

# The man in the Middle East

Aaron Hagstrom talks to war correspondent turned scholar and author, Jack Fairweather, about Iraq, Afghanistan and AK-47s

Aaron Hagstrom on Monday 12th December 2011



Photograph: Jack Fairweather

The fates, the destinies, or whatever it is that brings good fortune, have certainly shone kindly upon Middle East correspondent and Oxford graduate Jack Fairweather. His rise has been meteoric; from novice 21-year-old copy editor in Calcutta to Baghdad bureau chief in three years. Confident, slim, and sun-tanned, Fairweather certainly looks the typical athletic war correspondent, yet he is currently working as a scholar — a fellow at the Harvard Center of Middle Eastern Studies and senior editor at Solutions Journal — and has just come out with his first book, 'A War of Choice: The British in Iraq 2003-9'.

I met him several weeks ago when he came from his Harvard post to give a talk at Queen's College on his book. He had to get his phone fixed, so we walked down to the repair store on New Inn Hall. On the way, he joked how these technical glitches were what every war-correspondent feared most. It was such a problem overseas that it forced him to the extremity of convincing some Afghani engineers in charge of Internet service to transmit his articles. "I would surreptitiously hand them a flash disk and it would take up to eight or nine hours," he said, laughing. After he dropped off his phone, we sat down for coffee nearby to talk about his career.

Jack Fairweather dates his first aspirations to a career as a war correspondent to a talk given by veteran South African correspondent Alec Russell at Oxford. Through a family connection with Russell and a strong recommendation from his tutor, Fairweather secured a position as copy editor of the Letters page at the Daily Telegraph in Calcutta. But it was through personal initiative in covering the 2002 terrorist attack in Calcutta — the first in thirty years — that he advanced to become a full-time feature writer for the Telegraph. "I just managed to catch it on the BBC Worldwide, so I went out and conducted some interviews, and later that day my desk manager asked me if I had any material to which I could gladly say I had."

As a novice foreign correspondent doing his first "embed" in Iraq, Fairweather said that at first he found it difficult to write about the Iraq War without the "repertoire of tropes" that more

experienced correspondents could draw upon. But veteran correspondent Patrick Bishop assisted him. "He took me under his wing and really showed me what it meant to be a war correspondent," Fairweather said.

He was astonished how Bishop could "bang out" a piece the first day they arrived in Iraq, but he soon caught on. Together they worked at an American base in the Kuwaiti desert where they set to work gathering quotes from American soldiers. Alongside Bishop, he first witnessed the sobering sight of "The Highway of Death" — a six-lane highway between Kuwait and Iraq strewn with the wrecks of charred vehicles from the Iraqi army fleeing Kuwait during the first Gulf War. This struck him as the "closest to a war crime the American military had committed since Vietnam."



In another stroke of luck, it turned out that Fairweather's mother had attended an obscure girl's school in the middle of England with Kuwaiti Princess Al-Sabab, who since had risen through the ranks of the civil service. Through Al-Sabab's influence, Fairweather was elected Kuwait correspondent for the Daily Telegraph. "I was quite fortunate in choosing Kuwait because it became a launch pad for war and really propelled me into a career as a war correspondent".

While in Kuwait, he spent six weeks during the summer of 2002 with the princess and her family before taking up his new position. "It was a wonderful way to sort out Kuwaiti society," he said. The weekend after his stay with the princess he was invited to a Kuwaiti tribal gathering. "I walked in, and all the old boys were gathered," said Fairweather, "I asked the chief whether he might welcome the chance to topple Saddam and he said, 'Well, actually we don't think war ever ended with Iraq.'"

Scribbling down the quote, he wrote up an article that earned the recognition of his mentor Alec Russell. "Alec said, 'Great story, well done,' and my career was launched on this setting theme. And I was able to do lots of stories afterwards on the impact of the First Gulf War." This privilege included the opportunity to go down to Bahrain on an American aircraft carrier where he wrote on the Iranian perspective of the Iran-Iraq War on its anniversary.

As a young correspondent in Iraq, Fairweather found the dangerous life exhilarating but also wearing. "It was a very special moment; the Iraq War was the biggest story on the planet and there was a huge appetite for it," he said. "The first two years I was there, everything you wrote would get into the paper." Fairweather covered a reconnaissance unit of the British army, "a great bunch of lads", in dangerous ranging work south of Basra. Wearing the garb and full beard of an Arab sheikh, he made it into Fallujah lying in the backseat of a car driven by his Sunni Islamic friend. In another incident, he was bundled into a truck between "two guys with AK-47s"

who turned out to be police officers warning him of the dangers of being out alone. And he was involved in a suicide attack.

“These experiences began to eat away at you at a particular point and you begin to realize how close you have been to getting into serious trouble,” Fairweather said. “And you really start to weigh story versus risk.” But there were also good things. For in the same year, he was not only elected Baghdad bureau chief of the Daily Telegraph but met his wife, all of which led to a “magical year of war-reporting.” After his Iraq tour, he worked as the Washington Post’s Islamic world correspondent reporting from such hot spots as Afghanistan.

His courage and insight is what has earned him high acclaim as a correspondent, including the Best Team Reporting award at the British Press Awards, for his work in Iraq. But now he is winning new respect as a writer, scholar, humanitarian and environmentalist. His recent book, “A War of Choice,” is a conscientious examination of the war in Iraq. Drawing on more than 400 interviews of public and private individuals, Fairweather looks at the cost of Blair’s decision to go to war. “I wanted to find a demotic voice but at the same time write a damn good page-turning book,” he explained. Besides this, Fairweather has involved himself in saving the lives of Iraqi interpreters, and has served as editor of Solutions journal — the goal of which is to offer bold ideas for solving the world’s “ecological, social, and economic problems.” It seems then the destinies had good reason to shine so kindly on Jack Fairweather; for his courageous and humane work has been both a credit to Oxford and a boon to mankind.