

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

A Stricken Land: Author and reporter Sara Daniel tells the stories of people on all sides in wartime Iraq, and she talks with Tony Kahn about her four years in the field.

Tony Kahn:

Hi, everybody, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. There are so many sides to the war in Iraq, that some people say it's probably more useful to look at it as a circle, or a vicious cycle of fear and vengeance, without any discernable beginning or end.

For four years now, the French reporter Sara Daniel, has risked her life going back and forth to Iraq from her home and her family in Paris, to tell the stories of people from every side of that war.

In today's *Morning Story*, Sara reads from the pages of her new book, *Voyage to a Stricken Land*.

[Drumbeats lead into dramatic Middle Eastern music, which continues behind Sara's voice.]

Sara Daniel:

I met him in front of the burning houses of his village. A small Arab farmer, Kamir Mohammad. The night before, Kurds set fire into the straw roofs of the houses. Some of Kamir's neighbors said "The house is on fire. Better to lose everything than to see Kurds settle in the houses."

But Kamir Mohammad couldn't bring himself to take such a desperate step. "It's my father house, the house where my children were born. Let them come and kill me here, I'm ready," he told me.

"We knew that the land belonged to Kurds", said Kamir, "and that the government confiscated it for us. But what could we do? Saying 'no' to Saddam meant saying 'yes' to death. Please, I don't want to be free, I just want to get my land back."

That morning, the Kurdish owner of Kamir's house had written his name in blue marker on the wall, "Barzan". Eight thousand men and children belonging to the Barzani tribe had been arrested one day by the Iraqi army and never been seen again. Saddam had mentioned on television they were already in Hell.

It was Rambar Rashid, a young Kurd, what pointed out the Arab houses; he now bitterly regretted having turning in his friends. Rambar and Kamir had known each other since childhood, played soccer together, and talked about their plans for the future. "Kamir is my brother", explained Rambar. "Of course, this is Kurdish land, but

the Peshmurga [a Kurdish military group] beat his brother and stole his car. Why do they have to go through all this?" he asked mournfully.

That night, to avoid Peshmurga violence, Kamir would spent the night at Rambar's house, even though their families were at each other's throat. I was overwhelmed. Time had come to tear myself away from this stricken land and go back to my family.

Tony Kahn:

That was Sara Daniel reading to us for today's Morning Story from her new book about the four years she spent in Iraq, called *Voyage to a Stricken Land*. I ran into Sara a few weeks ago, when she was in New York, once again briefly, between trips to Iraq.

Sara Daniel:

I've been interviewing so many people who are dead now; that's a, a curse you have to get used to when you work in Iraq. Sometimes it's, it's a question of minute, of hours that I escaped some awful scenes. One time I, I interviewed Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, one of the possible president of Iraq, and he asked me to come with him the following morning for the prayer at the Najaf mosque. And this big blast happened and I think 300 people were killed. I escaped, ah, ah, well, ah... being killed....

[Slower, meditative, Middle Eastern music can now be heard in the background.]

Tony Kahn:

What don't you escape when something like that happens?

Sara Daniel:

When, when you come back, and you have all these recurrent images of death and, and sorrow and you have nightmares and... you know, at some point, I guess, the body has to say that, that it's enough, so you just lay hopeless- hopelessly in bed, and wait till you get better.

Tony Kahn:

At least, I think, sixty reporters have already been killed in Iraq. Why do you keep going back there, especially given the anxieties and the concerns of your, your friends and your family?

Sara Daniel:

Lots of reasons. I know a lot the Arabic mentality and the Arab world. I spent a lot of my childhood there, and I felt I could explain who were the others, and try to fill the gap. And then also you, you feel a sense of responsibility towards the friends you have there and you left with the Iraqis and also with the soldiers, sort of another family and you can't let them down. Very, very strong feeling. You forget about the outside world, and your world is, is just what you see and what you experience and how you

try to, to survive, to find food sometimes, and to plant your tent, to, to file your story, and, and life is so tough that nothing outside exists.

[Music returns...]

Tony Kahn:

You called your daughter often as you could. What would those conversations be like?

Sara Daniel:

She is very little, so we, the conversations, it's more songs that I sing when she's going to bed, or, I mean, I'm not telling her what I'm experiencing there, fortunately for her. She has a, a lot of family around her, and I think she has a strong mentality, and she understood that it was important for me to do this job and to, ah... it was somehow important.... One thing I, I was, I couldn't stand, was to see children wounded or ... I remember one time, was really tough, it was after the battle of Falujah and there was this tiny child, maybe two or three years, and all his family was, was dead, twenty relatives, ten brothers, and every one of them was dead, and he was cuddled by his uncle, who was very tender and gentle to this little, ah, little kid. And I learned afterwards that his uncle, he was put - he was put in jail, so this kid had nobody, and, and I have this memory of him covered in bandage and lying in, in a hospital in Baghdad... [a woman's voice joins the music in the background] that's a tough memory...

It was frustrating for everyone, for, for the soldiers who believed in this war, it, it, it was very tough on them, of course. You-you've been through tough situations and sometimes, when you come back, you can't explain them, and sometimes you don't want to explain them, because that's not nice memories. Everything is so amazingly surprising in Iraq, and you lose the sense of astonishment, and you take for granted things.

I've met some incredible people in Iraq, and some heroes. I mean, there are lots of good wills and good people, and that's what brings hope - all those people - that you could find those people in those situations. But it's not enough, unfortunately, the corruption, the politics, the, the greed for power has overtaken everything. [music swells, then fades out]

Tony Kahn:

I'm here in the studio with Gary Mott.

Gary Mott:

So she has these conversations with her young daughter in France...

Tony Kahn:

Who's about five or six years old, yeah...

Gary Mott:

It's important, what she's doing...

Tony Kahn:

Right.

Gary Mott:

Why is it important to her to get these stories out?

Tony Kahn:

Because she has to? She has no choice in the matter. She really opened my eyes to that. She says, "You know, you get attached, you owe something to the people that you're with." She tells stories, OK, so that's why she goes back... to find the stories, but she also goes back to them and she says it's such a heartbreak, that so many of the people that she does form attachments to, are not alive the next time she goes back to Iraq.

Gary Mott:

I'm fascinated to find out how she got access to insurgents.

Tony Kahn:

[Murmurs agreement.] And members of al-Qaeda. She identified herself as a journalist. She really went there to hear from people about why they were doing what they were doing. And she puts all of their stories together and she does not take sides. Like most acts of courage, she couldn't live with herself if, if she did otherwise.

Gary Mott:

That's why we do *Morning Stories*.

Tony Kahn:

[Laughing] Well, you know, it's moments like this where I'm not happy to be the bearer of a story like this, but I really am proud of the fact that we can get stories like this, and that we can pass them on and, and hear stories from others in response, and while on the subject of gratitude, I express our gratitude, as always, to Ipswitch, who've been our funders from the start of this podcast, pretty much. Leaders in file transfer software at <I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H.com> and also our thanks to the people who have gone to our website and who have clicked and made contributions. There are eight of you heroes out there already...

[They chuckle]

Gary Mott:

At least eight...

Tony Kahn:

At least eight, so thanks a lot!

Gary Mott:

<wgbh.org/morningstories> There's a wealth of stuff to listen to and see.

Tony Kahn:

Check in to say "Hi", and we'll see you soon.

[Drums lead as the music returns in the background]

Sara Daniel:

I, I, I will go back. But... the next time I, I'm going to prepare very carefully my trip... take less chances... writing this book have made me realize that sometimes I went too far.

Tony Kahn:

Count me among the people concerned about you until you get back.

Sara Daniel:

Thank you, that's very nice of you!

[Music takes on a foreboding tone as it fades out.]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Dan Snyder

Notes from transcriber:

Sara's description of the tragic friendship of Rambar and Kamir reminded me so much of Tommy Sands' evocative song "And There Were Roses". Set far from Iraq, in Northern Ireland, this song strikes the same sad chord about war's effects on friends and friendship.

<http://www.tommysands.com/>

My song for you this evening, it's not to make you sad
Nor for adding to the sorrows of this troubled northern land,
But lately I've been thinking and it just won't leave my mind
I'll tell you of two friends one time who were both good friends of mine.

Allan Bell from Banagh, he lived just across the fields,

A great man for the music and the dancing and the reels.
O'Malley came from South Armagh to court young Alice fair,
And we'd often meet on the Ryan Road and the laughter filled the air.

There were roses, roses
There were roses
And the tears of the people
Ran together.

Though Allan, he was Protestant, and Sean was Catholic born,
It never made a difference for the friendship, it was strong.
And sometimes in the evening when we heard the sound of drums
We said, "It won't divide us. We always will be one."

For the ground our fathers plowed in, the soil, it is the same,
And the places where we say our prayers have just got different names.
We talked about the friends who died, and we hoped there'd be no more.
It's little then we realized the tragedy in store.

It was on a Sunday morning when the awful news came round.
Another killing has been done just outside Newry Town.
We knew that Allan danced up there, we knew he liked the band.
When we heard that he was dead we just could not understand.

We gathered at the graveside on that cold and rainy day,
And the minister he closed his eyes and prayed for no revenge.
All all of us who knew him from along the Ryan Road,
We bowed our heads and said a prayer for the resting of his soul.

Now fear, it filled the countryside. There was fear in every home
When a car of death came prowling round the lonely Ryan Road.
A Catholic would be killed tonight to even up the score.
"Oh, Christ! It's young O'Malley that they've taken from the door."

"Allan was my friend," he cried. He begged them with his fear,
But centuries of hatred have ears that cannot hear.
An eye for an eye was all that filled their minds
And another eye for another eye till everyone is blind.

So my song for you this evening, it's not to make you sad
Nor for adding to the sorrows of our troubled northern land,
But lately I've been thinking and it just won't leave my mind.
I'll tell you of two friends one time who were both good friends of mine.

I don't know where the moral is or where this song should end,
But I wondered just how many wars are fought between good friends.
And those who give the orders are not the ones to die.
It's Bell and O'Malley and the likes of you and I.

There were roses, roses
There were roses

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