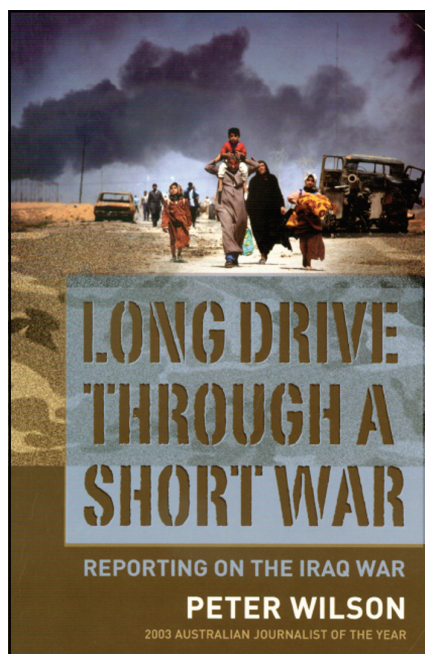


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‘Embedded’ with the invaded Iraqi people

***Long Drive Through a Short War: Reporting on the Iraq War*, by Peter Wilson, 2004. Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books. 294 pp. ISBN 1 74066 143 5.**
***Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*, by Seymour M. Hersh, 2004. London: Allen Lane (Penguin). 394 pp. ISBN 0 7139 9849 0.**

FEW journalists from this part of the world chose to report the 2003 invasion of Iraq as ‘unilaterals’ – those who reported from outside the cosy security of the ‘embedded’ reporters were attached to the Coalition military. Only one unilateral was from New Zealand: Jon Stephenson, who provided at great personal risk some invaluable independent insights for the *Sunday Star-Times*. New Zea-



land's handful of television reporters covered the war from the safety of the rear or were embedded.

According to the Paris-based global media watchdog, Reporters Sans Frontières, Coalition forces displayed ‘contempt’ for unilaterals. Many journalists came under fire, others were detained and questioned for several hours or days and some were mistreated, beaten and humiliated by Coalition forces.

Of the 14 journalists who died while the embedded system was in full force – from the start of the war on March 20 until the fall of



Saddam's statue on April 9 – only four of the casualties were embedded, even though the 700 or so embeds greatly outnumbered their unilateral colleagues in Iraq.

And 16 of the 21 media workers killed by the end of 2003 were unilaterals. Only five were embeds.

The Australian's European correspondent, Peter Wilson, his Canberra-based photographer, John Feder, and part British, part-Lebanese 'fixer' Stewart Innes were remarkably placed unilaterals for the duration of the war. They entered the south of Iraq in the wake of the invading Coalition forces, were arrested for visa violations (facing seven years of imprisonment, they were told) while interviewing civilians in Basra before British forces seized the city, spirited under guard to Baghdad, held under 'house arrest' in the Palestine Hotel and finally covered the implosion of Saddam Hussein's 24-year regime.

Of the hundreds of foreign journalists covering the war in Iraq, only Wilson managed to report both the invasion of southern Iraq and the fall of Baghdad.

Wilson's *Long Drive Through A Short War* is a personal account of their time in Iraq during the invasion and a subsequent post-war visit to the country to see the fate of the people he had met. His evocative reports led

to him being named the 2003 Australian Journalist of the Year and his experiences and independent view provide plenty of depth for this book.

Wilson was struck by the willingness of American soldiers to express their personal views about their operations, a striking contrast to most Australian soldiers' (and New Zealanders in similar situations?) reluctance to say almost anything for fear of punishment.

This American openness has a simple logic – when US soldiers are asked to fight and die for their country's values, high among those values are their democratic rights and free speech (p. 180).

Wilson found that 'while the Australians were generally scared to talk on the record, five minutes with an American would almost always yield some pretty strong opinions'.

Particularly interesting is the dilemma faced by Wilson about deciding whether to enter Basra while British troops were still besieging the country's second city, especially in the wake of the death of ITN's Terry Lloyd immediately after the start of the invasion.

I was happy to go, figuring that if the snipers and mortar were under control the biggest danger was being ar-



rested by Iraqi soldiers or police, and there was no reason to believe they would harm us.

Coalition troops had already shot up Terry Lloyd's ITN vehicles and would later kill several more reporters but there had not been a single report of the Iraqis doing so (p. 78).

Wilson didn't want to 'bully' the trio into entering Basra. It needed to be a collective decision. High in his thoughts was the experience of a three-man Channel Seven crew killed by Indonesian troops in East Timor in 1975. He had taken a close interest in their deaths because of his friendship with the family of Tony Stewart, the crew's 19-year-old soundman.

Wilson researched the tragedy in the 1980s while writing a thesis on the history of Australian journalists in Indonesia.

The Seven trio were killed after entering the town of Balibo, in the path of Indonesia's invasion force, and witnessing an advance that Indonesia claimed was not happening.

An East Timorese witness who had tried to talk them out of driving to Balibo told me later that reporter Greg Shackleton had been the keenest to take the risk (p. 79).

Wilson says that he often wondered about the group dynamics in making

that fateful decision to go to their deaths in Balibo.

In any event, Wilson, Feder and Innes jointly decided to enter Basra for a quick talk to Iraqis and get some photos to capture the atmosphere in the beleaguered city. A few hundred metres inside Basra, they talked to a grain silo worker who lived with his wife, their five sons, three of their wives and two grandchildren in one house. They were preparing to leave their home because of the intermittent bombing.

This was the first proper interview conducted by the Western media in Basra during the war, and it was the oddest interview in my 24 years of journalism.

With their city being attacked by Coalition troops the last thing these men expected was to be approached in the street by an 'enemy' news team and asked how they felt about it all (p. 81).

Feder had just completed the last of his photographs after interviewing the group when they were seized by two carloads of special police.

Having a translator ... had allowed us to stop for a real interview but that had made us a stationary target ... We had stayed still just long enough for word of our presence to be reported and acted on (p. 82).



It didn't take long to figure out that they had been arrested by a group including members of the notorious Fedayeen Saddam, the secret militia. But they were probably saved by the fact that they had been handed over to regular authorities in the local office of the Ba'ath Party.

Ironically, the trio were kept prisoner that night in the 198-room Sheraton Hotel, empty except for the four-man al-Jazeera TV crew. And the manager charged Wilson US\$107 cash for the night (room only).

They were kept under guard with Wilson being forced to pay for the captors' meals. Their satellite phones, cameras, flakjackets and other gear had been seized.

The following day, the captive news team were taken on a breakneck dash to Baghdad, running the gauntlet through two battles. They were taken to the Palestine Hotel where most Western journalists were based while their minders awaited decisions.

In the chaotic last days of the Saddam regime, Wilson resumed reporting and Feder borrowed cameras to cover the fall of Baghdad.

Perhaps the most poignant chapter is 'Ali's evacuation' where Wilson tells the harrowing story of a 12-year-old boy who lost both parents and both arms in Coalition bombing of his

hamlet Zafaraniya and the reporter's own crucial involvement. Ali Ismail Abbas was now the 'provider' for his six surviving sisters and fighting for his life against infection from his third degree burns.

Ali's plight became a tragic icon for the civilian cost of the war. British journalists tried to stake out his hospital room for exclusive stories while Wilson quietly got on with the job of arranging his evacuation to a specialist burns hospital in Kuwait.

The description of the scene when Ali is taken by stretcher from Saddam City Hospital to an ambulance waiting to take him to the military helicopter evokes ghoulish images of journalistic vultures hovering in the hope of taking some media credit (pp. 216-229). Appalling.

In Wilson's return to Iraq in October 2003 to visit the people he had reported on during the invasion, he was pleased to see the dramatic progress made by Ali.

Even four weeks after his evacuation, Ali had already begun to use his feet like his hands. With his toes, he could take off elastic socks, hand up his own T-shirt, and write and draw. And the UK Limbless Association was helping in his rehabilitation.

Wilson's book is an intriguing and evocative account of the realities



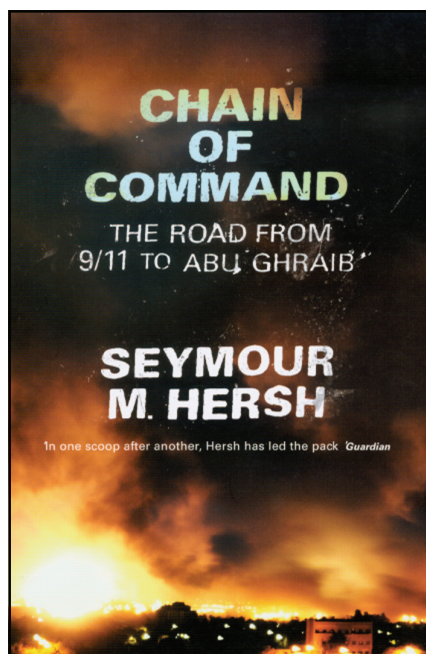
of life for a frontline reporter, and Feder's excellent photos enhance its value as a record of the invasion.

But the book is less satisfying when attempting to analyse the big picture. Wilson is perhaps too willing to accept the US rationale – hence his reluctance to report that it was the Americans who shelled the Palestine Hotel – and his prognosis for the future far too rosy.

Iraq is in the grip of a civil war unleashed by the failure of US post-invasion policy, even if this is not officially admitted.

For those seeking greater insight into the wider struggle, Hersh's *Chain of Command* provides many of the missing links. Seymour M. Hersh, known as Sy to his friends, has led the pack in war reporting and analysis since Vietnam. His 'muckraking' investigations concentrate on the policy failures, corruption and abuses of power, and his reporting has withstood the test of time – and presidents.

Hersh was a 32-year-old freelancer when he broke the macabre story of the My Lai massacre at a Viet Cong stronghold called 'Pinkville'. Since then he has unearthed scoop after scoop: an account of the US Government's cover-up of the My Lai massacre in 1972, the CIA's illegal spying on domestic 'enemies', the secret bombing of Cambodia, exposing the forgery of documents 'prov-



ing' Iraq planned to buy nuclear materials from Niger, and finally the Abu Ghraib torture revelations.

In three articles for *The New Yorker* that form a basis for this book, he showed that Abu Ghraib was not an 'isolated' incident but in fact an attempt by the US government and military leadership to circumvent the Geneva Conventions to extract intelligence in a bid to quell the Iraqi insurgency.

Something of a lone wolf, Hersh was paid perhaps one of his best compliments by neoconservative Richard Pearle who once described him as 'the closest thing American journalism has to a terrorist'.