work for the Baghdad Bulletin, an English-language newspaper that launched after major combat operations ended but lasted only a few months. Fresh from finishing a master's degree in Middle Eastern studies, he stayed and picked up various strings from Bloomberg News to the Scotsman in Scotland.

Covering the war gives journalists an opportunity to recall the noblest tenets of their profession and fulfill the public service role of journalism.

The sense that I could do more good in the Middle East than in the U.S. drove me to move to Jordan six months before the war to learn as much about the region as possible before the fighting began. All I ever wanted to be was a foreign correspondent, so when I was laid off from my reporting assistant job at the Wall Street Journal in August 2002, it seemed the right time to try to make it happen. There was bound to be plenty of parachute journalism once the war started, and I didn't want to be a part of that.

Idealistic, for sure, but I am not the only one. Ashraf Khalil had the same motivation. The 33-year-old Chicago native had been living in Cairo for six years as a freelancer when he decided his years of experience in the region could add depth to the torrent of coverage coming out of Iraq.

"I feel I have a responsibility to try to bring something to these stories," says Khalil, who freelanced in Iraq in January and February 2004 and is now a reporter in the Los Angeles Times' Baghdad bureau. "I spent a lot of time waiting for someone to sponsor me, and finally I realized it just wasn't going to happen unless I did it myself."

It isn't easy to fulfill such a lofty mandate when people are out looking for foreigners to behead. The days are long gone when car bombs and attacks on military convoys were so infrequent we could keep track of the date and place of each one.

Iraq became terrifyingly dangerous almost overnight last spring. Everything changed during the U.S. Marines' siege of Fallujah the first week of April 2004 and the simultaneous Shiite uprising led by firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. It wasn't safe for foreigners to walk the streets, and car bombs

became an almost daily occurrence.

The anger and violence have only gotten worse since then, and a new terror has been added: kidnapping.

Some 200 foreigners, several freelance journalists among them, have been kidnapped in Iraq since insurgents adopted the tactic last April.

British freelancer Brandon was snatched from his hotel room in Basra in August in an elaborate operation involving at least a dozen gunmen. A week later documentary filmmaker Micah Garen was taken at gunpoint from the streets of Nasiriyah. Both were later freed unharmed. The old dangers of Iraq also continued to plague reporters. In June a ricocheting bullet hit Freeman in the rear end in Basra when someone at the Muqtada al-Sadr rally he was covering shot at the ground directly behind him. He fully recovered. (See "[Letter from Baghdad](#)," August/September 2004.)

But most agree such attacks have more to do with bad luck than with freelancing. And they say they don't need to take extra chances to get stories that will sell.

"I've never felt the need or the pressure to take any risk to get stories into the paper," Freeman says. "I personally think that staffers, who have reputations to protect in the face of competition, are much more likely to come under pressure to take risks in terms of being 'the first into Fallujah' or whatever."

Last fall the kidnappings and beheadings increased, and Western reporters became virtual prisoners in their hotel rooms. When they did go out, they would travel with two cars: one up front with the reporter, and a "chase car" following in case the first vehicle was attacked. Khalil says given the current climate, he doubts he would come to Iraq without the backing of a major media organization. "I have been advising people not to," he says. "There is a prospect [journalists] will be specifically targeted. The infrastructure that is needed for security is just beyond the capabilities of freelancers."

Stephen Negus, 34, arrived in Iraq just after U.S. forces took Baghdad with only the slimmest prospects for work. He's now a "super stringer" with the Financial Times and The Economist. Essentially a staff writer in all but name, he says Iraq has become too dangerous and too expensive for freelancing.

"It could be done, but the conventional wisdom is it's damn foolish," he says. "Chances are [freelancers] could get a couple of good stories and come back safely..but over a long period of time you are taking your life into your own hands to do that."

But in a place where keeping a low profile is the best way to stay alive, the small operations of a freelancer seem safer than those of big media organizations, which rent houses replete with armed guards and a stream of foreigners coming and going.

Cheap local hotels have also proved more secure havens than the high-end Sheraton and Palestine hotels, where many large news outlets base their operations. The high-rises have been regularly hit by rocket fire.

Moving into a seedy hotel early on "was actually the best thing to do," Freeman says. "You saw a very different side of life staying in a cheap Iraqi hotel compared to somewhere like the [more

expensive] al Hamra and probably spent a lot more time with locals as a result."

Economizing in Baghdad, however, requires some flexibility in living and eating standards. Negus arrived in Baghdad in mid-April 2003 with two photographers and an SUV packed with Top Ramen noodles. He had lived for 10 years in Cairo, "where it's extremely difficult to sell a story," and he wanted to go "where things are changing." The three split the cost of an \$80-a-night room on the 16th floor of the Sheraton. It was one of the only hotels open at the time, and electricity and sewage barely functioned.

"It was like urban camping," says Negus, a California native. "You couldn't flush with any guarantee of success." The polite thing to do was to use the restroom in the lobby. "And literally I did go down and up 16 floors of a staircase with a flashlight. You'd have been a fool to take the elevator."

Key to many freelancers' financial survival is the \$20-a-night al Dulaimi hotel. With its Baroque-on-a-budget décor, reminiscent of its pre-war reputation as a brothel, the hotel is home to scores of freelancers, bed bugs and garish velveteen furniture. The tall white building in the Jadriyah neighborhood of Baghdad was still home to a working prostitute when one of the first reporters moved in across the hall in the summer of 2003. Everyone knows to buy new sheets before checking into the Dulaimi.

But the Dulaimi has never been attacked, and the small Musafir hotel next to it, also a popular freelancer haunt, is too short for rockets to hit. Both are too far from a main road to be directly attacked by a car bomb--ideal Baghdad digs. The neighboring al Hamra hotel, however, is where reporters with expense accounts stay. It's about four times as expensive, has been threatened several times and has a side exposed to rocket attack. Somehow it's still filled with journalists.

For the superstitious, there may be one black mark on the brothel-turned-hotel's security record: the "Dulaimi Curse." Freeman, Brandon, Garen and French reporter Georges Malbrunot, who was kidnapped for four months, all had stayed at the Dulaimi. While the coincidence is just a joke among reporters, Agence France-Presse filed a story last summer taking the curse seriously, even suggesting hotel staff might have had a hand in the attacks on journalists.

Freelancers dismiss any sinister conspiracies, however, and many are still willing to risk a hex or two for the cheap rates.

But harder than finding safe, inexpensive housing is getting enough work to justify the trip in the first place. Most freelancers cobble together a series of strings from various, often obscure, media outlets to pay their way. It takes a lot of wheeling and dealing to come up with catchy stories budget-constrained editors will print.

Negus started working for The Economist--a step up from his gig writing about humanitarian projects in Baghdad for UNICEF--after he went to a party with an Economist reporter who happened to mention the magazine's bureau was understaffed.

"Iraq is an expensive place for freelancers to operate," Brandon says. Besides the cash needed for hotels, translators, cars and satellite phones, there's the stress of writing something that sells. "Finding new and interesting stories somewhere like Baghdad, where all the reporters are based, can be a real struggle, so the easier solution is to head out to lesser-visited places--Najaf, Kurdistan and

Basra in particular--bearing in mind that staffers are often reluctant to leave Baghdad in case they miss something major."

Khalil, now in a room paid for by the L.A. Times in Baghdad, says the best part of making it to the promised land of steady paychecks is "not to have to worry about pitching, payments and the care and feeding of four different papers... [Now] all I've got to do when I get up in the morning is write stories."

Then, from his datebook, he pulls a piece of paper whose edges have gone fuzzy from wear. He unfolds it and points to the handwritten lists of story slugs, which newspapers bought them and for how much. A relic from his freelancing life.

"To remind me of those days," he says.