

The Unseen Gulf War

Peter Turnley

As we all know, the military pool system created for Operation Desert Storm was meant to be, and was, a major impediment for photojournalists in their quest to communicate the realities of war (This fact does not diminish the great efforts, courage, and many important images created by many of my colleagues who participated in these pools.). Aside from that, while you would have a very difficult time finding an editor of an American publication today that wouldn't condemn this pool system and its restrictions during the Gulf War, most publications and television entities more or less bought the program before the war began (this reality has been far less discussed than the critiques of the pools themselves).

I refused to participate in the pool system. I was in the Gulf for many weeks as the build-up of troops took place, and then sat out the "air war", and flew from Paris to Riyadh as soon as the ground war began. I arrived at the "mile of death" the morning the day the war stopped. It was very early in the morning and few other journalists were present. When I arrived at the scene of this incredible carnage, strewn all over on this mile stretch were cars and trucks with wheels still turning, radios still playing, and there were bodies scattered along the road. Many people have asked the question "how many people died" during the war with Iraq and the question has never been well answered. That first morning, I saw and photographed a U.S. Military "graves detail" bury in large graves many bodies.

I don't recall seeing many television images of the human consequences of this scene, or for that matter many photographs published. A day later, I came across another scene on an obscure road further north and to the east where, in the middle of the desert, I found a convoy of lorries transporting Iraqi soldiers back to Baghdad, where clearly massive fire power had been dropped and everyone in sight had been carbonized. Most of the photographs I made of this scene have never been published anywhere and this has always troubled me.

As we approach the distinct possibility of another war, a thought comes to mind. The photographs that I made do not, in themselves, represent any personal political judgment or point of view with respect to the politics and the right or wrong of the first Gulf War. What they do represent is a part of a more accurate picture of what really does happen in war. I feel it is important and that citizens have the right to see these images. This is not to communicate my point of view, but so viewers as citizens can be offered a better opportunity to consider the whole picture and consequences of that war and any war. I feel that it is part of my role as a photojournalist to offer the viewer the opportunity to draw from as much information as possible, and develop his or her own judgment.

This past war and any one looming, have often been treated as something akin to a "Nintendo game?". This view conveniently obscures the vivid and often grotesque realities apparent to those directly involved in war. As a witness to the results of this past Gulf War, this televised, aerial, and technological version of the conflict is not what I saw and I'd like to present some images that I made that represent a more complete picture of what this conflict looked like.

War is at best a necessary evil, and I am certain that anyone that feels differently has never experienced or been in it. I have always hoped that true images of conflict give one the opportunity to witness and reflect more fully on the full realities of war. After covering many conflicts around the world in past 20 years and witnessing much human suffering, I feel a responsibility to try to contribute to making sure with my images that no one that sees the brutal realities of conflict, ever feels that war is comfortable and/or convenient.

I would like to propose that we discuss a portfolio of these difficult images now, as a future war in Iraq grows more likely every passing day. I look forward to hearing from you..

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