

## **THE SURPRISING INTERROGATIONS THAT LED TO SADDAM HUSSEIN'S CAPTURE DURING THE GULF WAR.**

**THE KEY TO THE IRAQ WAR'S BIGGEST TRIUMPH WASN'T FIREPOWER OR TECHNOLOGY OR "ENHANCED" INTERROGATION. IT WAS MORE PERSONAL THAN THAT.**

**505**



American soldiers in the 4th Infantry Division stand over the opening of the 'spider hole' where Saddam Hussein was captured in Ad Dawr, Iraq in 2003.

After coalition forces invaded Iraq in March 2003 and toppled its government, the U.S. military launched an intensive manhunt. The target? **The nation's deposed dictator, Saddam Hussein, escaped Baghdad when the capital fell.**

Nine months later, in an operation code-named "Red Dawn," U.S. troops extracted Hussein, disheveled and disoriented, from a hole in the ground near his hometown of Tikrit. He had an unloaded Glock pistol (**which President George W. Bush later kept as a trophy**) and a suitcase **stuffed with \$750,000**. According to U.S. military historians, **the team that apprehended Hussein boasted 600 soldiers, two dozen tanks, and a company of Apache attack helicopters.**

Yet all that firepower would have been useless, had it not been for months of meticulous intelligence gathering and canny questioning. **Eric Maddox, the Army interrogator connected to the Delta force pursuing Hussein, played a pivotal role in the operation**—considered the biggest triumph of the Iraq War—with no trigger pulling, no drone strikes, and no enhanced interrogation methods. His secret weapon for helping pinpoint Hussein's exact location was much sneakier: **He used empathy.**

The fine art of verbal communication certainly wasn't the kind of military action Maddox had envisioned when he heeded a vague sense of patriotic calling in his senior year at the University of Oklahoma and enlisted with the 82 Airborne Division. Fearless and hardworking, Maddox made jumpmaster and became a Ranger, a designation notorious for its grueling training.

But ultimately, plunging out of planes was not how he made history. Instead, throughout more than 300 interrogations in the Iraqi city of Tikrit, he used his ability to talk and listen with empathy—and to influence people who had no reason to trust him. His central role in Saddam Hussein's capture earned *Staff Sergeant Maddox* *a Legion of Merit, the National Intelligence Medal of Achievement, the Defense Intelligence Agency's Director's Award, and the Bronze Star.*



*Eric Maddox receiving a Legion of Merit.*

#### **OPERATION RED DAWN – A BRIGHT SPOT IN A MURKY WAR.**

Few moments in the Iraq War were as widely celebrated as the capture of Saddam Hussein. For one thing, the invasion had been unpopular from the start, both at home and internationally. *Claims by the Bush administration that the brutal dictator was developing weapons of mass destruction ultimately proved false. Allegations connecting Hussein to al Qaeda terrorists also went unsupported.* Many critics suspected ulterior motives, ranging from oil reserves to Bush's declining poll numbers. Soon after the president prematurely declared "Mission Accomplished" on an aircraft carrier on May 1, it became clear that the invasion had done nothing to advance the war on terror, nor would it help establish a bulwark of democracy in the region. Instead, the nation of Iraq would face years—if not decades—of instability, strife, and sectarian violence.

However, most Americans and their allies cheered the toppling of Saddam's regime, which had been responsible not only for the invasion of Kuwait and the Persian Gulf War in 1990 and 1991 but for the violent suppression of Shia and Kurdish uprisings, ruthless chemical-gas attacks on its civilians and the murderous repression of all political dissenters. To help troops identify the leaders of the brutal regime, most of whom had also quickly dispersed after the invasion, the U.S. Army issued a special deck of playing cards to troops, showing photos, names, and job titles of high-value targets. Pictured on the ace spades, number one on the blacklist? Saddam Hussein himself.

If the United States had overplayed its hand with the invasion, cleaning up this deck might just make the gamble worthwhile.



*Iraq's 'most wanted' deck of playing cards, distributed to U.S. troops after coalition troops invaded the country.*

#### **FROM CHINESE LINGUIST TO MIDDLE EASTERN INTERROGATOR**

Maddox wasn't exactly groomed for the role of Saddam hunter. After quitting the paratroopers in 1997, he pursued the more cerebral route of a military linguist, with a concentration on Mandarin Chinese.

In 1999, he became an interrogator. But except for occasional interviews with Chinese citizens apprehended on the U.S.-Mexico border as part of human-trafficking networks, Maddox had no opportunities to practice his interrogation and intelligence-gathering skills.

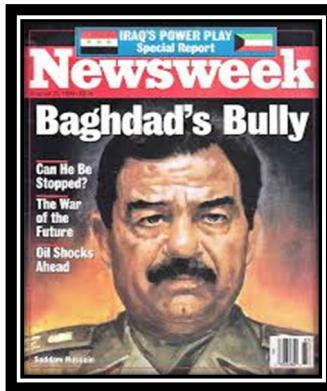
The September 11 attacks, and America's subsequent war on terror, changed all that. After two years with the Defense Intelligence Agency, [Maddox was ordered to Baghdad International Airport in July 2003](#). By chance, he got attached to Special Operations Task Force 121 in Tikrit, a city on the Tigris River about 140 miles northwest of Baghdad. But while Tikrit was also Hussein's hometown, few strategists expected to find him there; most assumed he had escaped to Syria.

Maddox suddenly found himself immersed in a hunt for high-value targets—or HTVs—represented on the deck of cards. With a list of about 200 names, he began to interrogate prisoners in Tikrit. Drawing on his ranger skills, he joined delta force raids to capture suspects in the middle of the night, then interrogated them during the day. He quickly learned that the war on terror had changed the way we fight wars, making intelligence work more important than ever.

Before 9/11, he says, war focused on force distribution and battlefield strategies. But since the attacks, the enemy began to consist primarily of insurgencies and radical organizations without government backing or heavy amounts of equipment. "Their primary resource," he says, "is their ability to recruit and inspire citizens."

#### **CHANNELING JACK RYAN AND THE ACTORS WHO HAVE PLAYED HIM**

Maddox soon realized that threats and intimidation were not going to get him the answers he was looking for. Instead, he decided to incentivize prisoners and offer a way out. "All they care about is themselves," he says. "At the end of the day, they have to take care of themselves. They have to take care of their families, and what's best for them." Listening to his subjects through his interpreter, Maddox learned to gain trust, by displaying empathy—not to be mistaken with sympathy, he insists: "There are no emotions in empathy. Empathy is understanding. It's not sympathy."



While Maddox says his friends sometimes compare him to Jack Ryan—the fictitious CIA analyst-turned-field-operative in author Tom Clancy's spy thrillers—he may have more in common with actors who have played Jack Ryan on screen. "If I need to cry or laugh or yell or scream, or get scared," Maddox explains, "I gotta be able to pull any of those out of the bag as instantaneously and authentically as possible. No part of it is real."

At times, Maddox even fooled his superiors, who pulled him from interrogations, afraid he was losing his way. That, he says, was the greatest compliment: "Of course I want my prisoners to think that I am with them, and if my boss thinks that I am with those prisoners, then I must be doing a really good job."

Maddox and the Special Task Force came to focus on one central character: Mohammed Ibrahim Omar al-Muslit, [a relative and bodyguard of Saddam](#). After about three months of interrogations, Maddox began to suspect that the guard's presence in Tikrit signaled the former dictator's proximity, so finding him became the central mission.

"We started with family members, business partners, and that eventually led to his driver," says Maddox. "On December 1 we arrested al-Muslit's driver. And he was the one who explained the entire layout—Mohammed Ibrahim was the messenger for Saddam and the insurgency."

**For the next 13 days, the driver joined Maddox on raids and even sat in on interrogations.** On December 13, they finally got the bodyguard. The man stalled at first. After a few hours, his position changed. He became adamant: "I'll take you, but we have to go right now," he told Maddox. Ibrahim knew that if he waited too long, Hussein would grow suspicious and leave and Maddox's offer—of money and relocation help—would become void.

That evening, the Special Task Force, with the support of the 1st Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division, headed out to the village of Ad Dawr about 10 miles southeast of Tikrit. At first, a search of two targeted houses came up empty, but then a force member discovered the hole in the ground that was soon beamed across TV screens around the world. In that hole sat the pathetic, unkempt figure of a deposed tyrant.

**Maddox himself didn't take part in the final raid.** Red Dawn's heavily armed force **took the former president without firing a single shot.** The news stories that circulated for weeks afterward showed pictures of Hussein captured by members of the Delta Force and infantrymen of the 4 Brigade next to the hole. **Maddox's name never came up**, nor did TV audiences learn what it had taken to get to the forlorn hideout along the Tigris. More than 300 interrogations, countless raids, and meticulous analyses of personal networks had taken up most of Maddox's six-month tour. **After Red Dawn, he continued his service in Iraq and then in Afghanistan as a civilian, conducting more than 2,700 interrogations and participating in more than 200 raids before he left the service.**



Iraqi-American Samir, pinning Saddam Hussein to the ground during his capture in 2003. Samir was the translator for the U.S. Special Forces that helped find Hussein and pull him from his hiding place

#### **THE POWER OF INTELLIGENCE**

As effective as his techniques have been in the war on terror, Maddox knows that "intelligence through empathy" has not become the historical legacy of the ongoing battle. What has surfaced since Red Dawn, instead: authorizations for water-boarding, the torture of suspects through intermediaries at black sites overseas, and the scandalous abuses of prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

**For Maddox, this happened because commanding officers lost sight of their mission** and began seeking the punishment of prisoners as a troop morale booster instead of intelligence. Those without experience in interrogation—the higher-ups—often work with false assumptions, he says.

"The problem with our policy on torture is that people who have never done any interrogations, ever," Maddox bristles, "are speaking smartly on the topic."

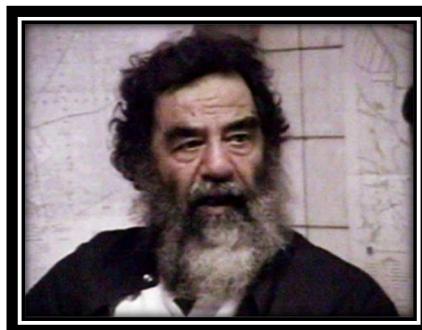
Sometimes, it was simpler than that. "If you're torturing somebody," Maddox states, "then you're just stupid."

Not that Maddox didn't know how to turn up the heat on a reticent subject. "If I got upset with a prisoner, I could cause them more problems than torture," Maddox explains. "If a prisoner wanted me to hurt them, I would start spreading rumors around the town and the prison that they're the ones who are being cooperative."

On the other hand, Maddox kept his word and delivered on promises he made to his prisoners. The bodyguard's driver received a reward of \$250,000 and was released to his family and eight children. His current whereabouts are unknown. As for Mohammed Ibrahim Omar al-Muslit, he received an early release, after which he retrieved a stash of money from a hideout in Aleppo, Syria, to build a new life as a rich man in Eastern Europe.

Staff Sergeant Eric Maddox helped locate other high-value targets using the same techniques as those that worked in Tikrit. But his later successes in Iraq and Afghanistan fade in comparison to Operation Red Dawn.

"You get Saddam Hussein," he notes dryly, "your career has peaked."



*Saddam Hussein immediately after his capture in 2003*