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features

Witness to Genocide

by Heather Pringle

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Forensic archaeologists uncover evidence of a secret massacre—and help convict Saddam Hussein of crimes against humanity

Archaeologists and physical anthropologists exhumed 114 victims of the Kurdish genocide from a mass grave in the center of Iraq's Muthanna province. Nine other mass graves nearby remain unexcavated. (Courtesy US Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District and the Regime Crimes Liaison Office)

NEW In her **Beyond Stone and Bone** blog entry "Massacre of the Innocents," author Heather Pringle takes you behind the scenes of her investigating and reporting of this story.

In May 1988, a prison guard checked Taymour Abdullah Ahmad's name off a list and directed him to a bus idling in the Popular Army camp in Topzawa, southwest of Kirkuk. The camp was one of Iraq's grimmest prisons. During his month-long internment there, the 12-year-old Kurdish boy watched guards beating male prisoners senseless with lengths of coaxial cable. He had seen four children weaken and then die of starvation. He stood helplessly as a guard stripped his father to his undershorts and led him off to his death. So Taymour was not sorry to see the last of Topzawa. He did not know that the paper in the guard's hand was an execution list.

The buses idling in the prison courtyard looked like ambulances. But this, Taymour soon discovered, was a cruel illusion; inside, they were squalid mobile prisons. The boy, his mother, and two younger sisters were forced into a dark air compartment that reeked of urine and feces. There was no toilet, no food, no water, no way out. The only ventilation came from a small, mesh-covered opening. By the time the bus pulled out, 60 or so frightened passengers--mainly Kurdish women and their young children--were crushed together in the stifling heat.

After more than 12 hours of travel, the bus bumped to a halt in the desert near the Saudi Arabian border. Taymour stepped into the cool night air and noticed at once that their bus, along with the 30 others in the convoy, had parked next to a large, shallow pit. Before he could take this in, however, a soldier pushed Taymour and his mother and sisters over the edge. Gunmen began firing. "When the first bullet hit me," Taymour later recalled, "I ran to a soldier and grabbed his hand." He had seen tears in the man's eyes, and instinctively reached toward him, hoping he would pull him out. But an officer watching nearby issued a command in Arabic, and the soldier shot Taymour. This time the boy fell to the ground, wounded in the left shoulder and lower back. He played dead until the gunmen moved away, then crawled out of the open grave and set off into the darkness. Several hours later, he reached a camp of Bedouins who took pity on him, hiding him in their tents.

Taymour told this story in 1992 to Human Rights Watch, which was investigating the treatment of Kurds in Iraq. Ethnically and linguistically distinct from the country's Arab majority, the Kurds have long sought independence from Iraqi rule. Moreover, a small number of Kurds follow an ancient religion known as Ezidi. To advance the separatist cause, some Kurds sided with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, from 1980 to 1988. Their defiance infuriated Saddam Hussein, who feared losing control over the rich oil fields of northern Iraq's Kurdish region. So in 1988, Hussein's government publicly announced a campaign to crush Kurdish resistance. They dubbed it Anfal--The Spoils of War--the title of the eighth chapter of the Koran, which records revelations received by Muhammad after his first victorious battle over non-believers. By characterizing the Kurds as infidels, Iraqi officials hoped to rouse support in the Muslim world for their genocidal campaign.

Anfal proceeded with terrifying precision. Iraqi aircraft first dropped conventional bombs and chemical weapons on unsuspecting Kurdish villages; ground attacks followed, driving the survivors to collection points situated near main roads. Paramilitary and military forces waited in secret to gather up the terrified families and bus them to army camps and temporary holding centers. Seven months later, in September 1988, the Iraqi government announced the end of Anfal and declared a general amnesty for anyone who had sided with Iran during the war. By then, however, some 100,000 Kurds had vanished without a trace and around 2,600 Kurdish villages lay in ruins.

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What happened to all the missing Kurds? In the early 1990s, Human Rights Watch sent a team of researchers to Iraq to discover their fate. The eyewitness accounts and Iraqi secret police documents they gathered suggested that the country's security forces had massacred thousands, and Human Rights Watch hoped that some nation would bring charges of genocide against Iraq in the International Court of Justice. None did. But after the March 2003 U.S.-led invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's new government began looking into crimes of the former regime. A team of American Marines journeyed across Iraq, recording some 230 probable mass-grave sites. One lay close to where Taymour was rescued in the southern province of Muthanna.

Two boys, between the ages of seven and ten, were blindfolded before they were shot. On average, each adult was shot nine times, each child four times. (Courtesy US Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District and the Regime Crimes Liaison Office)

Investigators also pored over captured Iraqi government documents. Some contained detailed plans to round up and slaughter "subversives, agents of Iran, and similar traitors to Iraq" in the Kurdish zone. The documents, including signed execution orders, implicated seven senior Iraqi leaders in the mass murder of Kurds: Saddam Hussein; Ali Hassan al-Majid al-Tikriti, better known as Chemical Ali, who drew up the plans for Anfal; Sultan Hashem Ahmed al-Ta'I, military commander of Anfal; Tahir Tawfiq al-'Aani, governor of Mosul, a city with a large Kurdish population; Sabir abd al-Aziz al-Douri, director general of Iraq's military intelligence; Farhan Mutlaq al-Habouri, head of military intelligence in the Kurdistan region; and Hussein Rashid al-Tikriti, deputy chief of operations for the Iraqi forces.

But a survey of mass graves and a stack of government documents were not enough evidence to meet the requirements of the International Court of Justice. To convict someone of a crime against humanity, Iraqi prosecutors needed to demonstrate that the accused willfully killed others as part of a systematic attack against a civilian population. And to convict on the charge of genocide, prosecutors had to show that a defendant intended "to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group as such." The legal system needed clear proof that the Iraqi death squads targeted Kurdish civilians and systematically exterminated them. This meant locating the bodies of women and children massacred by Iraqi forces and showing that the slaughter was systematically organized by government forces.

To clinch their case, prosecutors needed to put a team of highly skilled forensic archaeologists and anthropologists to work excavating some of the country's mass graves.

In a desolate stretch of the Hajara Desert in Iraq's Muthanna province, Sonny Trimble crouched down, eye level with a 7,000-pound trackhoe bucket. At his signal, the operator angled it gently into the ground, shaving off a half-inch layer of sand. The two men had been at this work for nearly an hour on a sweltering April morning in 2005. With each pass of the bucket, Trimble strained to hear the sound of metal scraping against bone--the prelude to a grave. So far, nothing. But as the bucket edged past, he spied a small tuft of black, then a swatch of brilliant orange, emerge from the ground. He stopped the trackhoe and crawled over for a closer look. Sticking out of the sand were pieces of a woman's black dress and a flaming orange sash.

The 52-year-old Trimble was a civilian archaeologist in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the chief curator of the corps' extensive archaeological collections. Over the years, the U.S. Army called upon him to undertake several difficult and sensitive missions. Personnel from his team had traveled to Vietnam to recover the remains of American soldiers, and he had assisted the Kuwaiti government in its search for the bodies of more than 600 civilians kidnapped by the Iraqi army during its 1991 flight from Kuwait. In spring 2004, Trimble received a phone call from a lawyer working in the Department of Justice, asking if he would head a major investigation of Iraq's mass graves. The enormous project would require the forensic excavation of hundreds of victims and detailed analysis of evidence in a secluded laboratory in Iraq.

Crimes against humanity are usually investigated during peacetime, when researchers can exhume bodies from mass graves patiently, without fear of attack or reprisal. Iraq, however, was spiraling rapidly into civil war. Car bombings, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), ambushes, and kidnappings grabbed daily headlines around the world. A Western forensic team working for months at a mass-grave site would present a large, stationary target for insurgents. No one could guarantee the safety of the team, but Trimble, who had worked under these conditions before, understood the risk. He accepted the mission. "I was really interested in assisting the Iraqi people," he recalls.

In America, opposition to the war in Iraq was mounting. To deflect criticism and win popular support, the White House wanted Americans to see how Iraqis had suffered under Saddam Hussein's regime. This meant proceeding as quickly as possible with a series of major criminal trials. To facilitate this, the U.S. Congress allotted $128 million for criminal investigations in Iraq and created the Regime Crimes Liaison Office (RCLO) to assist Iraqi prosecutors. Already, prosecutors had opened the books on three major atrocities: the slaughter of some 150 men in the village of Dujail 40 miles north of Baghdad, the death-squad executions of Shiite men, and the disappearances of Kurdish civilians during Anfal. For Trimble, the first order of business was to excavate mass graves suspected of containing Kurds.

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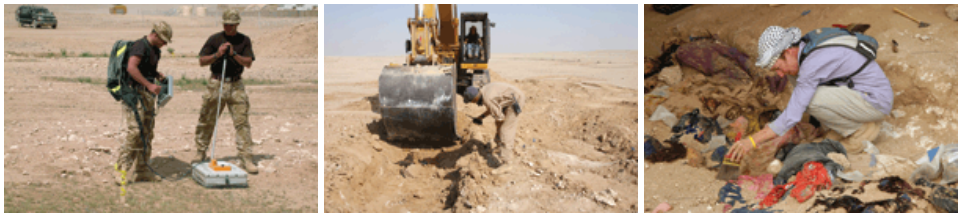
Muthanna was one of these.

Trimble visited the Muthanna site for the first time in March 2005 with RCLO senior staff and a regional security expert from the U.S. Embassy. Together, they decided that convoying the forensic team each day to the site from the nearest military base, 17 miles away, posed too great a risk. "People had started putting IEDs on everything, and we wouldn't have made it," says Trimble, a slender, likable man with a deceptively low-key manner. So he and Wade Ricard, a logistics expert and heavy equipment operator, designed a mobile field camp. The RCLO hired 135 private security contractors to guard the camp and its supply trucks.

Meanwhile, Trimble's field director, Susan Malin-Boyce, helped assemble gear and prepare the field team in Baghdad.



Under threat of insurgent attack, the forensic archaeologists had to work fast. From left: Ground-penetrating radar was used to find the edges of the mass graves. A trackhoe stripped away the sand, stopping when bodies were exposed. Archaeologists carefully unearthed and documented the dead. (Courtesy US Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District and the Regime Crimes Liaison Office)

A staff archaeologist at Geoarcheology Research Associates (GRA), a company specializing in rescue archaeology, Malin-Boyce had served in the U.S. Army in Germany during the Vietnam War. Later she managed major archaeological projects in Pakistan and other developing nations. But the wry, observant New Yorker had never undertaken a forensic excavation. As she readied the team for the field, she wondered how she would cope personally with what she called "the emotional disaster of a mass grave. I had certainly encountered human remains on many prehistoric sites, but it's not the same--it's not recent and it's not mass murder."

Taking advantage of a break in the battle against insurgents, U.S. Army helicopters flew the team to the field camp on April 7, 2005. The next morning, Trimble and Malin-Boyce walked the site alone, planning out the work. Much of the site, they noticed, was rimmed by a high horseshoe-shaped ridge, which would have concealed both heavy equipment and large numbers of people from prying eyes. The two archaeologists walked the terrain, eyes to the ground. They spotted four unused grave trenches. Each measured 10 feet wide, and lay in a line running north and south. Instead of being scattered randomly over the landscape, the graves were arranged in a regular, orderly pattern, suggesting that the murderers had a systematic plan for burying their victims.

Over the next three days, the team searched the terrain for scraps of cloth and traces of back-dirt piles--indicators of buried graves. They flagged, measured, and recorded every feature. Mark Smith, a sandy-haired cartographic expert from GRA, meticulously recorded the location of each bullet and cartridge casing--crucial forensic evidence--with an electronic surveying system. He then fed the information into a computerized Geographic Information System (GIS), which allowed him to analyze and map the location of bullets and other data.

The team discovered 10 massive burial pits, all oriented along the same north-south axis. "If Steven Spielberg ever did a documentary on what happened to the Kurds, this is where he would come," observes Trimble. "There are graves as far as the eye can see." The team picked one, and brought in a trackhoe to take off the upper layers of sediment, a way of speeding the initial phase of the dig. The bodies, they discovered, lay just a foot and a half below the surface--an astonishingly shallow grave. As team member Joe Schuldenrein pored over the region's geology, the reason became clear. Just two feet or so below the surface, a layer of rock-hard calcrete prevented even heavy machinery from carving out deep pits.

The choice of sites, says Schuldenrein, principal archaeologist at GRA, was "a fatal flaw" in the executioners' plans. It made detection and exhumation of the graves relatively easy.

Trimble and Malin-Boyce decided to clear the sand off the entire grave before removing the first body. This way the team's forensic photographer Tim Bradshaw, a sergeant in Florida's Coconut Creek Police Department, could photograph the entire crime scene and excavators could recover the entangled skeletons one by one--an important evidentiary concern. "You need to be able to identify an individual case," says Malin-Boyce, "and lift that person out, while still leaving other individuals in place." So the field team began working in the center of the grave, then moved out to the edges. With long-handled hoes, they carefully scraped off the overlying sediment, then switched to trowels to expose the bodies. They found 114 individuals strewn across a 36-foot-long grave.

The field team consisted of physical anthropologists who specialize in human anatomy and the recovery of human remains, and archaeologists who are experts in meticulous excavation. Malin-Boyce knew that the team could not afford any competition between these groups, particularly as the 120-degree temperatures began to fray everyone's patience. "We had to have collaboration in the grave," says Malin-Boyce, "so the archaeologist could ask the physical anthropologist closest to them, 'Does this hand belong to this person? Does this thumb belong to this hand?' "

Smith, the cartographer, digitally mapped the position of each body. He found that he could record as many as 60 points of reference on each set of remains in just three to five minutes, a fraction of the time that homicide investigators generally take to map bodies in a crime scene. Each evening, back at the field camp, Smith, a quiet, reserved man, downloaded the day's data into the GIS program. With it, he created composite maps of the entire grave for Malin-Boyce, who used them as progress reports--or "dailies"--to plan for the next day's work.

Once each victim was fully recorded, team members gently lifted it from the ground and placed it and all associated belongings into a sealed body bag. They discovered that eight adult victims had died with infants or small children in their arms. As the crew worked, they reconstructed the crime. "Imagine bringing this group of people in here, marching them down here in the night in the headlights of the vehicles," explains Malin-Boyce. "Imagine the children crying and screaming and everyone begging." At the same time, she adds, they were imagining it from the perspective of a shooter. "How do you organize it? What do you do? Where was the heavy machinery? That's just what archaeologists do--you re-create the scene from every possible perspective. So it's not just the perspective of the victims that you are occupying, it's the perspective of the shooter as well."

Physical anthropologists working in a lab near Baghdad catalogued the injuries suffered by every individual in the Muthanna grave. After the trial of Saddam Hussein, the human remains were turned over to Kurdish officials for reburial. (Courtesy US Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District and the Regime Crimes Liaison Office)

As the excavators pressed on, Trimble kept a close eye on the security situation. It was obvious to the entire crew that the longer they spent on the ground, the more likely they were to draw the attention of hostile forces. But they refused to leave any of the bodies they excavated behind. They were conscious, says Trimble, that the American government had let down the Iraqi people, promising much but delivering little. The team was determined to be different. "So we left no bone, no speck, not so much as a broken bead behind," says Malin-Boyce.

On the final morning at the site, she walked down to the empty grave with a colleague. A thick fog had settled in, and all over the ground delicate flowers the color of the moon bloomed. "It was so serene," recalls Malin-Boyce, shaking her head.

The team's Forensic Analysis Facility was based at Camp Slayer near the Baghdad airport. The camp consisted of rows of desert-tan, metal-frame tents surrounded by an inner perimeter of large shipping containers and a white picket fence. Before the war, Camp Slayer was one of Saddam Hussein's presidential compounds and pleasure palaces. It had artificial lakes that attracted flocks of migratory birds, and once featured a private zoo where Hussein's son Uday kept lions and other large carnivores. The most spectacular piece of architecture, however, was the so-called Perfume Palace, a building with gold-leaf wallpaper, a blue ballroom, an indoor pool, and two-story-high murals of military scenes. Shortly after the 2003 invasion, looters trampled through the compound, carrying off everything of value, but vestiges of the Hussein years remained. Some troops on the base filed reports by the light of chandeliers, while others posed for pictures in front of a larger-than-life mosaic of Saddam.

The forensic team lived and worked in the Forensic Analysis Facility. Distractions were few and far between--a Ping-Pong table, some chairs set out for an evening cigar, and a nearby Internet cafe. "You were living, eating, and working with the same people, over and over," says Trimble. "You had no new friends to talk to, nothing."

The facility housed a variety of labs. In the intake tent, a team of analysts opened the sealed body bags one by one. Early in the project, Trimble decided to depart from the standard report format of mass-grave analysis. Generally, forensic experts gather only collective statistics in their reports on age, gender, and cause of death of massacre victims. But the team's evidence manager, Kelly Bertoglio, a paralegal specialist from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, persuaded Trimble to create a separate case file for each victim, as was customary in criminal cases in the United States. In this way, the death of each individual could be analyzed, reconstructed, and published in detail--not lost in a welter of generalized statistics.

Everyone on the team agreed that the intake analysts had the worse job. Led by Kerrie Grant--a veteran field archaeologist who had helped excavate remains of the "Hobbit," Homo floresiensis, in Indonesia, and the Paphos theater ruins in Cyprus--they had to disentangle clothing and personal effects from each set of bones. The tent reeked of the sickly sweet smell of human decomposition. Beyond that, Grant and her colleagues struggled with the circumstances of the victims' sudden deaths. Hunting through the victims' pockets for identification papers, they came across teenage girls' vials of perfume and little boys' makeshift water pistols. Once they found the tiny bones of a near-term fetus curled inside the dress of an expectant mother. Optimistic to the end, the woman had carried a stack of infant-sized clothing to the grave.

All this took an emotional toll. "At times I could see people freeze in the lab," says Grant, who served as a flight engineer in the Australian Air Force before taking up archaeology. "They were having what we called 'a moment.' " The nature of the moment varied unpredictably. Paul Rubenstein, the federal preservation officer for the U.S. Army

Corps of Engineers, froze when he opened a body bag and found the remains of a child and a pair of plastic shoes known as jellies. His own daughters had once worn similar shoes. "When you make this mental connection that these people were not unlike yourself," says Rubenstein, "it hits you very hard."

Iraqi prosecutors wanted identification papers and other definitive proof of the victims' ethnic identity to make the genocide charges stick. But the RCLO attorneys believed that Hussein's security forces would have stripped the prisoners of their identification before the executions. The American lawyers had not accounted for the religious scruples of the killers. Grant and her colleagues found 16 dirt-caked identification cards sewn into small pockets in women's inner garments: the victims knew their Muslim guards would not pat them down carefully. These papers were cleaned, photographed, and turned over to investigators, who contacted the families.

Grant's team then sent each victim's clothing on to the cultural objects laboratory. There, Ariana Fernandez-Congram, a cultural anthropologist previously employed at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, devised an ingenious method for examining the garments in three dimensions. She and her colleagues brushed the dirt from each article of attire, then placed it on an appropriately sized wooden mannequin. The clothing was remarkably well preserved, and by displaying it on a mannequin, they could create a vivid likeness of the dead person. The lab's analysts compared the garments to known styles of Kurdish dress, checking for matches. More than 80 percent of the victims wore at least one article of traditional Kurdish clothing or possessed Kurdish jewelry, cosmetic kits, or sachets.

The analysts also recovered other vital data from the clothing. The style of a child's garments sometimes pointed to his or her sex--information impossible to obtain from skeletal remains of children under the age of 10. In addition, close scrutiny of the fabric often revealed bullet holes and bloodstains, evidence of cause of death. And one piece of footwear, a young girl's rubber boots, pointed clearly to the date of the victims' death. The boots bore an image of a popular Hanna-Barbera cartoon character, Top Cat. Aware that cartoonists frequently updated the look of their characters over time, team member Nancy Brighton, an archaeologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, began researching Top Cat. She discovered that the image on the little girl's boots dated to a specific period, 1988 to 1989--the time of Anfal.

While the cultural objects analysts sifted through the victims' personal possessions, forensic anthropologist Christopher King and his colleagues examined the skeletal remains in a separate tent. The anthropologists cleaned the bones, individual by individual, and laid them out on gurneys, studying them for indicators of sex, stature, and age. This led them to a startling discovery. Of the 114 individuals buried in the Muthanna grave, only 30 were adults--2 men and 28 women. The remaining 84 victims were children, the vast majority of whom were under 13 years of age. "This demonstrates that the individuals buried in this mass grave were not restricted to Kurdish adult and adolescent males, as one might expect at the time of war," says King, now an anthropologist with the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Most of the adult males in these families had probably been murdered at prison camps such as Topzawa.


The victims' clothing and personal effects were cleaned and displayed on mannequins. Photographs of the mannequins were used as evidence in Saddam Hussein's trial. Unique pieces of homemade clothing may help identify the victims. (Courtesy US Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District and the Regime Crimes Liaison Office)

King and his colleagues also discovered that 27 victims had their hands bound with rope or cloth, while 16 wore cloth blindfolds. The anthropologists examined the skeletal remains for bullet wounds and other signs of injury or trauma, and handed over the bones to the team's radiographer Jim Kister. Death by gunshot, Kister explains, leaves many grim traces on the human skeleton. As a bullet explodes through a human skull, for example, it deposits small particles of lead, as if the metal melted onto the bone. This "lead wipe" appears as small opaque specks on an X-ray.

The killers at Muthanna stood at the southern edge of the pit and fired into the midst of the captives. Some of the victims twisted in terror to escape the line of fire, receiving wounds both in their chests and backs. Others tried to parry bullets with their bare hands, an instinctive, defensive response. And nearly three-quarters of the victims suffered gunshot wounds in their legs and feet: a common tactic that prevents the targets from fleeing. In all, Muthanna's adult victims averaged eight gunshot wounds each, the children four. "It's unbelievable what these children went through," says Kister.

When the forensic anthropologists and radiographer were done, Adel Shaker, a medical examiner in the State of Alabama's Department of Forensic Sciences, reviewed all the evidence. Then a technician took two DNA samples, usually a healthy tooth and either a wrist or foot bone, from each victim for future testing. For the vast majority of the victims, Shaker determined the cause of death was homicide. But in four cases--three young children and a fetus--Shaker could find no visible signs of trauma at the time of death. In all likelihood, says Trimble, the children were

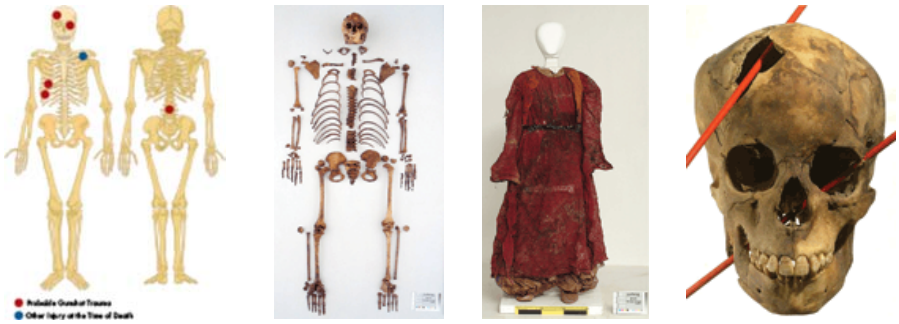
buried alive and perished of suffocation.

Armed with all the data, the team reconstructed the massacre. The killers, says Trimble, first led the two adult male victims--possibly the bus drivers--and the adolescent boys into the grave, positioning them at the deepest end. "They were very methodical." Then they brought all the women and children into the grave. The pattern of shell casings found at the site shows that the shooters, whose numbers cannot be determined, likely stood at the southern end of the pit and fired into the throng with AK-47 assault rifles, mowing the victims down in a spraying motion.

The team presented the Iraqi prosecutors with a 2,000-page final report on the Muthanna grave. It revealed with shocking clarity how an organized Iraqi force slaughtered 114 Kurdish civilians in a remote region of Muthanna. The executioners employed heavy, earth-moving equipment to dig 10 mass graves ahead of time, each of which was oriented in the same north-south direction. The victims--predominately Kurdish women and children--carried household goods and possessions to the grave, as if they expected to be resettled. And all had been killed in a single episode as they stood in the grave, many blindfolded and with hands bound. On the strength of this and related documentary evidence, the prosecutors decided to bring Saddam Hussein, Ali Hassan al-Majid al-Tikriti, and five other defendants to trial on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity.

On November 30, 2006, Trimble took the stand as an expert witness for the prosecution in the Anfal trial. The courtroom was located in the former headquarters of the Ba'ath Party in Baghdad. It resembled a fortress. Guards patrolled the marbled hallways with automatic rifles. On the stand, Trimble stated his credentials in a clear voice, pausing after each sentence for the Arabic and Kurdish translators, then glanced around the courtroom. Behind a glass wall, two rows of reporters and distinguished visitors watched attentively. In the center of the room, Saddam Hussein and the other six defendants sat in an iron-barred enclosure, facing five judges. Hussein, who was dressed Western-style in a white shirt, woolen vest, and dark suit, flipped open a notebook and took out his pen.

Three weeks earlier, the Iraqi High Tribunal had convicted Hussein of crimes against humanity in the murder of some 150 men from the village of Dujail, and sentenced the former Iraqi president to death by hanging. Hussein, however, appealed the conviction; while he awaited that decision, the Tribunal proceeded with the Anfal trial. In the first phase, the court heard from 65 eyewitnesses, who described under oath how Iraqi planes dropped chemical weapons on Goktapa, Wara, and many other Kurdish villages, gassing thousands, and how armed men took away the panic-stricken survivors. Most of these detainees were never seen again.



An illustration of an 8- to 10-year-old girl's gunshot wounds. Images of her bones and a mannequin wearing her clothes were presented together during Saddam Hussein's trial. Colored rods show the path of bullets through a victim's skull. (Courtesy US Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District and the Regime Crimes Liaison Office)

Taymour Abdullah Ahmad, the young Kurd who had crawled out of the mass grave in Muthanna, had been living in the United States and returned to Iraq to tell the court how gunmen killed his mother and three sisters and how he narrowly escaped death himself. Trimble, who watched this testimony on closed-circuit television, was astonished: it was the first time he had heard Taymour's story. The Justice Department initially discounted the young Kurd and his report. "He seemed to them to be not all there," says Trimble. But many details of Taymour's account fit hand-in-glove with the evidence Trimble's team unearthed. "When I saw him testify, I thought he was completely credible," says Trimble. "He came across as a guy who, by the hand of God, had survived."

The defense counsel consistently argued that the architects of Anfal had drawn up plans for a strictly military campaign, one that targeted only Iranian soldiers and Kurdish saboteurs. So Trimble decided to emphasize a key point in his testimony--that the Anfal death squads systematically slaughtered Kurdish civilians, notably women and young children. To make this point forcefully, he and his team created a graphic PowerPoint presentation to ensure that the most important forensic facts would not get lost in translation. For this presentation, Trimble chose to highlight 17 victims from Muthanna. "We selected ones that we thought would best represent the demographic profile of the Anfal cases," says Trimble.

The archaeologist testified for four hours on behalf of the entire team. He described the methods he and his colleagues used to recover, secure, and analyze the evidence. Then he presented the 17 selected victims from Muthanna, one by one. He showed photos of each skeleton in the grave, the individual's gunshot wounds, and the personal effects found with the body. These ranged from a young child's prayer beads and little red shoes to a woman's spoon for measuring medicine or powdered milk. Finally, Trimble exhibited photos of a mannequin wearing each victim's attire. As he spoke, he tried to maintain as much eye contact as he could with the judges. Partway

through his presentation, however, he noticed one judge dabbing his eye. Two others soon followed suit. At first Trimble was puzzled, thinking something was wrong. Then he realized what was happening. "My God," he thought, "they are all crying."

Sitting in three rows, the seven defendants listened to the dramatic testimony patiently. At the end of Trimble's presentation, the presiding judge allotted time for each to speak, for under Iraqi law, defendants are permitted to cross-examine witnesses. One by one, the seven men rose to their feet, addressing sometimes rambling speeches to the presiding judge, who then distilled questions for Trimble. While some of the defendants tried to cast doubt on how the victims actually died, others such as Chemical Ali questioned the exact location of the Muthanna mass grave. "Maybe those deserts are in Iraq," said the man who planned Anfal, shrugging visibly, "or maybe they are somewhere else."

Saddam Hussein, however, took a different tack. With a notebook in his left hand and a pen in his right, he first piously quoted a verse from the Koran. "In the name of God most merciful and compassionate," he said, "God give us patience and let us die as Muslims." He then proceeded to his first question: Why, he wondered, was the court even listening to Trimble's testimony? "We are discussing and listening to witnesses for what is called Anfal," he observed, "which is a true name for the military campaign. And then we moved directly to the mass graves and I had in mind that--maybe the trial chamber will correct me--but I thought the mass graves is a different case than the Anfal case, but they were mixed together, and then the Americans started coming as experts and witnesses. Does that mean that the trial is moving in a hurry and someone wants to move it quicker and they mixed it with Anfal?"

The presiding judge frowned as he mastered his irritation. Then he spoke directly to Hussein, sternly dismissing the defendant's accusation of judicial malfeasance. "If you paid attention," the judge admonished, "[you would have seen how] the mass graves are connected very well to the Anfal case. There's no independent case for mass graves." Hussein, however, appeared unconvinced. "Let a neutral expert come and examine the mass graves," he insisted. "I don't accept the reports of American experts and witnesses in this court."

This pacifier belonged to one of the 85 children exhumed from the mass grave at Muthanna. (Courtesy US Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District and the Regime Crimes Liaison Office)

Soon after, Hussein lost his appeal in the Dujail case, and the Iraqi government carried out the death sentence against him on December 30, 2006. But the Anfal trial proceeded as prosecutors entered 4,935 official government documents as supporting evidence. These included signed execution orders for the Kurds massacred at Muthanna. After presenting both the paper trail and the forensic evidence proving that the executions had taken place, the prosecution rested its case. The defense then struggled to rebut it. But in June 2007, the judges convicted Chemical Ali, Sultan Hashem Ahmed al-Ta'I, and Hussein Rashid al-Tikriti of genocide and crimes against humanity. They have been sentenced to death, but were last reported being held in U.S. custody. Sabir abd al-Aziz al-Douri and Farhan Mutlaq al-Habouri received sentences of life imprisonment. But all charges against Tahir Tawfiq al-'Aani were dropped at the prosecutor's request. The former governor of Mosul did not make any key decisions related to the Anfal campaign, nor had eyewitnesses placed him at any of the crime scenes.

Trimble's testimony at the Anfal trial did not bring the Muthanna work to an end, however. There remained the crucial issue of returning the victims' remains to their Kurdish homeland in Iraq. The RCLO senior staff impatiently waived off Trimble's request for funds to do this. "They wanted us out of there because it was, quite frankly, a matter of budget," says Trimble. "But I told them I was not leaving until we had all these people wrapped up and in the hands of Kurdish officials, because our country in the past has not taken care of the dead in places like Bosnia and Kosovo. And I think we're better than that."

The team carefully researched Muslim burial customs, learning that the bodies needed to be wrapped in cotton cloth and buried with their heads pointing toward Mecca. So the team ordered yards of the necessary material and designed exterior tags to indicate the location of the skull in the fabric bundle. It was an emotional farewell. Many of the team members wept openly as they wrapped individuals whom they had come to know so well. Then they placed each victim's personal belongings in a separate box. Kurdish officials plan to exhibit these objects one day in a Kurdish holocaust museum.

Trimble also discussed with senior American officials how best to identify the many victims who remained nameless. He proposed creating a slide show of the victims' clothing and taking it to town halls and mosques across the Kurdish region. "These people come from tribal societies," he explains, "and though they buy a lot of Western clothes, they mostly make their clothes." Families of the victims could easily recognize the homemade apparel.

Today, Trimble and Malin-Boyce are looking toward the future, hoping to create a permanent mass-graves team to help courts around the world bring death squads and war criminals to justice. The pursuit of justice in Iraq's deserts has transformed the lives of the team's archaeologists and anthropologists and given them new purpose. "Once you've worked on a project like that," says Malin-Boyce, "it's very hard to go back to anything else."

In January 2008, the Kurdish regional government held an official reburial ceremony for the Muthanna victims in its capital, Erbil. Soldiers carried flag-draped coffins through the city streets and mourners wept openly, holding framed

pictures of their lost family members. "This ceremony," said Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani in his speech, "makes us feel pain and happiness at the same time. We feel pain because we find ourselves in front of the bodies of innocent victims, and happy because they are back in the homes of their fathers and grandfathers."

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