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"I Punched Saddam in the Mouth"

Meet Samir, the St. Louis auto mechanic who pulled Saddam Hussein from his spider hole
By Chad Garrison

In a south-city Saint Louis Bread Co., a young auto mechanic named Samir puts down his coffee long enough to carefully eye the other patrons. Assured no one is paying him any mind, he lowers his voice to a guttural whisper, fidgets with the zipper on his black tracksuit and rubs his grease-stained fingers along a finely manicured goatee. Then, in a syncopated rhythm of street slang and accented English, he transports himself back in time to a bitter-cold December night in Iraq.

It had to have been the most sublime moment of his life. Samir tells how he arrived in Tikrit as an Arabic interpreter for United States Special Forces in late 2003, how he peered into a hidden bunker and heard a voice begging for mercy, how he reached into the darkness and pulled out Saddam Hussein.

"I was so angry," says Samir, who immigrated to St. Louis eleven years ago after fleeing Iraq. "I began cussing at him, calling him a motherfucker, a son-of-a-bitch -- you name it. I told him I was Shiite from the south and was part of the revolution against him in 1991. I said he murdered my uncles and cousins. He imprisoned my father.

"All these years of anger, I couldn't stop. I tried to say the worst things I could. I told him if he were a real man he would have killed himself. I asked him: 'Why are you living in that dirty little hole, you bastard? You are a rat. Your father is a rat.'"

In Arabic, Saddam told Samir to shut up. And when Saddam called him a traitor, an enraged Samir silenced his prisoner with a flurry of quick jabs to the face.

"I punched Saddam in the mouth."

Samir's extravagant story is difficult to believe -- until he pulls out his laptop computer and rifles through the dozens of photographs he shot that night. There's the photo of Samir posed next to the bodyguard who will ultimately lead U.S. forces to Saddam. There's the photo of Samir standing behind the stack of \$12 million in U.S. currency seized near Saddam's hideout. And there's the most riveting image of all: Samir kneeling behind the bruised and bloodied dictator just minutes after his inglorious capture.

"I would die for this picture," Samir says. "Without this photo, no one would believe me."

It's largely because of the photos that Samir insists his last name not be used for this article. He's afraid that extremists loyal to Saddam, or opposed to the U.S. invasion, will retaliate against him or members of his family who continue to live in Iraq.

But more than that, Samir's anonymity as a 34-year-old civilian contractor free from military censor enables him to openly discuss the spellbinding saga. His version is far more real-to-life than the "official" Pentagon account.

Jennifer Silverberg



Samir, a St. Louis auto mechanic, was the first to grab hold of Hussein.



Dazed and abused: After silencing Saddam with a flurry of punches, Samir props up the prisoner for what would become a world-famous photo.



Saddam seated in the "Baath

The high drama began to unfold around noon on Saturday, December 13, 2003, when Special Forces delivered one of Saddam's bodyguards to a U.S.-controlled palace outside Tikrit.

Intelligence officials had long viewed the bodyguard as a crucial linchpin in finding the tyrant. In a room deep within the palace, the officials and Samir went to work interrogating Saddam's protector.

"At first he lied to us; he said he didn't know anything," recalls Samir, who questioned the bodyguard in a plush recliner called the "Baath Chair" -- nicknamed for its role in interrogating members of Saddam's Baath Party.

"We made threats to him. Routine stuff, saying we would beat him. Finally, after a couple of hours, he said he knew. Saddam was on a farm."

Army soldiers had searched the small farm outside Tikrit twice before and failed to find any evidence of Saddam being there. Compelled to follow up on the tip, Samir, the bodyguard and several intelligence officers piled into a van and headed out for the hunt.

"He told us that the farmers on the land were serving as lookouts, so we didn't want to get too close," Samir says.

From a distance, the bodyguard-turned-informant pointed out the two-room farmhouse. He said Saddam was living in it and told of an underground bunker where the dictator might hide.

The reconnaissance complete, the group returned to the palace. By nightfall a brigade of some 600 soldiers from the U.S. Army's Fourth Infantry Division was in place, along with an armada of eight support helicopters flown in from Baghdad. The raid was imminent.

At 6:30 p.m. the brigade pulled out of the palace with Samir and the bodyguard riding in the lead Humvee. To keep warm, Samir wore a black stocking cap decorated with a St. Louis Rams insignia. So as not to draw attention, none of the vehicles in the convoy turned on its headlights. But even with the aid of night-vision goggles, it was tough going.

"It was so hard to see, and the bodyguard kept pointing us down the wrong dirt roads," Samir recalls. "I was yelling at him and slapping him. I don't think he was trying to get us lost, but we were getting frustrated."

When they arrived at the farm, soldiers quickly detained two of the three farmers who had served as lookouts for Saddam; the third one was never found.

Back at the farmhouse, Special Forces couldn't find Saddam or the hidden bunker.

"The farmers wouldn't tell us anything," says Samir. "We were beating the shit out of them, but they weren't talking."

Desperate, they pulled the bodyguard from the Humvee and demanded that he tell them the location of the bunker.

Samir thought the bodyguard was again trying to deceive them when he told the soldiers they were actually standing on top of Saddam's secret bunker.

"I gave him a few slaps on the face and said, 'What do you mean I'm standing on it?' We couldn't see anything. All there was was dirt and leaves. But we got some shovels off the trucks and started digging. Immediately we hit

Chair" an hour after his capture



U.S. Army soldiers and Samir (in Rams hat) celebrate a successful mission.



Samir (kneeling on the right) spent three years at a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia before coming to St. Louis in 1994.



President George W. Bush greets Samir before a July 2004 campaign rally in St. Charles.

something."

Samir says a soldier fired several blank rounds into the bunker's exposed opening, and a man's voice cried out from the spider hole, pleading for his life.

"He said, 'Don't shoot. Don't kill me,'" recounts Samir.

Peering into the hole, Samir could make out only part of the man. In Arabic, Samir told the fugitive that if he wanted to live, he needed to get out now. When Samir asked to see the man's hands, he showed his right hand, and then his left, but he wouldn't show both at the same time.

"No, I want to see both your hands," Samir yelled.

Keeping an eye on the man's hands, Samir plunged into the hole and grabbed the prisoner. Samir says he knew right away that it was the deposed dictator.

"He smelled bad, like a homeless person, and had the long beard and hair, but I knew it was Saddam. I told everyone, 'It's Saddam. It's Saddam!'"

Unconvinced, Special Forces had Samir ask the captive his identity. When the man answered that his name was Saddam, Samir says he shook him by his hair and dirt-matted beard.

"I said, 'Yeah, Saddam what? Saddam what?' Finally he said, 'Hussein.'"

Upon hearing that, Samir unleashed years of pent-up rage.

"I told him that I was going to fuck him up the ass. That we were all going to fuck him up the ass. I told him he was a criminal and a murderer. I hit him and spit in his face. I stepped my foot on his head and his back. He wasn't crying, but I think he was shocked. No one had ever treated him this way."

The beating over, Samir tossed his digital camera to a nearby soldier, who quickly snapped a shot of Samir kneeling over the fallen despot.

Later, when the world's most wanted man was whisked onto an awaiting helicopter, Samir remembers Saddam muttering to himself in English, asking the same question again and again: "America, why? America, why?"

An hour later, as Saddam sat in the Baath Chair for his initial interrogation, Samir joined an adrenaline-fueled celebration taking place in a makeshift palace bar. Samir and his photos became the center of attention. Several members of Special Forces abandoned their Heinekens long enough to download the photos onto their laptops.

It was a hell of a party, Samir recalls, but amid the back slaps, toasts and laughter, he felt a nervous twinge in his gut. During the capture Samir's commanding officer scolded him for taking the photo of Saddam, and now he panicked that the attention surrounding the picture could raise further ire.

Before going to bed that night, Samir downloaded the photos onto his laptop, replaced the camera's memory card with a new one and hid the chip containing the images deep within his luggage.

Samir was a twenty-year-old college student living in the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriyah when he joined a civilian uprising against Saddam. It was 1991, and U.S. and coalition fighters had just declared a ceasefire after liberating Kuwait.

Encouraged by the Republican Guard's swift defeat, Samir grabbed the family AK-47 and joined thousands of southern Shiites organizing a massive rebellion. In hindsight, Samir says, the revolution was doomed from the start.

The ceasefire allowed Saddam to regroup and launch a counterattack against his own people. It soon became clear

that the United States never planned to assist the Shiites with any tactical support. The failure of the U.S. government to provide military assistance during the uprising still strikes a sour chord with Samir and countless other Shiites.

"We were defenseless," fumes Samir. "Saddam began a retaliation campaign with tanks and helicopters. Our guns were useless."

Samir lost a cousin in the fighting. In other anti-Saddam strongholds, such as the southern city of Basra, Saddam's forces slaughtered thousands. Republican Guard tanks were reported to be painted with the message "After today, no more Shiites."

"I knew I had to leave," reflects Samir. "Everyone in my village knew I was part of the uprising. It was only a matter of time before [Saddam's forces] would kill me."

Three weeks after taking up arms, Samir told his parents he was going to flee the country. Reluctantly they agreed.

For 500 dinar (about \$3.50 at the time) a smuggler hid Samir in the back of a van and drove him within twenty miles of U.S. military fortifications along the Iraqi-Saudi Arabian border. Samir would walk the rest of the journey, crossing desert and barren farmland before surrendering himself to a U.S. soldier.

A few days later, he boarded a military cargo plane for the remote desert camp of Rafha in north-central Saudi Arabia. Samir spent the next three and a half years in the sprawling tent city, which, in the year following the war, swelled to a population of more than 33,000 Iraqi refugees.

Samir describes his time at Rafha as intolerably boring and uncomfortable. Temperatures in the desert routinely rose to 140 degrees Fahrenheit, and blinding sandstorms blanketed everything in mounds of dirt and grime.

During his second year at the camp, Samir began receiving letters from his cousin Zeiad al-Hachami, one of the first Iraqi refugees to win asylum in the United States. Zeiad's letters from his new home in St. Louis convinced Samir that he wanted to resettle in America.

"It sounded so good," says Samir, whose fascination with America was forged as a child, when he watched the cowboy westerns of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood.

A few years later, when Samir was granted asylum, he told immigration officials he wanted to live in St. Louis. His first impression of the Gateway City might be well suited for the city's visitor-guide propaganda.

"I thought it was Heaven," says Samir. "Everything was so green and clean. Coming from the middle of the desert, it was a big deal. It was beautiful."

Samir didn't sleep a wink the night he unearthed Saddam. Long after the party, he lay in bed replaying the unforgettable mission over and over in his mind. He pulled his laptop to the corner of the bed and once again viewed the image of him posed behind the handcuffed despot. At 6 a.m. he placed a call to St. Louis.

Mohammad Al-Baaj took the call in his south St. Louis home. Mohammed and Samir's fathers are best friends in Iraq, and their children have known each other all their lives.

"He told me to turn on CNN," recounts Mohammad, a brawny and jovial man. Weeks after casting his ballot in the January Iraqi national election, Mohammad still wears the purple dye on his index finger that marks him as a voter.

"He said he did something amazing but couldn't tell me. I didn't know what to think. I watched CNN from nine o'clock till four in the morning -- nothing. Finally I'm going to bed around four a.m., and they say that Saddam Hussein had been captured.

"A few hours later, Samir called me back. I said, 'You my man! Tonight I'm going to throw a party for you even if you can't be here. I'm going to throw a party.'"

There were no parties for Samir when he first arrived in America in the spring of 1994. He landed in St. Louis with just six dollars in his pocket, and he could barely speak English. Since then he's gained a vast network of Iraqi and American friends, and parlayed his love of automobiles toward making a comfortable living.

"He is a darn good mechanic," enthuses Nadir Malik, general manager of the airport shuttle service TransExpress, who hired Samir as a driver in 2001, only to learn later on that he was also talented under the hood. "Samir could dissect a military tank and put it back together in the same day. He's that good."

While working for TransExpress in the first few months of 2003, Samir again became swept up in efforts to topple Saddam's regime. At the time, President George W. Bush delivered an ultimatum threatening war if the Iraqi government did not allow United Nations weapons inspectors access to the country.

It took but a few hours for Samir to ace a screening exam qualifying him as an Arabic/English interpreter for the U.S. military. Days later he received his first assignment: He was to report immediately to Kuwait.

On May 2, 2003, Bush landed on the deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* -- its tower adorned with a huge sign that read "Mission Accomplished" -- to announce an end to combat operations in Iraq.

Arriving in Kuwait, Samir worried he'd missed all the action and was told there would be little use for him now. Demanding to be reassigned, he was dispatched to Tallil Airbase in Iraq and given the job of interviewing civilians and interrogating prisoners.

After his plane touched down in the dead of night in the second week of May 2003, Samir learned that the airbase was just outside his hometown of Nasiriyah.

"The first thing I told my boss was that I was from Nasiriyah and hadn't been back since 1991," says Samir. "She freaked out. She could not believe it. She said, 'Tomorrow we will take you to find your family.'"

The next morning Samir hopped on a Humvee for the half-hour drive to his parents' home. The entire neighborhood, some 700 residents, poured into the streets to greet him.

"It was an awesome feeling," he says. "I felt like I was coming with the U.S. forces to free my family. It was the best feeling of my life."

Samir saw his parents often over the course of his six-month deployment in Nasiriyah, many times bringing with him soldiers from the airbase to share in meals and family celebrations. When his contract lapsed in October 2003, Samir returned to the States and immediately signed up for a second tour.

Within a few weeks he was again in Iraq, but this time, instead of being stationed in the relatively docile south, Samir was assigned to the northern city of Tikrit, where elite U.S. forces were engaged in a massive manhunt to find Saddam Hussein.

Ten days after Saddam's capture, an Army officer burst into Samir's room, demanding his photos.

"He said officials at the Pentagon saw the photo with Saddam on the Internet and were pissed," recalls Samir.

It was months before the scandal of Abu Ghraib would break, but in hindsight Samir believes the military was doing some pre-emptive damage control. The picture of Samir gloating over Saddam could be seen as degrading, perhaps incriminating. A close inspection of the photo reveals blood on Saddam's lips where Samir's fists landed their mark.

"I begged him not to take the photos. I made a huge scene," recounts Samir. "But he took my laptop and erased everything. Even things that were in the trash can."

In reality, Samir's protests were merely illusory, for he had hidden away scores of copies of the photos, even going so far as to pass some along to fellow interpreters for safekeeping.

Today, military officials maintain they know of Samir's pictures but are unaware of any efforts to destroy the images.

"That may have happened to a certain extent on a local level, but it wasn't an objective here at Central Command," says Captain Alison Salerno, a public-affairs officer with the military's Tampa-based Central Command. "In a lot of situations the military frowns on so-called souvenir photos, and in this case the interpreter should've been instructed that private photos of a detainee that show their faces are not appropriate."

For his part, Samir is unapologetic.

"What were they going to do? Fire me? Send me home? Fine."

Samir remains adamant that he never released the pictures onto the Internet and speculates the leak might have come from Special Forces.

Within days of finding its way online, Samir's photo with Saddam was splashed across newspapers and televisions around the world. In Iraq, the news that the man who captured Saddam was an Iraqi made Samir's face -- if not his name -- a well-known image.

For months after returning to St. Louis, Samir kept a low profile. Few people outside the city's Iraqi community (estimated to be some 3,000 people) knew the identity of the man in the photo.

"I was scared to talk about it outside of my friends," says Samir. "I didn't know what might happen. In general, lots of people say they were happy about the capture of Saddam, but I know there are a lot of people out there who don't agree. They support Saddam or don't think the United States should be there."

It was only last summer -- after a friend with connections to the Missouri Republican Party arranged a meeting between Samir and President George W. Bush -- that Samir's story became public.

The meeting, held prior to Bush's campaign stop at the St. Charles Family Arena last July, lasted just a few minutes. Samir relayed to the president his story of capturing Saddam and presented him a gift of Iraqi beads signifying good luck. Bush told Samir he was immensely proud.

Samir's boss at the time, Nadir Malik, says Samir was back at work replacing a transmission just hours after meeting the president.

"It was unbelievable in a sense," recalls Malik. "I said, 'You just met the leader of the free world, and now you're covered in grease working on an engine?' But that's very much like Samir, he's pretty laid back."

Later, CNN and other outlets would grab the story. In January, a film crew from the cable network trailed Samir, Mohammad Al-Baaj and two other St. Louis residents of Iraqi descent as they drove Samir's green BMW 740 to Nashville to register to vote in the nation's first democratic elections in more than 50 years.

Followed to the polling station by the television cameras, Samir soon found himself surrounded by a crowd of Iraqi nationals.

"At first there were a dozen, then fifty," Samir says with a grin. "Soon there were probably a hundred people. It was amazing."

CNN led the story with the following teaser: "It's a world-famous photograph showing a man in military camouflage holding Saddam Hussein down on the ground. What you may not know is that the man actually lives in the St. Louis area. He was working with the U.S. military as an interpreter when American forces discovered Saddam's secret hiding place. Well, he ended being the first person to grab Saddam as he crawled out of his spider hole."

After learning that Samir wore a St. Louis Rams cap during Saddam's capture, the football team last season comped him several pairs of front-row tickets at the Edward Jones Dome.

More recently he was honored by the arena football franchise, River City Rage, which invited him to speak at a press conference last month announcing the team's new season and new ownership group.

Orchestrating the event was Ed Watkins, a slender man outfitted in a dark suit coat and a pair of wrinkled khakis. Watkins owned the franchise for the previous two seasons when it played under the pious moniker the Believers, and he was not about to hand off the team without a bit of last-minute pageantry.

"One of the great things about this country is our ability to express our opinion," Watkins told the two-dozen or so folks who crammed their way into a hotel conference room to witness the meeting. "That said, I'm doggone happy to present to you a man who's a hero in Iraq and here."

Samir strode confidently to the podium, dapperly attired in the English-cut suit and red-and-white tie he wears only for such events as this. He proceeded to recite a G-rated version of what is by now a well-rehearsed story and concluded his speech by expressing heartfelt regret that he would be unable to attend the team's home opener. Samir had been scheduled to be the special guest during a halftime performance titled "Honor America."

With misty brown eyes, he told the crowd: "I won't be here, but my heart will be."

Samir's friends say that away from the media spotlight, he's changed little since the night of December 13, 2003. He still wears his everyday uniform, a black tracksuit and Air Jordan sneakers, and works out daily at Bally's in Clayton. And he's more than willing to provide free auto service to friends.

Samir is quick to anger when people dismiss the necessity of the U.S. invasion of Iraq -- or, even worse, when they question the validity of Saddam's capture.

Such was the case early last month when United Press International ran a story debunking the public version of Saddam's capture. Based on an interview a former U.S. Marine gave to a Saudi newspaper, the article, which received scant attention, said Saddam was apprehended a day earlier than the official reported date of Saturday, December 13, and surrendered only after an intense firefight.

The ex-Marine, Nadim Abou Rabeh, of Lebanese descent, also said Saddam was not taken from the clutches of the spider hole but found in a modest home in a small village. Nadim claimed, too, that a military production team later fabricated the film of Saddam removed from the hole.

"People will believe what they want to believe," scoffs Samir, who heard the story but paid it no mind. "I was there. I know what happened."

Samir says that the night he took down Saddam has led him to pursue a higher purpose in life. He recently turned down a friend's offer of \$60,000 a year to run his auto shop.

"I want to do something bigger than my old job," he says. "My life has changed big time because of Saddam and because of the war. I want to continue to be part of this."

Late last month Samir returned to Iraq for the third time since the fall of Saddam's regime. This time he's working not as an interpreter but as a political and cultural consultant in the U.S. government's rebuilding efforts. The job can earn Samir in excess of \$100,000 a year, though he says he'd do it for half as much.

As to the risks of arbitrary suicide bombings, Samir says he'd rather die in Iraq than here in a car accident or from a heart attack.

"Everyone dies one day," he muses. "Dying with honor is better than dying with nothing. At least you're going to be remembered."

Such bravado hardly surprises Mohammad Al-Baaj, who says his friend has never been lacking in confidence.

"He told me that maybe now he'll capture Osama Bin Laden," cracks Mohammad. "I'm just jealous that I wasn't there when he captured Saddam -- to smack him around and say bad things to him. Can you imagine? I guarantee

you Saddam will never forget that experience. He'll never forget Samir."