

Discovering a mass grave in Iraq, 2003

Introduction

Mark Rickert wrote this e-mail while serving as a journalist with the 372nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment in Iraq. On this day, he and his group were investigating rumors of a mass grave. The letter is written to his grandfather, Merle Kilgore, who was a friend and manager of Hank Williams, Jr. The following is an exclusive excerpt from the Simon and Schuster audiobook *Behind the Lines* by Andrew Carroll, read by Hank Williams, Jr.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and the transcript of the email. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. How would you describe the emotions of the author of this email from the time the two Iraqis approached until the grim discovery?
2. Why was it important that photographs were taken at the scene?
3. How did the events in this email support the saying “war is hell”?

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Transcript

Mark Rickert to Merle Kilgore, September 14, 2003. (Andrew Carroll / The Legacy Project)

September 14th, 2003

Hey Daddy Merle,
... We started packing up the convoy when two Iraqis walked onto the compound waving at us (they must have seen the shovels.) We couldn't understand what they were saying, but when they pointed us to a mound near the main road, the CID agents grabbed their shovels and headed over to the area. Until that point we'd been talking and joking around, but when the agents started digging, an uneasy silence fell over everyone there. The wind started blowing hot sand in our faces, and that old Iraqi watched with his hands folded behind his back. A few of us wondered if his kin were buried there.

I started taking pictures. When they pulled a femur bone from the hole I almost dropped my camera. One of the agents pulled out a skull and held it up. There was a bullet hole directly between its eye sockets. They even found the slug that killed the victim. It was flattened out and about the size of a quarter.

They dug up bones for the next hour and unearthed the skeletal remains of two bodies. The reason they do this is to document war crimes. There's a forensic science officer on the team who assesses the evidence and looks for war atrocities. At this point, it was too early for them to say whether this was a war crime or not, and it takes three bodies to make it a legitimate "mass" gravesite. But the eerie part was what the forensics officer said when he showed us the skull and the slug that had shattered it: "This guy took one between the eyes. He knew what his killer looked like."

That made it all clear somehow. These bones belonged to someone who had a life once, who had a family and people who loved him, only to be shot in the face and buried in the middle of the desert without a headstone or any trace that he ever existed.

Take care of yourself Daddy Merle.
Your grandson,
Mark