

Return to Sender



Mail Transportation (detail), Fletcher Martin, 1930s

A few months before Covid broke out worldwide, I went to Washington DC. There I met one of many Yazidi translators who had worked with the US military when they liberated Kurdistan from the Sunni dominated Arabic speaking regime of the late dictator, Saddam Hussein.

Kurdistan has done very well by the US intervention. Something actually good happened there. A non-Arabic speaking Western oriented Muslim entity with ties to Israel was freed from an Arab dictatorship.

Kurdistan is now one of three federated entities that comprise the fragile state of Iraq: Kurdish speaking Kurdistan in mountainous northern Iraq, the central Sunni Arab part of Iraq, once dominant under Saddam Hussein, but now the odd man

out and the Shia south, with its massive political and military support coming from its Persian speaking Iranian neighbours.

But one people in Kurdistan has not done well. In 2014 the Kurdish militia either willingly or passively allowed ISIS to kill 20,000 men of the monotheistic but non Muslim Kurdish speaking nation, the Yezidi, while allowing for the rape and enslavement by ISIS of 7000 women and girls of which about three thousand are still unaccounted for.

I know that a few hundred brave young Yezidi men volunteered as translators for the US forces. Many of them were allowed to emigrate to the USA after their poorly paid service which in some cases ended in death on the battlefield. No US veteran organization recognizes and rewards their service.

“Hello, my name is Geoffrey Clarfield. I am a journalist volunteering on behalf of the Yezidi community in Canada and the USA. I would like to know whether your veteran’s organization has any program that supports these men and their families?”

Well, this is what I usually heard when I contacted a range of US veteran’s organizations, “Oh Mr. Clarfield I am so sorry, you are a Canadian. And so, there is not much you can do down here, unless you are a Veteran of some kind who has worked for the US military. I am so sorry that I cannot help you.”

But then, in the midst of my despair during my visit as I was browsing in a book shop in DC I came upon the following book *Chasing Ghosts* by US Iraq war veteran Paul Rieckhoff. I read it straight through. This is what a reviewer at Booklist wrote about the book:

Lieutenant Rieckhoff and his 38-man infantry platoon spent 10 months in one of the most volatile areas of Baghdad, trying to maintain order, protect civilians, track down insurgents, and protect themselves from snipers and bombers. It quickly became

clear that the American mission in Iraq had vague strategy, flawed tactics, and overchallenged, underequipped soldiers. Rieckhoff made it back alive, determined to tell the truth about what was happening and demand accountability from elected officials. Although Rieckhoff does not emphasize it, it comes through clearly that Iraq War veterans are held in declining respect, evidenced by the problems they have getting help with war-related injuries, especially psychological ones. Iraq has been a rich man's war and a poor man's fight, with the Iraqi people barely visible in the American media. Moreover, Rieckhoff's experiences showed him that censorship and bias abound even in these days of "on-the-spot" reporting, distorting what anyone following the war through the general media can learn. A most commendable eyewitness report on Iraq.
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I discovered that Rieckhoff had formed an organization to support veterans of the Iraq and Afghan war. I immediately called his organization and left a message. No reply. I called again and left a message. No reply. I sent an email. No reply. I got back to Canada and using Her Majesty's postal service printed out my communications and sent them registered mail. No reply.

I am still hoping. Maybe, someone who reads this article will send it to Mr. Rieckhoff. I still hope to hear from him. Here is a copy of what I sent him:

October 2, 2019

Dear Mr. Rieckhoff:

I have just finished reading your book Chasing Ghosts. Thank you for writing it. It is an excellent piece of honest reporting-true, informative and persuasive. It gave me a clear understanding of the war in Iraq from the bottom up, and not from the top down as it was presented by the government and

the US media at the time.

It pained me to read about how your men did not have sufficient drinking water, proper transport and above all, good local intel in so far as you had to find your own translators on the ground, hardly a recipe for winning the hearts and minds of a brutalized society which was in chaos when you arrived in Baghdad.

You and thousands of young American men like you, went to Iraq as patriots who were told that Saddam Hussein still had weapons of mass destruction. It turned out that this was no longer the case when you arrived, which must have been demoralizing. The fight in Iraq continues. It is complex and the US is still engaged there.

When the coalition forces liberated Kurdistan during the second gulf war they were able to win the hearts and minds of most of the local population, largely because of the valiant efforts of just under one thousand men. These were the Yezidi translators.

The Yezidi are the indigenous people of what is now called Kurdistan, mountainous northern Iraq. They are monotheists who have been persecuted for centuries by their Muslim Arab and Kurdish neighbours because they have refused to convert to Islam. They were culturally what most Kurds were before they adopted Islam and their religion and customs predate Islam in Iraq by more than a thousand years. They are as one author calls them, "the heirs of forgotten kingdoms."

During the second gulf war, hundreds of young Yezidi men volunteered to work with the US forces, translating from Arabic and Kurdish to English and back, to ensure that lines of communication with the Pesh Merga of the soon to be formed Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and, with the soon to be newly reformed Iraqi armed forces, went smoothly.

Many Yezidi translators served for years at a stretch

with no break. Many were wounded and killed as they did not only work from bases but went out on patrol and experienced firefights. Those that survived were allowed to emigrate to the United States and slowly, ever so slowly, go through the long process of sponsoring their immediate family members to join them. I have included one of the many articles I have published on the plight of the Yezidi in this envelope to give you the story of a typical translator.

As you know, during the summer of 2014 ISIS forces occupied the Sinjar (Shingal) mountains of northern Iraq, the traditional homeland of the Yezidi. It was a well coordinated effort and as each ISIS contingent entered and terrorized a Yezidi village, the Pesh Merga of the Kurdish Regional Government deserted their posts en masse, after having disarmed the few Yezidi men who still carried arms.

It is estimated that ISIS slaughtered up to forty thousand men and elderly women, raped and enslaved up to 8,000 Yezidi women and took male children to camps where they were trained to be ISIS fighters and suicide bombers. More than 3000 Yezidi women who were raped and enslaved are still missing, probably in captivity in refugee camps, now filled with former ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq. The coalition forces still on the ground in Iraq at that time did not help the Yezidi.

I have worked on behalf of the Yezidi in the United States and Canada for the last four years. In Canada we raised funds to bring in 30 refugees and successfully lobbied our government to bring in another 800 Yezidi refugees during the last two years. The United States has brought in less than 20 during this same period.

Two weeks ago, I was in DC meeting with Yezidi. While there, we contacted three US veteran organizations who told us that the Yezidi translators who are now US citizens are ineligible to join, as they were not US citizens when they

were fighting with the US forces in Iraq. You may be aware that a similar fate was endured by Hmong highland tribal militias who fought with the US in Viet Nam. Thousands later moved to the United States.

I would like to request 30 minutes of your time to have a conference call with you so that we could ask you for advice. The call would include my two Yezidi colleagues, both former translators.

Thank you so much for your consideration.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey Clarfield

On Behalf of the Yezidi Rescue Committee

It is funny how the unconscious works. One of the most famous Veterans of the US army was Elvis Presley, and so whenever I tried to communicate with Rieckhoff, involuntarily I began to hum that old classic song by Lieber and Stoller: "Return to Sender, Address Unknown, No Such Number, No Such Zone."

I think I got the lyrics right. I am still waiting for a reply.