

A journey

From business to bullets, a mid-life decision

by Kurt Schork
REUTERS

SARAJEVO - I landed in Hong Kong on my 43rd birthday, intent on becoming a foreign correspondent. My credentials were unimpressive: no reporting experience, no contacts in Asia, minimal language skills.

The lure was adventure, and the challenge of building a new career without relying on the safety net of my twenty years in government and business. It was a humbling experience. Journalism is a guild profession with one set of rules for members and another for those on the outside — which is where I found myself.

Asia does not want for talent. Editors are swamped with queries from anxious freelancers. I soon got used to not having my calls returned. How could I complain? I had done nothing to distinguish myself from the pack.

A game plan evolved: write well from places so dangerous there would be no competition. I found plenty of dangerous spots, all filled with reporters. Many wrote circles around me. The South China Morning Post indulged my long, brooding pieces from Vietnam, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Kashmir and Afghanistan. I cracked The Washington Post, my hometown paper, with a feature on women in Pakistan.

After a year on the circuit in Asia, the Gulf War loomed. Having managed, like Bill Clinton, to go to Oxford instead of Vietnam, I was determined not to miss a second American War. Uncredentialed, I headed for the middle east, still hoping to make a name.

Three colleagues and I swam a snow-melt swollen river from Turkey into Northern Iraq in time to witness the last of the Kurdish rebellion. Swept up in the panicked flight of more than a million refugees, I decided to make Kurdistan my story. It wasn't easy. Hundreds of hacks from the world's major agencies and newspapers descended on northern Iraq. Unable to move articles, I sold photographs.

In August, after everyone had left, Reuters took me on as a stringer. Kurdistan had no phones and I had no communications gear, so I had to get to the Turkish border to file. More than



PHOTO BY CORINNE DUFKA, REUTERS

Correspondent Kurt Schork (center, holding woman's shoulders) carries an injured civilian following an artillery attack in a Sarajevo cemetery.

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once I drove 14 hours from southeastern Kurdistan to the bridge at Habor, just to send 60 lines.

My break came on October 7, 1991 in the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyah. Iraqi soldiers had been shelling the city for two days, inflicting hundreds of civilian casualties.

Enraged Kurdish peshmerga (those who go before death) guerrillas counter-attacked. Late that Monday I went in with them on an infantry assault across an open field. There was the usual hum and saw of bullets, and a sound like rustling leaves as lead ripped through knee-high crop stubble. Men were falling and dying as cries of "Allahu Akbar - God is great" drifted over the battlefield. I had never felt so alive. The Kurds captured the Iraqi garrison that day. Then they executed every prisoner — more than sixty by

my count. Some they shot point blank before my eyes, others they beat to death with the butts of their kalashnikovs. My copy and photographs from that afternoon caught Reuters attention. Soon I had a satellite telex, freeing me to roam and file at will. Kurdistan became my passion, reporting, my craft.

After 15 months in northern Iraq, Reuters sent me for a six-week stint in Kabul and then on to Sarajevo. The transition was like going from regional theater to Broadway.

Kurdistan and Afghanistan were solo efforts. Unburdened by telephones, I was on my own for days, sometimes weeks at a time. The Bosnian civil war is such a big story, everything turns on the desk. I've learned to lean on my editors for support and to anticipate their needs. It feels good to be part of a team.

War reporting is a privilege. After three years, the grime and gore of combat, the dreadful logic of ethnic hatred are no longer abstractions for me.

More important, every day I see the grace and dignity of ordinary people trying to survive under extraordinary circumstances. "Reporter," I say, when asked what I do. Only those in the business really know what I mean.