

ANNA ECKHOFF

A  
NEW  
BEGINNING

LIFE ON THE FRONTLINES

LINJE H

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*A New Beginning*

*Life on the frontlines*

by Anna Eckhoff and Line Zahll

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# IRAQ





## CHAPTER 3

# TURNING POINT

### Iraq 2006

The noon heat had settled over the desert state of Kuwait.

Iraq's border country whizzed by outside as I drove the car alone through the dusty landscape where the desert temperatures reached close to 122 degrees Fahrenheit. Some distance from the border, I pulled over, put on the big, gray winter jacket from Denmark, and stuffed dollar bills into my pockets. I distributed the banknotes as best I could and set the car in motion towards the Iraqi border.

I had just turned fifty-nine, and though I was both a mother of six and a grandmother, I had once again gone on an adventure. A few months ago, I was swimming with retirees. Now I was smuggling American dollars into Iraq a couple of times a month.

Only a few months after the greatest diplomatic crisis in recent times between Denmark and several Arab countries in the Middle East, I traveled to Iraq with the usual sense of danger and excitement. The Muhammad crisis, in which the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper had published twelve satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, gave Denmark an unusually unfortunate leading role on the international stage.

On the news, we heard about the closure of Danish embassies and saw pictures of large demonstrations of angry Muslims burning the Danish flag in protest and cursing all Danes. It was a period when every Dane in the Middle East made sure to keep a very low

profile. And here I was, on my way to the second-most dangerous country in the world; not as an actor in a spy movie, though at times it felt like that, but for my job as the head of administration in the Danish Demining Group (DDG). My predecessor had the task of transporting money across the border, so I did, too. All our financial transactions were in cash because it was too dangerous to have a bank account in Basra, Iraq's second-largest city, which is about 300 miles from the capital Baghdad. Since certain groups in the country saw us as a kind of occupying power, our local employees would risk their lives if they were connected to us through their bank accounts. Also, a lot of counterfeit money was in circulation in Iraq, so in an attempt to keep our safe free of counterfeit money, we paid out only precise amounts. That way we didn't get fake money in return. And that's why I drove to Kuwait once or several times a month, returning home to the camp with my pockets full of small dollar bills. They really filled out the jacket.

I have no idea what the border officials thought when they saw me coming, driving on my own through the desert landscape in my big, thick winter jacket, which felt suffocating in the scorching heat. Maybe they thought I was trying to cover my arms, as the Muslim women do. Whatever they thought, I was pretty sure they knew who I was and what I was doing. But the male border guards couldn't physically search a woman. As long as they didn't have a female employed as a border official, and as long as I had all the money on me, I was protected. That is also why I wasn't nervous. At least, not in the beginning.

★ ★ ★

I wasn't finished with traveling the world after Sudan. Rather the opposite. Even though my stay there ended badly, I learned a lot—in particular how to act when I was part of a small, isolated group at the end of the world.

I got a job as the head of administration in the Basra province in Iraq for the DDG, which was part of the Danish Refugee Council.

A job where I would be in mortal danger if I left camp. I was the only Dane working in an NGO in southern Iraq because after the Muhammad crisis, it was dangerous to be a Dane living in these areas. So when Maria, a Swedish nurse, came and collected me in Kuwait and helped me to Iraq, all of the Danish flags, stickers or words that could in any way connect us with Denmark were removed from our clothes.

Maria knew the passport office workers on the Iraqi side, and they seemed happy to see her. The inspector looked curiously at my beetroot-colored passport and asked me to pay to get my visa, which was valid for ten days.

There was a lot of corruption at the border crossing between Kuwait and Iraq. The border officials and the top manager especially had to pay a lot of money to get a job at the border crossing. In return, there were huge sums of money to be gleaned through corruption and unofficial charges from the many trucks that crossed the border. The government in Baghdad was unable to prevent corruption in the Basra province where various militia groups had seized power. The militia were irregular troops with no command lines to the Iraqi state leadership that had come to power after the invasion in 2003. They collected protection money, kidnapped, raped, tortured, and killed; the lawlessness in Basra was immense.

Maria was charming and good at talking to the border police. I kept a close eye on how she did it, so I could learn from her. We both had bare legs and short-sleeved dresses that just covered the knee but no scarf around our heads. As we drove through the Iraqi border town of Safwan, I could see that all the other women were wearing long, black dresses and were covered in scarves. They looked like Catholic nuns. Maria wasn't nervous about our Western attire, and I actually think it was an advantage for us, too. With our looks, we couldn't pretend to be Iraqis, and it most likely gave us a special status and some privileges at the border.

When we finally entered Iraqi soil, we were greeted by four vehicles from my new organization and their security personnel who

wore bulletproof vests and carried AK-47 machine guns over their shoulders.

I wore a bulletproof vest, too, despite it being terribly heavy and not at all as stylish or modern as the one Jack Bauer wore in the TV series *24*. It did not give me the feeling of being protected, especially because a roadside bomb could hit the underside of a car.

We were surrounded by sand, and it felt hot and dry. Herds of dromedary camels walked in the sand along the road as we drove to camp in the armored car.

DDG's camp was located between Basra and the border with Kuwait, about an hour's drive from the Danish military base Camp Danevang. It was surrounded by a high wall with lookout posts and armed guards in each corner like a cowboy fort in an old Western movie. Arctic Response, the Canadian security company in charge of security at the camp, had hired about 100 Iraqi guards. They took turns guarding the camp and going out into the field to protect the de-miners as they searched for cluster bombs and unexploded ammunition from the past three wars in Iraq.

It began back in 1980 when Iraq invaded Iran. Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim, came to power in 1979 during a coup in Baghdad and appointed himself president. His leadership was characterized by a consistent centering of all fiscal and political power in himself and a narrow circle of staff, many of whom were from his own family. There were often purges and executions among his close associates, but time and time again, he succeeded in mobilizing new supporters and maintaining full political control over the country.

The invasion of Iran should have been a quick victory due to the weakening of Iran's military after its religious leadership executed or retired thousands of officers. In the first year, Iraq seemed to withdraw victoriously from the war, but when the retired officers were ordered back into the Iranian military, the tide of the war began to turn, and the war dragged on. It lasted until 1988 and cost millions of lives.

After the war against Iran, Iraq lacked money. Therefore, in 1990, Iraq invaded the small but oil-rich neighboring country of Kuwait. However, that led to a U.S. bombing and later invasion of both Kuwait and parts of Iraq. Soldiers from the American coalition stopped when they reached 150 miles from Baghdad. It seemed that the United States could have easily conquered the capital but dropped their plans for fear of how long an invasion of the entire country would keep the Americans stationed in Iraq. Therefore, American President George H. W. Bush declared a ceasefire in 1991.

But Baghdad wasn't forgotten. The conquest of the city came twelve years later during the Iraq War. A coalition led by the United States invaded the country. The United States saw Iraq as a threat because the regime allegedly ordered the making of weapons of mass destruction in the wake of 9/11. The invasion overthrew dictator Saddam Hussein's regime, but also left the country without a strong government and, thus, in a vacuum where political, religious, and military groups fought for power in the various regions of Iraq.

We worked in that chaos. That is why all of our guards here were armed with AK-47s, and I think the security costs accounted for about 50 percent of the total budget. This period was considered the most dangerous after the invasion of Iraq, and in practice, there was civil war in southern Iraq.

The greatest luxury in the camp was our swimming pool. It was officially called a *water reservoir*, as our donors would hardly accept that we had spent money on a pool. When the temperature hit 104-130 degrees Fahrenheit, it was great to jump in the water, and when I was free from work or on the weekends, I usually lay for an hour or two on a pool float with a book. We also had a chef. Having a chef might sound nice, but the truth was that he was lousy at making food for us. Perhaps because he didn't keep an eye on whether the food had expired.

There was also a shelter with a bar and movie theater. Here, we could watch movies and TV or have a party. Our program manager

was in charge of the food when we had a party, and we picked up the drinks on the weekends when we visited the Danish military camp.

We also had a clinic where our doctor, Dr. Yousef, and Maria stayed, and where medicine was distributed, and local Iraqis could get help. Maria and I had fun together. We both wore Western clothes in the camp, and every time we had to cross the border, we defied the militia and the orders to cover up. We also planned sightseeing trips and had such exciting excursion ideas that they made the security advisers nervous.

Every morning, international and Iraqi de-miners drove out in their vehicles to search for cluster bombs and unexploded ammunition from the wars in Iraq. At the exit to the camp, the international de-miners were given a pistol to place under their seat so it was always on hand in case they were surprised by anyone. Civilians, of course, were not supposed to be armed, but Iraq was a dangerous country, and our security team took no chances.

That is also why we had so many security people on staff, and one day, a job application with a familiar name came into Arctic Response. It was from DeWet, whom I fired in Sudan. Now, he had found out that I was employed in the camp. Arctic Response hired him, and after a while, I started taking him with me when I smuggled money.

Near us, Ronco—a commercial demining company—had a camp where there were shooting ranges. We went there for a weekend, and I laid down on my stomach or perched on my knees to shoot at a target as shots echoed across the sandy ground.

Despite 100 local guards guarding the camp with machine guns, the chief of the security advisers was concerned. If the camp came under heavy attack, he expected they would throw aside their guns and flee. Therefore, we needed to learn to protect ourselves, too.

I fired with both single shots and automatic salvos, which until then, I had only known from American action movies. I learned to separate a rifle and the names of the different parts.

There are probably not many Danish grandmothers who have had that pleasure, but it was actually quite fun. And it was fascinating to shoot with the famous—or infamous—AK-47.

## **Denmark 2001**

“I have always dreamed of seeing the world. Of working abroad,” I said, looking at Lars Sidenius.

The Danish actor had gray streaks in his short hair. The teachers had put us together. Maybe because we had good chemistry. Perhaps because they could see that he was the only one who could get through to me.

I was on a course in Gestalt therapy on the small island of Orø in Denmark to get better at collaborating, communicating, and dealing with emotions. The course was paid for by my Danish employer, Datacentralen, now called CSC, because whenever I was in the middle of a conflict, or whenever my boss held hour-long meetings where he talked constantly, I would leave.

Now we were supposed to tell each other about our dreams for the future. The others sat on chairs around us, observing us silently, while Lars asked what I wanted to do with my life.

“But it’s not going to happen,” I continued. “A mother of six can’t leave her family. Most of my kids might be grown and are able to fend for themselves, but I can’t leave the two youngest girls. They have already lost their father; they shouldn’t lose their mother, too. It’s my duty as a parent to take care of my children, and that should be my first priority.”

It was like hearing my own mother speak. I wasn’t to let my children down, even though the youngest ones would soon be old enough to fend for themselves. John was no longer there to stop my longing, but the kids were. The family had become my obstacle.

Lars looked me in the eye. He was the same age as me, but his life had followed a different path than mine. While I felt trapped as a widow with six children, he was an actor and a bachelor who rode a motorcycle and was as free as a bird.

“Your children are old enough to be without their mother for a period of time,” he said.

“But I’m not just the mother of six. I’m a widow, too. Fifty-four years old and swiftly heading for the age where I should be reducing my ambitions and settling for the excitement I feel when I read crime novels.”

“What’s holding you back?” he continued.

“I can’t leave my family and my home to start a new career far away from home, and what am I supposed to do out there? I am neither a doctor, a nurse nor an officer, and who is going to hire a woman my age?” I protested and continued: “I am the only breadwinner in a family with a house and a summer cottage. I can’t go off galivanting to a developing country as a volunteer or work for a low salary. There has to be a financial safety net for my family, and it’s my job to provide it. And I don’t know if I have the courage to break the norm that says a mother doesn’t leave her children.”

Lars looked at me seriously. Life experience had settled on his face, especially around the eyes that brought alive the characters he played on TV. He was a fascinating person who spoke passionately about dreams and about why we should always go after them.

“Anna, your children are old enough to fend for themselves. You can still provide for the children even if you live abroad. Do you want to live your entire life without fulfilling the dream you have always had?”

He had said the words. I barely registered the teacher saying it was the next pair’s turn now. I just had to get out. Get some fresh air.

I got up, walked past the chairs, opened the door, and looked for a place where no one could see me. I immediately spotted the red barn and walked towards it. I sat down behind it and let it all out. The tears, the thoughts, the longing. I sobbed and sobbed. It all came flowing out. In one moment, Lars had turned my whole world upside down. It was as if something deep inside me was loosening, and I didn’t even notice the teacher until she was standing next to me, looking worried.

“Is there something wrong?”

I wiped away the tears, but my cheeks were quickly drenched again.

“It’s a relief,” I explained.

I now knew it was possible. Lars had just given me the ethical permission that I hadn’t been able to give myself. It was okay. It wasn’t wrong of me. I could go. Live my dream.

He was perhaps the only one I would listen to. The only one who could get through to me, for he wasn’t trapped by limitations. He lived his own life, and that gave his words a completely different weight. I was welcome to go after my dreams and give in to the longing I always had. As I stood looking out at the field in front of me, all my doubts disappeared. And in that moment, I made a decision. If I was ever going to pursue that dream, it had to be now.

### **Iraq 2006-2007**

Pictures of mines and drawings of Iraqis passing a mine while working in the field hung on the board. One of our Iraqi employees had hung it up.

We went to a village school close to the camp to talk to the school children about not picking up mines from the ground and explained what to do. In the younger classes, both boys and girls sat at worn school desks, but as they got older, the girls had to stay home. Their families thought there was no reason for them to go to school if they had to take care of the men at home anyway.

I sat, the only white person, on a small, rickety chair in the back row under a big black hat. It was nice to get out. I had been out in the field several times with the de-miners because I loved to experience new things, but we were not allowed to go to shops or visit people at home, so this was the first time I was meeting Iraqis outside the camp.

The teacher was done, and we walked around to the tables and handed out backpacks and pencils to the kids. They smiled and laughed and surrounded me.

“What do you do?” they eagerly asked in Arabic because I was a foreigner. I enjoyed feeling their joy and curiosity about the world, and I smiled and answered their questions.



As I drove across the border into Iraq, I talked and flirted with the border guards. Sometimes they lined up to take a picture with me. They probably wondered what this older woman was doing driving all on her own in the middle of the desert in a short-sleeved summer dress or in a thick winter jacket. For them, it must have been a sensational and possibly a little daring or taboo-breaking sight. Some might think that I didn't show respect for their culture, but it was a conscious choice. As long as they were preoccupied with that, they didn't think about why I was there or what I had in my pockets.

We usually had to pay a fee of 20,000 Iraqi dinars for a visa when we crossed the border into Iraq or if our visa had expired and we were going back to Kuwait. The amount was right at the top limit of what we should pay, but we didn't say anything because we didn't want to be on bad terms with the border police. If they felt offended by us, it would be easy for them to call the militia, and we could risk being kidnapped or falling victim to a roadside bomb. That is why I was always very kind and smiled at the border police, who in practice were kind of organized militia.

It wasn't just the border police I had to flatter from time to time. In countries like Iraq, Sudan, and Kuwait, you have to play the game of all the authorities a little. I quickly learned that I had a particular talent for persuading civil servants and government officials to help us get things through, and I easily made “friends” among those in command. Many of them were older men who appreciated that I spoke politely to them and asked for their advice and guidance instead of demanding action.

Every time I needed help dealing with a problem, I thought the matter through beforehand. Who could help, and how should

I approach it? If I, as a foreigner, demanded that they had to do something immediately, it would end in a deadlock, and then the case processing could drag on for a very long time. I fully understood that reaction. I had my own irritation at being on the receiving end of orders, and my years of aversion to authorities made my approach to the officials completely different.

Western countries often come to issue orders to other countries on what to do and how to become democratic or “like us,” and it is not always certain that it is wisest to become “like us.”

I think my age was an advantage, too. I didn’t seem intimidating to them, and we could talk more equally to each other than if I had been very young. Sometimes I also brought them little gifts, like chocolate or a book about Danish royal castles, if we had talked about Denmark. My flair for dealing with authorities or border police became one of my core skills that benefited me and my missions many times. In Iraq, too.

In the fall of 2007, we had problems at the border. The Iraqi border authorities suddenly demanded both more money and that we should get a visa from the Iraqi embassy and not from the border crossing as we did before. If crossing the border was a problem, it could endanger the entire program.

According to our program manager, Iraq had to decide whether they wanted de-mining and NGOs in the country, or whether we should travel home and leave the dangerous explosives on the spot. I decided to contact one of my “friends” at the authorities in Kuwait. He was the head of the Human Services Center in Kuwait, as well as the former Chief of Staff of the Kuwait Army, and it was he who helped organizations obtain visas for Kuwait, so perhaps he could also help obtain them for Iraq. He was happy to help, and he contacted the Iraqi Embassy in Kuwait and arranged a meeting for me.

In late October, I entered the reception room of the Iraqi Embassy in Kuwait where many Iraqis were sitting, waiting. After a short time, I was called in to a high-ranking person’s office.

“I have to ask government officials in Baghdad if I can issue visas to you because we have never actually done that before,” he explained kindly.

Again, I was thankful for my good relationship with our general in Kuwait who helped me get in touch with the spokesperson for Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki in Baghdad. In the end, the spokesperson flew to Kuwait and ensured that the Iraqi embassy could issue visas to us in the future. He signed a letter that we were to show at the border checkpoint, and the problem was solved. Imagine, he had come all that way to help us. I was very proud to have handled the problem myself, and I kept the letter for border control, which the Prime Minister’s spokesperson personally signed. It was one of my best souvenirs.



Marzipan flowers stood between the candles on the two cakes.

There was no room for sixty candles, so nine shone from the chocolate cake with white whipped cream on top. I usually didn’t feel that my birthday was worth celebrating, but today, there was reason to celebrate.

Not just because the local Iraqis had bought cans of Pepsi and the cakes with their own pay and wrapped up Iraqi figurines as gifts to celebrate my birthday. That in and of itself was amazing. The day was also a milestone. Some may get a lump in their throat when they approach the end of their working life, but for me, it meant that I could finally quit my job in Denmark, which I had been on leave from. My sixty years meant that I could receive early retirement if my adventure abroad ended, and I had to move back to Denmark. Knowing that security was there was nice.

At the same time, I had started to feel that there was so much more waiting for me here in the second part of my life. I was probably the oldest employee, but also one of the most inexperienced, so I was curious. I always wanted to be part of whenever other people were going out and experiencing something new. And I felt

strong. I put on my shorts in the morning or afternoon and ran 5-10 miles around the camp, even when the temperature reached 122 degrees Fahrenheit. Many times, I was accompanied by Dr. Yousef, a doctor in the camp who taught the Samaritans working with the de-miners. He was in his mid-fifties, and we gradually became good friends. He was a handsome man with a large mustache, and he always wore a tie.

He was not a big runner, but he still joined me as I ran around the camp for the company. He was a very intellectual man who gave me a captivating insight into all the historical sites and fascinating sides of Iraq and the Middle East outside of the camp. I absorbed all the cultural and historical details of Iraq and the history of Babylon. One day, he told me that Abraham, who is the ancestor of the people of Israel, and who can be read about in both the Bible and the Koran, was reportedly born in Ur, just 24 miles from where we lived. Another day, he explained that many believed that Eden with the tree of Adam, where Adam and Eve had lived, lay just north of Basra.

On the jogs, I also gained insight into his medical practice. Short of breath, he told me about the Iraqi women who sometimes came for help if they had been with a man before their marriage. In Iraq, women are not allowed to have sex with men before marriage. If it happens anyway and they are discovered, the woman may have a hard time getting married, so some doctors operate on these women to recreate their virginity. And he recounted, with sweat on his forehead, how he had operated on up to 7,000 victims a year during the war between Iran and Iraq. Dr. Yousef had been appointed chief physician at Basra's military hospital by Saddam Hussein. I don't know how or why it came up, because he would rather not talk about it, but I do know that he eventually got into trouble and that Saddam Hussein placed him under house arrest.

I read that the regime forced some doctors, particularly in southern Iraq, to take part in crimes against humanity. I don't know exactly what crimes were involved, or whether Dr. Yousef was involved, but he felt in danger and was very afraid that someone would kill him. That fear was real.

While Saddam Hussein was in power, doctors who left Iraq were severely punished, and therefore few doctors traveled. Dr. Yousef always talked about the militias assassinating doctors in Iraq, and so, he dreamed of seeking asylum in another country where he would be and could feel safe.

DDG wanted the local employees to have access to further education or training. There was a major medical conference in Kuwait scheduled for early March 2007: The First Medical Exhibition and Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq. Here, Iraqi doctors would be updated on the latest medical science. Medical specialists from all over the world were to give lectures, and it was expected that several hundred Iraqi doctors would attend.

We were going to try to get Dr. Yousef to the conference, even though it could be difficult to get an Iraqi across the border. Many countries refused to accept Iraqis for fear that they would run away and seek asylum. My ability to play naïve and talk to the border officials, who eventually got to know this slightly strange foreigner in a summer dress, made me one of the best people to get others through border control. Therefore, it was decided that I should go along to help Dr. Yousef across the border. At the same time, I could withdraw money from the bank.

Dr. Yousef's passport was out-of-date, but I persuaded passport control to allow him to cross anyway. Dr. Yousef was very excited. Both for the conference and staying in Kuwait. We stayed in a hotel apartment and were free to move around the city. He had been trapped in Iraq for years on end, and suddenly, he was eating dinner at a restaurant patio with me and browsing shops full of goods. It was amazing for him to see how the people of Kuwait lived in peace and freedom without conflict and war. Kuwait was a world far removed from Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

"You have to help me seek asylum," said Dr. Yousef one day while we were in Kuwait.

His plea completely surprised me. Dr. Yousef was otherwise very proper and had never asked for that kind of thing before. But

the experience of freedom had sat deep within him. No matter how much I wanted to help, I was bound. As an emergency worker in a foreign country, I couldn't actively support individual employees in fleeing or seeking asylum in other countries. My job was to protect the purpose of the mission, and if I helped him seek asylum, I risked all 150 local staff asking me to do the same thing. Everyone wanted to get out of Iraq, but that was not the purpose of our mission. At the same time, I was aware that the man was afraid of being killed, and Dr. Yousef was my close friend. It was a huge dilemma. It reminded me of the miner's sick son and the pregnant woman in Sudan, but this time, I was personally involved. I understood well that he wanted out of Iraq, but I couldn't get too involved. I decided to drive him to the Canadian Embassy in Kuwait.

"I'll wait for you here," I said as we stood outside. If I went in with him, I could affect the case more than I could vouch for.

When Dr. Yousef came out to the car again, he said he had not been granted asylum.

"It was not impossible, they said, but now the process is underway, and I know how to move forward," he explained.

One day, Dr. Yousef drove to the camp from his home in Basra, and parked his car on the white stone pavement. His two little daughters stepped out and stood shyly behind their father. They stood with big smiles in white dresses and red flowers tied in their hair. Dr. Yousef wanted to introduce me to his girls. He had a hard time hiding how proud he was of them. They would go with him once he had saved enough money, and one fine day, he would be able to pay a human trafficker to get them out of the country and into another. It was one of the last times I saw him.



Iraq was high on the political agenda in Denmark due to Denmark's participation in the war. In February 2007, the Danish government announced that Danish troops would be withdrawn in August of that same year. At the same time, there was a fierce debate about

the Iraqis who worked as local interpreters for the Danish battalion in Iraq. The case began when a bus carrying seventeen Iraqi students, who also worked as interpreters for the Danish-British police training, was hijacked and the interpreters were killed. This prompted commanders and officers from Camp Danevang to petition the Danish government to grant asylum to local interpreters. The interpreters were in mortal danger due to their cooperation with the Danish forces. Initially, the government and then-Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen denied giving Iraqi interpreters special treatment. The case developed, and it came to light that the armed forces and the government had concealed the imminent danger that the Danish-employed interpreters in Iraq were actually in. A Danish interpreter was killed in December 2006, but it was kept secret until June 2007.

The case became a serious threat to the Danish government, and after a lot of pressure, the government changed its position and granted asylum to the Iraqi interpreters and their families. The first 200 interpreters arrived in Denmark around July 20, and by the end of 2007, 373 Iraqi interpreters with families had been granted asylum.

In Iraq, the local staff closely followed the case of the Danish interpreters, which was also covered by Iraqi media. When they learned that Iraqi interpreters who had worked for Denmark would be offered asylum, it caused a large crowd of our local employees to storm me for several days in the hope that they, too, could also be granted asylum. It was very easy to understand why employees wanted to seek asylum in Denmark. Although it was less dangerous to work for DDG than in the military, working for an international organization is always associated with some risk. I contacted the Danish Refugee Council to find out how we should deal with the request for asylum and was told that only the interpreters could be granted asylum.

During the same time period, we had to replace their employee ID cards, and many of them would not hand over the old one. They came up with stories of losing the card, or that someone had

stolen it, because they knew well that the ID card was proof that they had worked for Denmark, and they might need it when they, one day, got to Denmark. We couldn't force them to hand over the cards, so we told the employees that we would note the numbers of all the missing ID cards on a list that would be sent to Denmark, and that if the cards turned up, the Danish authorities would then know that they had been stolen or lost. In the days that followed, we got nearly all of the ID cards back, and the list was never sent.

When the interpreters' case was at its peak, I went to Denmark on summer vacation.

### **Denmark 2007**

The hammer hit the nail, which then sat securely in the wall. I let go of the nail with my fingers and struck again. With each blow, it drilled deeper into the wall of the summer cottage. When the nail was an inch out, I put the hammer on the dining table and grabbed the picture that Dr. Yousef gave me before I went back to Denmark. I set it on the nail and adjusted it so it hung straight.

"There we go," I said contentedly to myself, looking at the photograph of Saddam Hussein and the two men beside him. They all looked directly at me. I smiled at Dr. Yousef—one of the men.

That picture has hung there since the summer I was home from Iraq, but not everyone shares my enthusiasm. At one point, I rented out the cottage and when I returned, the guests had taken the picture down from the wall. They obviously didn't want to spend their summer vacation with Saddam Hussein. I do genuinely understand that. But for me, that image has a very special meaning because of Dr. Yousef.

When I was on vacation or leave in Denmark, I needed to spend the first few weeks relaxing because my head was so full of all the experiences. But I was unable to pull the plug every time. During this particular vacation, the interpretation case was continuing in Iraq and Denmark. Without knowing much about the debate that

the case had raised in Denmark, I was asked to comment for an interview in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* about whether it would be possible to manage large Danish aid projects from neighboring countries of Kuwait or Jordan, where most Danish organizations were located. I was briefed on the situation and received media advice from the Danish Refugee Council.

A few days after the interview in *Politiken*, I was sitting in the cottage checking emails. An email had arrived from the camp stating that Dr. Yousef had disappeared. He had been away for two days, and now the people in the camp were looking for him. I knew very well that he felt vulnerable, so I became very worried about him.

Four days later, they found his body 540 yards from the military hospital he had been in charge of. He had been tortured, shot, and killed. Still reeling from the shock of that news, the story also appeared in the Danish media, which immediately linked the murder to the interpreting case. Was Dr. Yousef another victim who was punished for collaborating with Danish organizations in Iraq, or was it a coincidence?

The head of the international department of the Danish Refugee Council was interviewed about the case on national Danish television, and I was contacted by journalists from various TV stations and the newspaper *Ekstra Bladet* who all wanted to interview me. They wanted to know what I thought was the cause of the murder, but I could only refer to the investigations that the Danish Refugee Council was conducting.

In a TV interview, I stated that I was angry at the militias, but I actually wasn't angry, just sorry. He had been a really good friend and I was going to miss him greatly, but I couldn't say that on TV.

Personally, I didn't think Dr. Yousef was killed because he worked for DDG, but perhaps because he was a doctor. Fifteen other doctors were murdered in Basra that same month, so it was a period when doctors faced vulnerability. It could also be because of his past with Saddam Hussein and his position as head of the military hospital. We didn't know the answer at the time, but I was

later told that Iranian-backed militias in Basra were behind the assassination. They killed Dr. Yousef because he had been in the Iraqi army and had fought in the war against Iran even though he was a Shia Muslim.

It usually takes a lot to stress my nervous system, but in the days around Dr. Yousef's death, I was very nervous. On a jog along the beach one day, I started to completely panic and had to force myself to calm down. It was as if everything was tightening around me. What would happen if the wrong people in Iraq found out that I had appeared in Danish newspapers and on the TV commenting on the matter?

*Politiken* subsequently wanted to print a picture of me, but I didn't dare to call too much attention to myself, especially immediately before traveling back to Iraq. The situation was getting a little too dangerous and out of control. For the first time, I felt really nervous about returning.

## **Iraq 2006-2007**

We needed beer and spirits in the camp, so one September day, my program manager and I drove towards Camp Danevang. Then we could also learn of any news on the security situation and what was going on in the area around Basra.

The roads there were mined with roadside bombs, so for safety, we always took different routes. If we had a fixed route, we would be more exposed to roadside bombs and kidnapping attempts. We chose a route, but at the last minute, my program manager suddenly changed his mind and chose a different and longer route. He was good at sensing when there was danger ahead, so I was confident he was making the right decision.

It was only when we got to camp that we saw the emergency vehicles. A Danish soldier had been hit by a roadside bomb on the route we had initially chosen. Eight others were injured. We weren't the target, for the militia targeted soldiers and not a bunch of de-miners, but we could easily have been unlucky and been hit that day, too.

A few days after the roadside bomb, I lay down on the roof of our building at our camp. I wanted to soak up the sun and take a break. The rays warmed me nicely, though I had to wave annoying flies away at regular intervals. Suddenly, I saw our operations manager crawling up the stairs to the roof. His rifle was strapped to his back. I could feel my heart starting to race. We were not allowed to carry guns in the camp, but we all knew he was a bit trigger-happy. He was famous in the camp for the pictures he took of his gun, and for sleeping with the gun under his pillow.

He reached the top and limped along the roof. The man had lost his leg to a mine and, like John, had a prosthesis. Normally, I wasn't afraid of him, but after the roadside bomb, I felt

more insecure. It was yet another situation I could not control.

One of my strengths is gaining control over situations that are out of my control. That's why I'm usually very tough. But sometimes, when abroad, you find yourself in situations where you—no matter how much effort you give—are not in control.

Quickly, I got to my feet and ran down the stairs and into my room, but he barely took any notice of me. When I turned to go down, I could see that he had laid down and taken the safety off the rifle.

I didn't hear the shots, but we had fewer birds in the camp after that day.



As the car approached the border, I could see the faces of the guards. None of them looked familiar, and it dawned on me that the smiling border guards that I could charm and who took pictures of me must have been replaced. These faces were frighteningly serious. My palms felt clammy as I held on to the steering wheel. My heart started beating faster under the jacket where I had hidden USD 150,000 in cash.

Normally, I drove the entire trip on my own, but after Dr. Yousef died, I was scared, especially after the roadside bomb episode. And

appearing in newspapers and television back home in Denmark hadn't helped, because I had no idea if the Iraqis who lived in Denmark had told the Iraqis in Basra. That's why I took DeWet with me on this trip.

I was waved forward and tried to smile despite my beating heart. They didn't smile back. Thoughts whirled around in my head. The Iraqi government had introduced a rule that all money brought into the country now had to be registered as is done in most other countries. Most money crossed borders through bank transfers and was registered that way, but the money that came in over land had to be registered now as well. If I was stopped with USD 150,000, it might have severe consequences for me.

As soon as we approached the border, I put the money in my jacket pocket. Even if the mood had changed, the border police would probably still prefer to avoid a body search of a woman. Actually, I was most afraid that the border officials would inform someone at their checkpoints that I was coming, driving with all the money. They knew who I was and that I was in charge of the money. We were frighteningly aware that some foreigners recently had been kidnapped only a few miles from our camp. Even if they were content to take the money, I could be accused of taking it for myself. That is why it was important that DeWet was traveling with me.

My heart was pounding now. This was one of those situations I could not control. I could not handle the guards here.

The men waved me on.

My heart started to calm down and I could see our escort car waiting on the other side of the border. But we were not in the safety of the camp yet.

As we trundled back toward the camp, I kept an eye on the people along the side of the road standing with cell phones in their hands. It could be the trigger for a roadside bomb. Sweat still clung to the palms of my hands, as my eyes constantly scouted for people behaving strangely or checkpoints that could be a shell hideout for militias waiting to attack. Our escort car drove

about 70 yards in front of us so only one of the cars would be caught or hit in an attack. My thoughts began to revolve around Iraq. About the danger and the chaos. And that it might soon be time to stop in Iraq.

★ ★ ★

DeWet missed his dogs. They were still in Sudan. Maybe that's why he fed the wild dogs outside our camp every night. One of the dogs was foaming at the mouth—a typical sign of rabies. The dog bit him on the hand. He carefully washed the wound, and only after a few days did he tell me about it. He was nervous because the wound was still hurting.

Our doctor in the camp had gone home, so again I had to turn to Lise, my doctor daughter. She replied that once you have contracted rabies, it is not possible to be cured unless you receive medication or a vaccination immediately after being bitten. I, therefore, hurried to call our new camp doctor. He lived in Basra, so he couldn't drive from Basra to our camp with the medicine at night.

“Bring some medicine for rabies when you come tomorrow,” I said.

DeWet was given the medicine and a vaccination, but our doctor said it's supposed to be given within three days. It was six days before he got it.

My South African friend went home a few weeks after he had been bitten. His contract stopped and he seemed very tired. I don't know if he told anyone else in the camp about the bite, but I imagine that it must be mentally hard not to know whether you have contracted rabies.

When we said goodbye, I didn't touch him. It may sound strange, but I was afraid that the disease could be contagious if I touched him. I still remember how he looked at me before leaving.



In the camp, I walked around in a state of constant alert. It didn't help that I was nervous when I was in charge of the dangerous money transports from Kuwait. That is why I allied myself with the Danish soldiers. A few times, they transported the money by helicopter from Kuwait to the military camp in Iraq where we could pick it up. There were two problems with that.

First, the road was full of roadside bombs. One day, some of our local employees told us that they saw militiamen in the process of placing three roadside bombs right by the bridge that we always drove over to get to the Danish and British military camps. DeWet called the camps and told them about the roadside bombs, and the mines were quickly rendered harmless, but it was a very unpleasant thought.

Second, the military camp was constantly under fire. During that period, we could sit on our roofs and watch them send missiles from Basra toward the Danish and British military camps. The camps had been moved closer to the airport, so it was also dangerous to be at the airport. The militias tried to bomb the Danish and British soldiers, but if they were just a fraction off target, the bombs would land at the airport instead. I experienced this once; I had just gotten off the plane when the alarm sounded. Everyone hurried into the building as bombs rained down right outside the doors. In those days, the war came a little too close.

In the camp canteen, there were placemats that described where you should run to when the siren sounded and the camp was under attack. It was frightening that such a placemat was needed. And it was even more frightening that I didn't know where the shelter was.

My contract ran out at the end of 2007, and I was happy about that, partly because the British formally handed over Basra province to the Iraqis on December 16, 2007.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki subsequently traveled to Basra with Iraqi forces and was determined to liberate the city from the

militia. Although the Americans only reluctantly agreed to help, they supported Maliki's fight. It ended in victory, and on March 29, 2008, an Iraqi government delegation met with the leader of the militia to negotiate a peace deal.

At the end of my contract, I said goodbye to two men who had held great significance for this second part of my life. DeWet did not contract rabies and in 2008, he was appointed security officer in Juba in Sudan. I wrote him regularly until he died of cancer a few years ago.

I had many memories of Dr. Yousef, and they kept occupying my mind. The photograph of Dr. Yousef with Saddam Hussein in my summer cottage now makes me wonder whether I made the right decision in front of the Canadian Embassy in Kuwait where Dr. Yousef had asked for my help. It is one of the most difficult dilemmas of working on the frontlines of the world's hotspots. When should I break with the organization's code of conduct to help a single person? When should I leave?

In most cases, I am no longer in doubt, but that day in Kuwait, I should perhaps have made a different decision. It wouldn't have been in accordance with our guidelines if I, as an employee of the Danish Refugee Council, walked into the embassy with Dr. Yousef and asked them to help him out of Iraq. And would that have made a difference?

I don't know. Neither do I know whether getting Dr. Yousef across the border to attend the Kuwait Medical Conference was actually a mistake. Many doctors were murdered in the time after the conference. Maybe our days in Kuwait made his killers aware of his existence? Had I paraded him around, and he was murdered because of it? Everyone in Basra knew he was allowed to go to the conference. You have to be careful about doing something extraordinary, and thereby, rocking the boat. It can create an imbalance. I was so happy when I managed to get Dr. Yousef over the border, but maybe that was really what put his killers on his trail. That thought still torments me.



The Danish Demining Group had a camp in the southern province of Basra in Iraq not far from the border with Kuwait. Sandbags and watchtowers were set up around the camp, which made it look like a fort. Inside the camp, we had about 540 yards of road we could run on. I was over 50 years old, so when I had run more than 30 miles (which is about 50 kilometers) in over 122 degrees Fahrenheit (50-degrees Celsius) heat, I got a blouse that said, "50 over 50 over 50."



The greatest luxury in the camp was our swimming pool. It was officially called a water reservoir. When the temperature hit 104-130 degrees Fahrenheit, it was great to jump into the water, read a book, and drink a beer while laying on a pool float.



An international security company hired 100 local guards to look after us. All of our guards were armed, and I even learned how to shoot an AK-47. The period from 2006 to 2007 was considered one of the most dangerous times after the invasion of Iraq. However, we were not attacked while I lived there because some militia groups didn't want problems since they believed that there was a strong army behind European citizens. Other militia groups attacked only the British and American armies.





In the Mine Risk Education Program, our staff taught school children how to avoid accidents with mines and unexploded ammunition. To see the program in action, I visited a few schools. There were many more boys than girls because many families still believe that girls don't need to learn anything in school, as in the future, they would stay at home and look after their husbands and children.



Decades of wars, including the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, left the province of Basra with mines and unexploded ammunition. Above, I am standing with de-miners and guards. In the picture next to it, the de-miners are collecting unexploded ammunition to blow it up in a safe space where no one will be harmed.





This picture hung on the wall of my summer cottage, but some renters took it down and put it out in the shed. They probably didn't want to look at Saddam Hussein, but Dr. Yousef (left) was proud to be photographed with Saddam Hussein, who had made him the head of the military hospital in Basra.

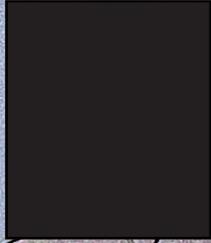
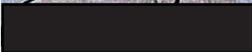


Dr. Yousef worked at the medical clinic in our camp. He gave me insight into all of the historical sites and the fascinating sides of ancient Mesopotamia, which formed that part of Iraq that lay along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers.



One day, Dr. Yousef drove into the camp with his two little daughters. He was very proud of them and wanted to introduce them to me. It was one of the last times I saw him. He was tortured and murdered in the summer of 2007.

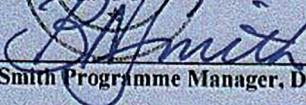
**Danish De-mining Group DDG)**  
**Identification Card**

	Name:	
	Title:	BAC Operator
	Date of birth :	16-12-1976
	Date of issue:	01 Jul . 2007
	Date of expiry:	30 Sept . 2007
	ID card No:	0501030
	Blood group:	A-
	Signature of ID card holder	

The bearer of this card is a staff member of the Non Government Organisation Danish De-mining Group. (DDG) DDG is doing humanitarian EOD (Destruction of unexploded munitions.) in Iraq. You are kindly requested to assist and cooperate with this person in his work for the benefit of the Iraqi people.

حامل هذه البطاقة هو أحد أعضاء المجموعه الدنماركيه لأزالة الألغام .  
هذه المجموعه هي منظمه أنسانيه غير حكوميه تقوم بتدمير الأعتده  
الغير متفجره. من فضلك قدم العون والمساعده لهذا الشخص لأنجاز  
عمله خدمة لمصلحة الشعب العراقي.

Certified by:

  
Brian Smith Programme Manager, DDG Iraq.

In 2007, Danish troops withdrew from Iraq. Local interpreters who had worked for the Danish forces were in danger of being murdered, and they were, therefore, allowed to seek asylum in Denmark. Our local de-miners, who also worked for a Danish organization, wanted asylum, too. They refused to hand over their ID cards, which needed to be replaced. The ID card was proof that they had worked for Denmark.

المحترم

السيد الدكتور / علي الدباغ  
الناطق الرسمي للحكومة العراقية

تحية طيبة وبعد ،

الموضوع: نظام الفيز للعمالين بالمنظمات الإنسانية

بالإشارة إلى الكتاب الذي وردنا من وزارة الداخلية العراقية رقم ٨٤٠ ، بتاريخ ٣٠ / ١٠ / ٢٠٠٧ بخصوص تأشيرة دخول .

نتقدم لكم بالشكر الجزيل لحصول المدعو / أنا اليزابيث - دنمركية الجنسية ، والمدعو / اندرو مايكل - بريطاني الجنسية على تأشيرة ، ولكن لسوء الحظ منحوا سفرة واحدة ، والحاجة قائمة لفيزا سمات متعددة ، حيث أن لديهم مكتب في منطقة الزبير ، ولهم تواجد شبه مستديم ويحتاجون التنقل بين الكويت والعراق بصورة متكررة ، حيث الكويت قاعدة أخرى للقيام بالمهام المكلفين بها .

لذا أرجو التفضل بالسعي لدى وزارة الداخلية العراقية لمنح المذكورين أدناه سمة دخول متعددة لمدة ستة شهور ، علما بأنهم يعملون لدى المنظمة الدنمركية لإزالة الألغام DDG.

رقم الجواز	الجنسية	الإسم
P BA331054	كندا	- جون وليم همدن
P 200976914	دنمرك	- أنا اليزابيث فب اكف
P BA156457	كندا	- براين سميث
P 094530778	بريطانيا	- اندرو مايكل توك
PP 458925241	جنوب أفريقيا	- دي وت جوهان
P 093209989	بريطانيا	- دارين ديفلن
P 56721912	السويد	- جون ماكس باتدهول
P 706367068	بريطانيا	- باتريك كريستوفر جوزيف نونان

شاكرين لكم حسن تعاونكم معنا ،  
وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام والتقدير ،،،

صادرة السيد الراتبين الكويت

القريق الركن مساعد  
رئيس مركز العمليات الإنسانية  
علي محمد المؤمن



يرجى مع الذكرة سمة  
دخول سمدة لمدة (٣)  
شهرات

In the fall of 2007, we had problems at the border because of new visa rules implemented by Baghdad. We could no longer get a visa at the border with Iraq; instead, we had to get it at the Iraqi Embassy in Kuwait. Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's spokesman in Baghdad flew to Kuwait and personally signed this letter, which allowed our international staff to obtain visas to enter Iraq.



The many oil fields in southern Iraq meant it was difficult to see the stars at night. The sky was always foggy due to gas leaks. When we drove to the Danish military camp, we often drove past the Ramallah oil field. It is said to be the largest oil field in Iraq and the third-largest oil field in the world. Saddam Hussein laid 100,000 mines around the oil field in 2003 to help prevent the invasion.

Order the book online with free shipping here:

**[Linjeh.dk](https://www.linjeh.dk)**



**ANNA ECKHOFF** is a mother of six and the grandmother of thirteen. At the age of fifty-six, she swapped her career as an IT project manager to work as the head of administration in the world's hotspots, holding jobs at NGOs, the EU and the UN, where she worked within accounting, personnel, procurement, logistics and IT. She returned to Denmark at the age of seventy-one, but dreams of going out into the world again to work.

From early childhood, Anna Eckhoff dreamed of excitement. She secretly ran around the local inner fjord to train for the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo. But it was not until forty years later that she was able to live out her childhood dream of combining excitement with travel. Before then, she managed to fulfill another dream: Getting married and having a lot of children. At the age of fifty-six, Anna Eckhoff replaced her secure life in a Danish suburb with the demanding duties of war zones, where she was stationed for the first time. And despite the many challenges that come with new beginnings so late in life, Anna Eckhoff was never in doubt – she belonged in the world's hotspots. Over the next fifteen years, Anna Eckhoff was on secondment ten times, including in Iraq, Sudan, Palestine, Afghanistan, Russia and Libya. Here she met a host of international employees and locals and led a life of both rewarding and exhausting relationships that sometimes made her feel like she was a participant on the TV show *Survivor*. Working under the auspices of NGOs, the EU and the UN enabled Anna Eckhoff to experience up close the vastly different interests that govern the course of the world.

At the age of seventy-one, she returned home to her children and grandchildren in Denmark but discovered that she still wanted to work. And that part of her is still longing for more adventures.

**A NEW BEGINNING: LIFE ON THE FRONTLINES** is Anna Eckhoff's personal account of daring to go after your dreams, despite those around you shaking their heads in disapproval, and about the inner development she experienced living and working on the frontlines.