

Commentary

The killing fields of Iraq

A personal account of the discovery of one mass grave

SOUTHWEST ASIA — Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, there have been bone-chilling discoveries, almost on a daily basis, of the atrocities committed by the former Baath party. These grisly reminders come in the form of mass graves dotting the landscape in more numbers than anyone cares to imagine. At last count, there are more than 270 reported mass graves with more than 50 of them verified by international forensic teams.

I became involved with the Iraqi mass graves during my first stint of duty in Baghdad during 2003. I was a spectral analyst with the Coalition Provisional Authority space support cell. One of the agencies we supported was the Ministry of Human Rights, which had been given the daunting task of assessing and verifying reported Iraqi mass graves. We were initially tasked with providing high-resolution imagery and mapping support to the team for site survey planning.

On my second deployment with the team, we were doing a geologic analysis of a site. The forensic archeologists were performing their analysis consisting of a small trench dug across the suspected grave. Over the last 19

years in the Air Force, I've had a lot of odd jobs in some obscure places, but none of that prepared me for what I was about to see.

I volunteered to help dig the trench while taking detailed notes to support future analysis. As we got further in depth, we noticed a definite change in the color of the

by Master Sgt. Richard Burch



The remains of a life cut short by Saddam Hussein's soldiers are uncovered in a mass grave with the help of spectral imagery from Space and Missile Defense Command. The number of Iraqi and foreign victims of his regime is estimated anywhere from 100,000 to 400,000 people, touching almost every person's life in the region.

soil along with a discernable odor. Not a stench, just a stale metallic smell possibly caused by the high concentration of localized iron-oxidation.

At that point, the archeologists took over the dig and uncovered small bones and brightly colored clothing. The results of their analysis came out as dry as a reading of the Sunday news, yet as clear as a bell to this day.

"One immature human femur, one

immature human pelvis — estimate based on bone length approximately 5 to 6 years in age," one archeologist said.

"WHAT?" I replied with a huge lump in my throat "You mean a child?"

The answer came back as dry as the last. "Yes, and based on the clothing, I'd say it's a female."

My head was spinning. A little girl, in a bright, purple flowered dress with gold ribbon. Then more unwelcome information.

"Looks like they had her hands bound," the archeologist said while holding up what was probably her pink hair ribbon used as a makeshift binding.

That was it for me. I had to go for a walk. Luckily, they decided they wouldn't disturb the site any further and started back-filling the trench. If I live to be a hundred years old, I'll never forget my feelings or the scenarios that still run through my head.

I have a lifetime's worth of experiences and memories from this deployment, from the places I've traveled and sights I've seen, to the people I've met and the lasting friendships I'll savor. But the one memory I wish I could forget is that of the pretty little dress with the gold ribbon buried in one of the many killing fields of Iraq.

— Master Sgt. Richard Burch
Spectral Operations Resource