FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT

ABC Indonesia Correspondent **Matt Brown** offers a glimpse into the life of a broadcast journalist and tales of the unexpected from hotspots around the world

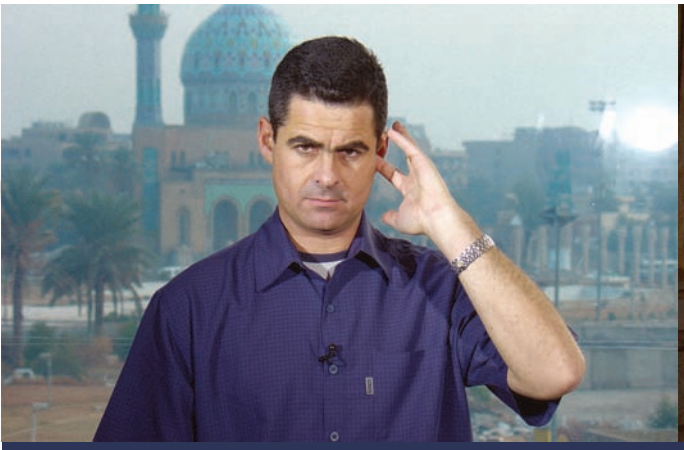
He cocked his AK-47 and waved it at my head. I didn't know enough Arabic to understand everything he said – but enough to know the Hamas militiaman wanted me out of the car. We'd organised our visit with his local commander but he and his half-dozen comrades were out of the loop, with no radios and plenty of fear and suspicion. They'd heard a rumour that Israeli Special Forces were travelling around in a battered yellow, diesel, stretch-Mercedes taxi exactly like ours.

The militiamen grew more strident but our translator saved our skins. A Palestinian doppelganger for Danny DeVito, he was a brave, well-connected and tough local journalist who leapt out of the car and promptly dressed them down, talking sense with just the right mixture of indignation and entitlement: "These guys don't have M16s and, anyway, I know your boss!"

We moved on. When we found the local commander, we filmed militiamen laying roadside bombs, interviewed their boss, did a live cross to *AM* on ABC Radio and headed home. After we crossed the bridge linking north and south Gaza a bright flash from behind us lit up the darkened roadside as the Israelis blew a hole in it with a 500lb bomb.

It was a series of terribly close calls but, in that perverse way of foreign correspondents, I was exactly where I'd always hoped I'd be: the place I'd imagined through long lectures and tutorials high up in the Tower Building of UTS. My Communication degree at UTS was an immersion in the culture of journalism.

The arguments about great writing and tough interviewing, politics, injustice, bias and 'ways of seeing' the world swirled around the concrete walled halls and Formica tables. They infused the stale air in the dark, windowless basement of the Tower Building, sustaining us through midnight shifts on the overbooked editing gear – a purgatory of poor resourcing that would prepare me well for the month-on-month night shifts of the ABC and the hallucination-inducing rigours of a sleepless life on the road.



Bearded and dread-locked, I was in my Radio Journalism class when I heard about the chance to work answering phones and making coffee on the Mike Carlton show on Sydney's radio 2GB. I'd been pumping out radio current affairs stories at 2SER for more than a year – a heady time I still consider the bedrock of my career – and figured I was ready for the challenge. I was just politic enough not to terrify the slightly whimsical executive producer with too much talk about 'alternative ways of framing the debate' and quick enough on the open-line panel to put the controversial and articulate callers to air, consigning cranks and mumblers to doom on hold. I didn't stop doing bar work but I felt like I might have made a crucial breakthrough.

A year or so later, thanks to recommendations from more than one caring tutor, I was working the night shift at ABC's Radio 2BL (702 Sydney), then freelancing documentaries for Radio National's *Background Briefing* and reading the news on Triple J.

It took another 13 years before I was appointed Middle East Correspondent. The job allowed me to escape the tightly controlled 'message of the day' world of modern media and really enjoy the basics of journalism: getting out of the office to talk to people doing extraordinary things. I quickly learned that, despite all the froth and bubble about the 'internet age', there is no substitute for 'being there' and seeing things for yourself.

That's what led me close to disaster more than once – the militiamen in Gaza were softies compared to the guy in Georgia who dragged me out of the car at gunpoint during Russia's invasion in 2008.

But I still count getting the chance to witness and interpret events first-hand as one of the great joys of this life. And, along with the dead bodies, kidnap fears and artillery, being a foreign correspondent brings real delights.

In Jerusalem I found the man doing the call to prayer at Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, and learned the job had been in his family for more than 500 years. His voice, at turns powerful, then tremulous, transformed that simple phrase, 'God is great', into something lyrical and transcendental as his words echoed out across the Old City and down the ancient, limestone valleys into East Jerusalem. He is now teaching his son the finer points of calling the faithful.

I also found living evidence of shared beliefs and mixed mythologies, the old world that fundamentalists of all hues have tried so hard to expunge. In a little church near Bethlehem I met Muslims who would come to receive miracles thanks to the saint Al Khader, also known to Christians as St George. The key to the church, turned in the mouth of one mute Muslim boy, had restored his power of speech. The sister of the Imam, who ran the mosque across the road, even managed to get pregnant after passing a sacred set of chains over her head.

The land was rich with stories and a sort of faith that rarely makes it into the headlines. In the valley down the road, the arid hills falling away down to the Dead Sea, a tattooed Bedouin woman with a hundred grandchildren, told me of the giant, green bird dwelling in the gorge below that protected the Christian monastery from devastation in an earthquake.

Now in Indonesia, I'm still on the lookout for these tales of the unexpected. Of course, I've met the counter-terror cop who delivers a speech wearing desert combat boots with a suit. But I've already found the Hindu shrine shared by Buddhists, Christians and animist-Muslims alike.

In that grey tower on Broadway I could never have guessed at the remarkable lives I'd get to witness, and I'm still amazed that so many people – then and now – have given me the chance.

photography: opposite page – Matt Brown was there for the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia

this page (clockwise from top) – live from Baghdad, 2007; the ABC's makeshift office in Saddam Hussein's old palace, 2006; ready for bed… beside piles of ammunition in western Iraq; reporting from Baghdad's Green Zone

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM © MARTINH70 (BARBED WIRE)