



It's not unusual for one of Wright's photos to appear on the cover of several Knight Ridder newspapers on the same day.

A Diary of War



Photojournalist Mandi Wright (BFA '97) has twice been sent to Iraq by the *Detroit Free Press*. The images she sent back tell a story of ordinary people whose lives have been forever changed by war.

by Tracy Coley Curlee (ABJ '90)

photos by Mandi Wright (BFA '97) / *Detroit Free Press*

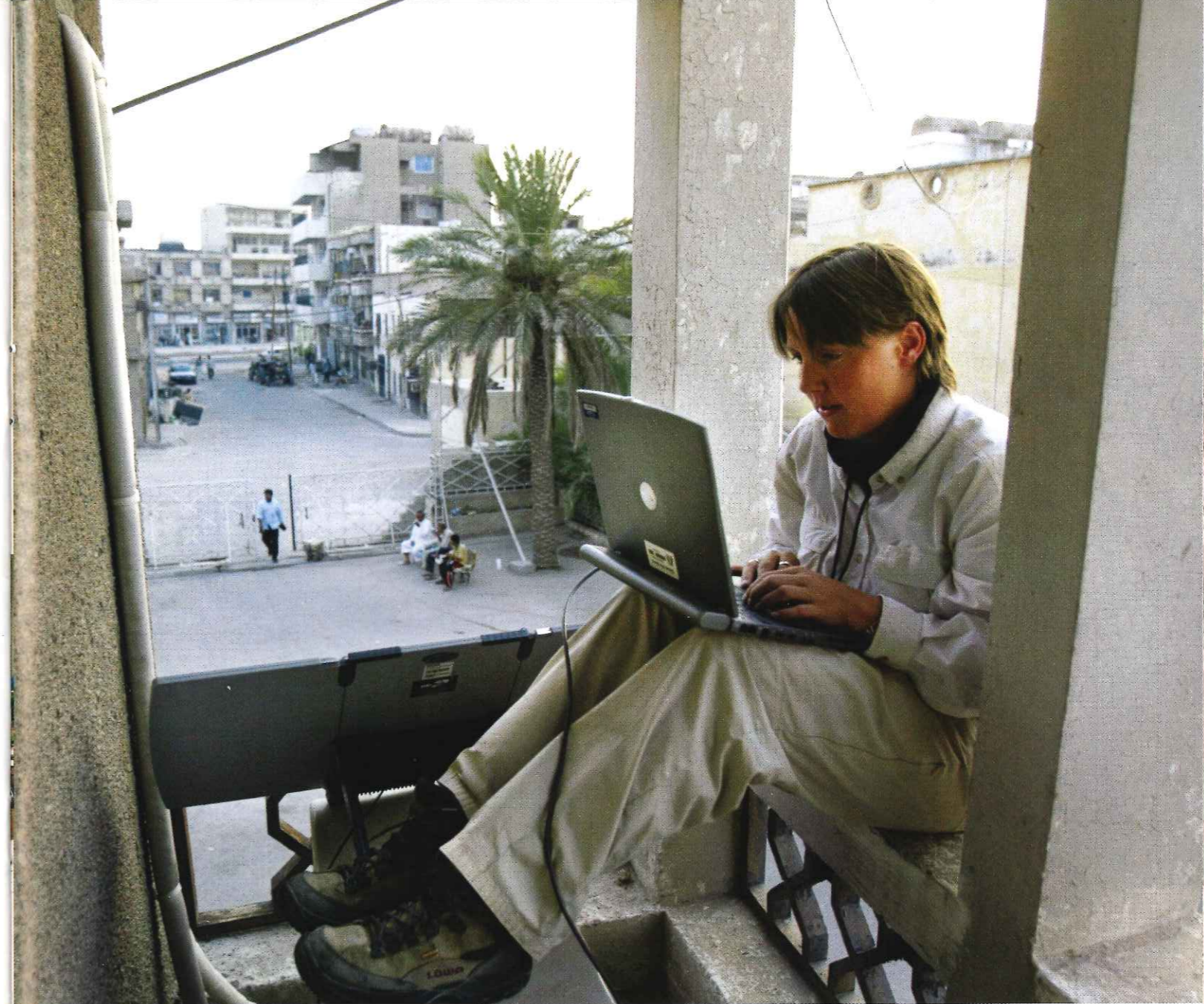
It's a day like any other in war-torn Baghdad, where the Iraqi people shop for food, run errands, and go about their lives as best they can in the midst of a combat zone. Their routine is disrupted when, without warning, a series of sharp pops echo through the city streets. For Mandi Wright, who is armed with only a digital camera, the sound is unmistakably gunfire—and it's no more than 500 feet away from her. Wright doesn't have a clear view of what has happened, but later that day in August 2003 she learns that Mazen Dana, a veteran Reuters TV cameraman from Palestine, has been shot and killed. Dana's death strikes fear in the heart of every journalist covering the war in Iraq.

"They thought he was carrying an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade launcher), when in fact it was just his camera hoisted on his shoulder," recalls Wright. "He was covering a mortar attack on a prison that had happened earlier in the day."

Wright (BFA '97), a photographer for the *Detroit Free Press* and its parent company Knight Ridder, has now returned from a grueling three-month assignment in Iraq—her second tour of duty within the last 10 months. From June-September 2003 and then again from January-March 2004, Wright lived in a 10-story hotel in Baghdad that serves as a makeshift news bureau. She lived amongst other journalists, including another photographer and two writers from the *Detroit Free Press*. The



A woman is comforted outside U.N. headquarters in Baghdad after a truck bomb brought down the building.



W.H. MANSOUR

hotel was cordoned off with gates and armed guards to prevent non-credentialed personnel from coming within 40 feet—though that did nothing to protect the hotel occupants from grenade launchers and suicide bombers.

Accompanied by her translator (also called a "fixer") Mansour, Wright traveled throughout Iraq capturing vivid and often haunting images that aren't limited to the standard trappings of war: soldiers, tanks, desert military installations, and death. Wright's photos also tell stories of compassion and suffering among the victims of war.

"In June 2003, the war had reached what we thought was its zenith," says Wright. "I went in doing features, but when the body counts began to rise it sparked interest in what was going on in Baghdad. So our focus changed to hard news."

Wright transmits her photos via satellite from her balcony at the Al Marbed Hotel in Basra, as guards below keep watch.

Depending on what stories are competing for space on the front page of American newspapers, it's not unusual to see the same Knight Ridder photo on the cover of several metro dailies. One photo that Wright took of an overturned personal assault vehicle ran in seven U.S. newspapers on the same day.

When there wasn't a major news story to cover, Wright was on the street looking for news-features. One situation that particularly moved her was a family of displaced Marsh Arabs.

"Marsh Arab farmers were driven out of their homes in southern Iraq years ago after Saddam Hussein had the marshes drained during the 1991 Shiite uprising," she explains. "It



Children sift through a garbage dump north of Baghdad that doubles as their home. Their parents are former Marsh Arab farmers who were forced out of their homes when Saddam Hussein had their marshes drained during the 1991 Shiite uprisings.

made their way of life impossible and they had to relocate to a place where they could survive with their sheep, cows, and goats. One of these families now calls a garbage dump in Baghdad home. They buy malnourished sheep, fatten them up on the garbage, then sell them for a higher price. They also pick out plastics, sorting through the garbage, to sell. The father drives around picking up garbage to bring home.”

There were also everyday stories very much like those Wright covered back home in Detroit. “She covered town meetings in Baghdad,” says Diane Weiss, photo editor for the *Detroit Free Press*. “The only difference is that they had AK47s at the door. She also had a hot weather feature with people bathing in the Tigris to cool off from the summer heat.”

During her second three-month assignment, Wright had a poignant conversation with Haydar Saheb, a security guard atop the shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala where thousands

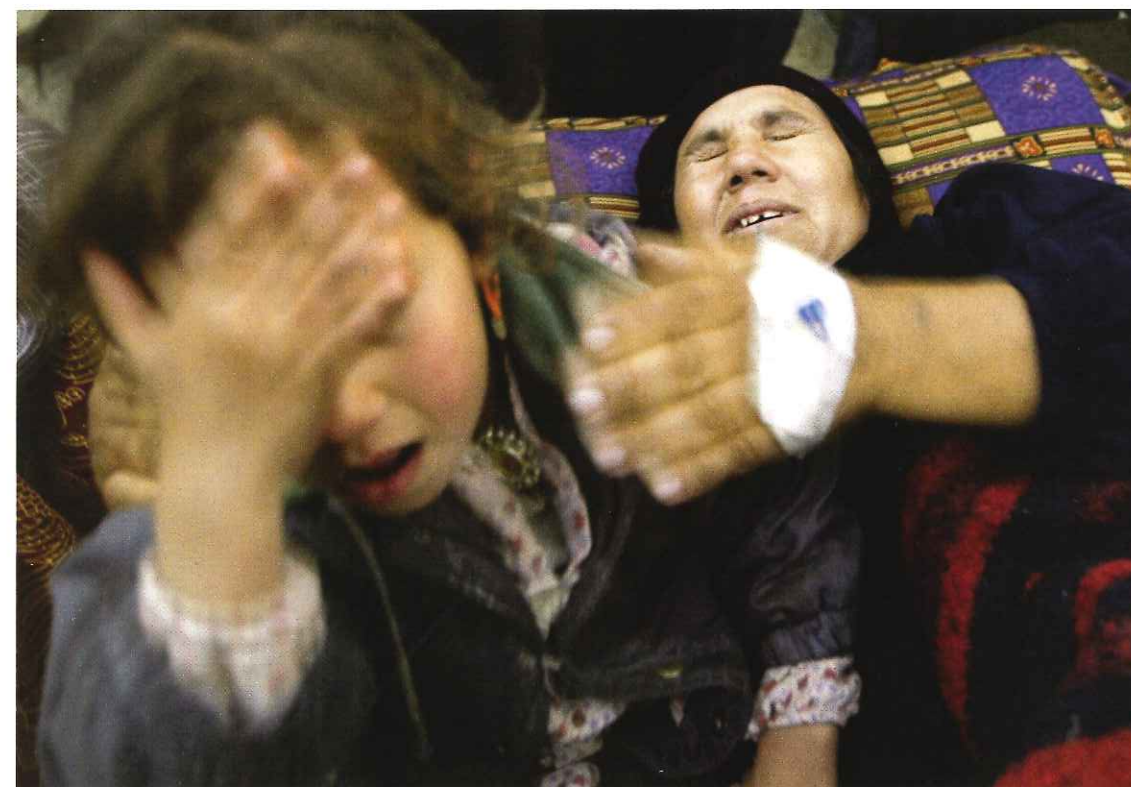
of Iraqi Shiite Muslims gathered to observe Ashura—the day when Imam al-Hussein, grandson of prophet Mohammed, was killed in Karbala in 680 A.D. This was the first such religious gathering since Saddam Hussein was ousted. “After 13 years of stopping our ceremonies, this is a great thing for the Shiite,” said Saheb. “Now I see the people come to this holy shrine from all over the world. This is the real freedom.”

Wright has ambivalent feelings about the war. “I spent a lot of time with Iraqis,” she says, “but I also have a brother stationed with the Marines in Iraq. I try to keep an open mind, but I saw a lot of things I could make judgments about . . . it’s hard to keep middle-of-line perspective when you see so much happening. But you don’t let it slant your story. You gotta talk the talk with the military, spend time, understand, and empathize with them. Then you turn around and you’re on the street empathizing with the Iraqis. You have to be a chameleon. There are some guys in the military that I feel so bad for because they are seeing things they never in their life wanted to see or experience. I feel bad for everybody really.”

College was not an option for Wright, or so she thought. High school had been a struggle for her, and the thought of pursuing a four-year degree was overwhelming. So she left her home town of Pittsburgh, Pa., to work with archaeologists in the Northeast, digging in dirt and photographing the finds. Photography had always interested her, particularly with people as her subjects. She’d taken a few photography classes at various places, but nothing that amounted to certification or a degree. When she was in her late twenties, she began reconsidering college, and a group of contract archaeologists from Georgia whom she befriended on a dig in New York convinced her that she should apply to UGA.

As a non-traditional student at UGA, Wright worked part-time as a photographer in the University’s public information office and took evening classes in the art school. It was a challenging schedule, but it was good preparation for the fast pace of the newspaper business. She worked for a couple of small newspapers in Ohio and Virginia right out of college before being hired by the *Detroit Free Press*.

“A journalist wants to be where the story is,” she says. “It’s more of a drive to explore what’s going on, when and where it’s going on. I have a sense of adventure.” This sense of adventure is what motivated Wright to volunteer for an Iraqi assignment after only three years at the paper. To prepare her and other journalists for the rigors of war-zone journalism, Knight Ridder sends them to hostile environment training, which teaches survival skills, first aid, and the ability to handle



(above) “This is real freedom,” said security guard Haydar Saheb, who was moved by the sight of Shiite Muslims being allowed to observe Ashura at the shrine of Imam Hussein in the holy city of Karbala for the first time since Saddam Hussein began to rule Iraq 13 years ago.

(left) Mistakenly identified as a terrorist bomber by U.S. troops on patrol outside Hawijah in northern Iraq, this woman lost her leg and her 14-year-old daughter. Another daughter was wounded by the U.S. gunfire.



(clockwise from top left)
This mother (in background) brought her two-month-old baby to the hospital for medical treatment. The diagnosis was calcium deficiency, but the baby eventually died with squalid hospital conditions partly to blame.

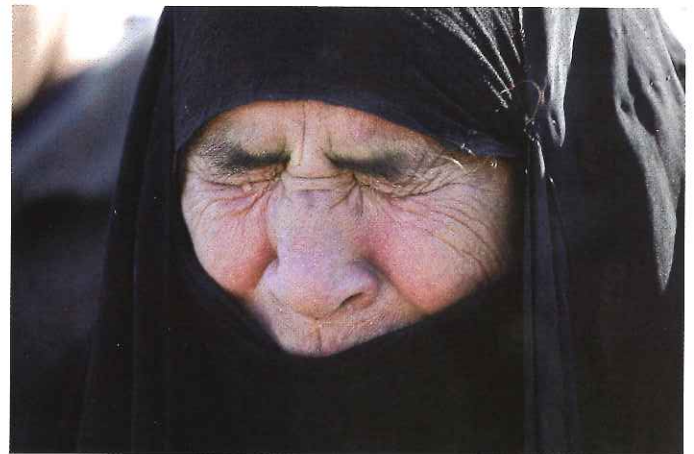
U.S. soldiers from the 1st Armored Division try to attach a chain to tow the remains of an armored personnel carrier destroyed by a landmine. This Wright photo appeared in seven American newspapers on the same day.

A seven-year-old Palestinian boy shows off his new toy weapon in a refugee camp set up for evicted Palestinians.

In 1988, Hamdyia Ahmed of Baghdad held the Iraqi record in the javelin. Also an accomplished swimmer, her dreams of competing in the Olympic Games were dashed when Saddam Hussein assigned her to be a lifeguard for the children of his secret police.



(Above) Shiite Muslims light candles in memory of loved ones killed in attacks near the doors of the mosque in Khadamiya in Baghdad. (Right) Family members grieve for a nine-year-old after he was killed by a suicide bomber outside a police station; the bomb killed more than 35 and wounded more than 100 in a city south of Baghdad.



hostage situations and identify imminent dangers like land mines.

Returning to the States after her second tour in Iraq, Wright tried to return to work immediately. But after only two days back on the street beat, she realized she had to take some time off to unwind. Fortunately, the *Detroit Free Press* grants extended leave time to all employees returning from long, dangerous assignments. “You have an anxiety level that wears you down,” says Wright. “Journalists experience trauma, but it’s not direct trauma. Things weren’t right in my face, but you take on the story and [all the feelings] that go with it.”

When it’s time to hit the pavement again, covering everything from the Detroit auto industry to local town meetings, Wright says she’ll be ready for it. But she’s taken steps to assure herself of regular adrenaline rushes.

“When I came back home, I was choosing between buying a new dinette set and a Harley Sportster,” says Wright, holding both hands in front of her, palms up, weighing the decision. “Dinette set. Harley Sportster. Dinette set. Harley Sportster. You know, I’m just not a dinette set kind of gal. I chose the Sportster.” ^{GM}

