

# The Triptych of Modern Combat

JOE SACCO'S REPORTING ON IRAQ

by Cord A. Scott, PhD

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**Abstract:** While one may read about and imagine combat based on verbal descriptions, visual depictions of warfare convey the information at a more visceral level. Chroniclers of conflict throughout time have tried to accurately depict the sights and concepts of warfare, and a wide variety of visual media have been used to discuss war, including films, television, and comic books. There is a symbiosis between comics and the military. Joe Sacco, who has gained a reputation in the new subfield of comics journalism as a reporter of conflicts around the world, has a knack for explaining the historical developments as well as the more immediate personal connections that bring a story to life. Unlike comic books that simply use war as a theme, Sacco tried to be true to what he observed in the field by drawing images as close to reality as possible. Sacco's three major works on the Iraq War tell different stories in a relatively brief timeframe (2005 to 2007). This article takes Sacco's three Iraq War graphic tales and dissects them to discover whether they convey a written or unwritten commentary on the war and whether they are effective in their intent.

**Keywords:** war, graphic novels, comic books, war comics, journalism, pictorial journalism, war correspondence, comics journalism, embedded journalist, Operation Iraqi Freedom, OIF, Operation Enduring Freedom, OEF, Gulf War, Iraq War

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War, at its core, is a visual event. While one may read and imagine combat based on verbal descriptions, visual depictions of warfare convey the information at another level. To that end, chroniclers of conflict have tried to accu-

rately depict the sights and concepts of warfare to an audience, whether soldiers or—perhaps more importantly—people for whom the front is remote and abstract: politicians and regular citizens at home. These people are the support basis for any conflict abroad, and if they cannot understand or embrace the reasons driving a war or military action or muster a sense of support or sympathy for the servicemembers involved, then their moral support may lag and fail, as was the case in the United States during the Vietnam War or the first Persian Gulf War and in the Soviet Union during its war in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> More recently, a wider variety of visual media have been used to discuss war,

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<https://doi.org/10.35318/mch.2019050205>

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<sup>1</sup> George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 909–10.

including films, television, and comic books. This last medium for depictions of warfare has seen contributions by many artists, all of whom have their own take on warfare and its depictions. Comic book readers tend to be in their early 20s to 30s, with disposable income, so they fit into the age range of the combatants.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, comic book superheroes have permeated popular culture through movie franchises and television series, and the success of comic-themed movies has conversely given more exposure to the medium of comic books, though they fit a different niche from the traditional superhero genre. There is a symbiosis between comics and the military. Famous character logos, such as the Punisher's skull, are used by military units, while military themes and storylines have been used in comic books since World War II.<sup>3</sup>

Comic book creators are also looking for different storylines and ways to convey ideas and discuss issues as well as reach more readers, and they have successfully entered the nonfiction category. One of the more recognized creators in the new subfield of comics journalism is Joe Sacco, who has gained a reputation as a reporter of conflicts around the world with a knack for explaining the historical developments as well as the more immediate personal connections that bring any story to life.

Sacco has reported on a wide variety of military conflicts in recent years. His style of journalism is a variation of photojournalism. He researches the material and conducts interviews, then sketches the events for either a comic book or longer graphic novel.<sup>4</sup> His work has concentrated on conflict around the world and has often been published in a more limited form in major news outlets, such as the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, the *Guardian*, or *Harper's* magazine. In addition to being translated into 14 languages, Sacco's work has earned him several honors, including an American Book Award, a Ridenhour Book Prize,

a Will Eisner Comic Industry Award, and a Guggenheim fellowship. While Sacco discusses the intricacies of combat, his work is geared toward a civilian population, not necessarily a military one, which would be focused more on specific language and ideas. The particular episodes from Sacco's work described in this article were based entirely on a civilian's perspective while embedded with Marine units and were written from a viewpoint that those on the ground might consider overly simplistic or even ignorant of military doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

Sacco's form of reporting has its origins in the combat illustrators of the American Civil War, who sketched images to give a sense of visual reference in a time when such technologies as high-speed film were not available. Artists for *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* often followed troops and quickly sketched images of events to provide an "action account" of the battles.<sup>6</sup> This kind of work still has resonance today, but it has effectively flipped from that older era and form. Sacco has made a critically acclaimed career of covering conflict, in particular the Yugoslav War and the fighting in Palestine, primarily on the intifada of the late 1990s. He has used his journalistic education and skills, combined with his artwork, to show combat around the world. His illustrations are similar to other war cartoonists in that he strives for a realistic approach to the look of war and its associated emotions, literal and mental. Unlike comic books that used war as a theme, Sacco tried to be true to the images, weapons, and even dialog that combatants have in the field by drawing the images as close to reality as possible, unlike some comic book artists who draw more exaggerated forms.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he tells of the horrors of war and leaves the reader with uncertain outcomes. Such objectivity has been a goal for many reporters covering conflicts.

Sacco's three major works on the Iraq War—covering Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF)—tell different stories in a relatively

<sup>2</sup> Vaneta Rogers, "Is the Average Age of Comic Book Readers Increasing?: Retailers Talk State of the Business 2017," *Newsarama*, 2 February 2017.

<sup>3</sup> For further analysis, see Cord A. Scott, *Comics and Conflict: Patriotism and Propaganda from World War II through Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014), specifically chapter 2 on World War II comic books and chapter 6 on Operation Iraqi Freedom comics.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Sacco, *Journalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012), xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Sacco, *Journalism*, 73–106.

<sup>6</sup> Harry L. Katz and Vincent Virga, *Civil War Sketch Book: Drawings from the Battlefield* (New York: Norton, 2012), 1–3.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, *Comics and Conflict*.

brief timeframe of insurgency in Iraq from 2005 to 2007. Two of the stories deal with the U.S. Marines and their service near Haditha in Western Iraq. They were reported and presented for a civilian population that may not understand the situation in the battle zone. While not as well-known as Sacco's earlier works on conflict, *Safe Zone Gorazde* or *Palestine*, the Iraq stories still discuss important aspects of the war, including questioning America's true role—savior or bully—especially during the Iraq invasion. Many governments and citizens of countries around the world opposed the invasion of Iraq, and even when the war was announced to be over and victory declared, the killing of Coalition servicemembers as well as many Iraqis continued unabated. While it may have been entirely happenstance, the publications that ran Sacco's work on Iraq may have been perceived as having antiwar sympathies (e.g., the *Guardian* in England) or as trying to convince readers of the questionable nature of the evidence and justification for the war in Iraq.<sup>8</sup> This was never overt in form but was another consideration in his work. Critical analysis of important national issues sometimes is seen as unpatriotic rather than as a necessary reflection on the lessons learned from an event.

Sacco is not the only writer/illustrator to address the Iraq War in a graphic novel format. Embedded journalist David Axe wrote two graphic novels—*War Fix* (with illustrator Steven Olexa, 2006) and *War is Boring: Bored Stiff, Scared to Death in the World's Worst War Zones* (with illustrator Matt Bors, 2010)—both of which deal with aspects of reporting and adrenaline. Another embedded journalist, Karl Zinsmeister, wrote *Combat Zone: True Tales of GIs in Iraq* (with illustrator Dan Jurgens, 2005), a fictionalized war comic. Comics writer Sid Jacobson and illustrator Ernie Colón followed up their graphic novel version of the 9/11 Commission's report, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (2006), with the graphic novel *After 9/11: America's War on Terror (2001– )* (2008), which seeks to put into context the post-11 September 2001 (9/11) world. But Sacco's work, rather than the broad over-

view of a historical monograph, offers a ground-level perspective that allows the reader to contemplate the issues of the war in terms of its human elements. Additionally, Sacco's work is much briefer than a typical comic book or graphic novel (8 pages versus more than 64)—a short-form comics journalism that is more akin to dispatches.<sup>9</sup> It might be said that he is trying to conduct war reporting in a manner reminiscent of reporters such as Ernie Pyle, from the perspective that by learning about the common combatants and their emotions and thoughts, one might better empathize with them and therefore support the cause. Pyle often traveled with Allied troops during World War II and usually covered the stories of soldiers on the ground rather than the generals who made strategic decisions. He also described life for the servicemembers at the front as well as the conditions in which they fought. Pyle was embedded with military units at a time when the word *embedded* was not yet used. While in these situations, journalists try to retain a distance so that the information they relate is neutral and use terms that may be common to those in the field but are not necessarily familiar to readers.

This article takes Sacco's three Iraq War graphic tales and dissects them, asking: Do the stories convey a written or unwritten commentary on the war? Does the United States have an effective way of transitioning from U.S. to Iraqi control? Are the stories effective in their intent? The stories and discussion on them are presented in the order in which they were published: "Complacency Kills," first published by the *Guardian* in 2005; "Trauma on Loan," published by the *Guardian* in 2006; and finally, "Down! Up!" which was originally published by *Harper's* magazine in 2007. These stories were later combined into a part of Sacco's collective work *Journalism*, published in 2012, and for purposes of simplicity, most notes will rely on the pages of the book *Journalism*.

## The Iraq of 2004 and Sacco

Sacco entered Iraq during its occupation in late fall 2004, when he began compiling information for the

<sup>8</sup> "Iraq: The Case for Decisive Action," *Guardian*, 18 January 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Sacco, *Journalism*, xvii.

first of the published comics, “Complacency Kills.”<sup>10</sup> It is important to look at the situation unfolding at the time, especially in al-Anbar Province in the western part of the country, and how the events of the following two years influenced his storylines. For additional reference to the situation on the ground, other sources are available.<sup>11</sup>

Following the cessation of formal combat operations in May 2003, vast parts of Iraq were thrown into rounds of sectarian violence as Shi’ites sought retribution against the Sunnis who ruled the Baath party and therefore all of Iraq. Further complicating matters were various clans as well as terrorist groups who saw the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime as a way to reintroduce a caliphate into Iraq, one based on strict interpretation of Sharia law. Finally, other groups decimated by the 2001 U.S. strikes against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan saw the opportunity to branch out to the groups opposed to Western influence in the region.<sup>12</sup> One of the most important parts of the overall picture in 2004 was the series of events surrounding the city of Fallujah, which had become a symbol of anarchy as well as anti-U.S. insurgency. In April 2004, four security operatives working for the private military contractor Blackwater USA were killed and their bodies desecrated by locals. This act spurred a response by the U.S. Marines in a limited capacity in April 2004 in Operation Vigilant Resolve, followed by Operation al-Fajr (New Dawn, also known as Phantom Fury) in November 2004. By the time that Sacco arrived northwest of Fallujah that December, the province was in full uprising.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than giving a solely military synopsis or analysis of the United States in Iraq, Sacco chose to simply report his observations in “Complacency

Kills,” similar to the way Pyle presented the lives of common combatants during World War II. Sacco was embedded at Haditha Dam on the Euphrates River, the headquarters of the 1st Battalion, 23d Marines, five miles north of the city of Haditha.<sup>14</sup> While Sacco was there in late fall 2004, the changes to both the province as well as within the Iraqi National Guard, the focus of his story “Down! Up!,” were just starting to occur. Had he stayed longer, the stories may have taken on a different perspective when, in November 2005, what was classified as a civilian massacre of some residents of Haditha by U.S. Marines occurred.<sup>15</sup> As it was, the stories that Sacco told and illustrated were still a reflection of what the soldiers and Marines felt while serving in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> They along with many Americans were somewhat vexed by the fact that despite the declaration “mission accomplished” in May 2003, U.S. military personnel were not only still in the country but were experiencing losses well in excess of those during the initial invasion.<sup>17</sup>

Sacco also occupied a position that few had worked before, reporting in remote areas such as Haditha as opposed to Baghdad. His work took place before David Axe’s *War Fix*, which dealt with the adrenaline rush of combat, as well as issues surrounding American forces in Iraq.<sup>18</sup> However, Axe’s work was not as focused on the military personnel in the area as Sacco’s. Sacco’s story “Trauma on Loan” was released around the same time as Brian K. Vaughan and Niko Henrichon’s graphic novel *Pride of Baghdad* (2008). Both are set in Iraq and feature the pet lions kept by Saddam Hussein’s oldest son, Uday Hussein. *Pride of Baghdad*, however, depicts what the lions saw while roaming through the rubble of Baghdad, giving the lions a voice to discuss the events around them.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Joe Sacco, “Complacency Kills,” *Guardian*, 24 February 2005; and Sacco, “Complacency Kills,” in *Journalism*, 74–81.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel B. Sparks, *Small Unit Actions* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps History Division, 2007), 13–15.

<sup>12</sup> Williamson Murray and MajGen Robert H. Scales Jr. (USA), *The Iraq War: A Military History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> William Langewiesche, “Rules of Engagement,” in Nicholas J. Schlosser, ed., *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004–2008: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography* (Washington, DC: Marine Corps History Division, 2010), 140.

<sup>14</sup> Langewiesche, “Rules of Engagement,” 137.

<sup>15</sup> Charlie Savage and Elisabeth Bumiller, “An Iraqi Massacre, a Light Sentence and a Question of Military Justice,” *New York Times*, 27 January 2012; and Sacco, “Down! Up!,” in *Journalism*, 82–97.

<sup>16</sup> Sacco, “Complacency Kills” and “Down! Up!,” in *Journalism*, 74–97.

<sup>17</sup> Sacco, “Complacency Kills,” 81.

<sup>18</sup> David Axe and Steven Olexa, *War Fix* (New York: NBM Publishing, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Brian K. Vaughan, Niko Henrichon, and Todd Klein, *Pride of Baghdad*, deluxe ed. (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2014).

While both used the idea of Uday's lions, the latter was obviously fictional while Sacco's story related true events briefly featuring the lions.

## “Complacency Kills”

The first of Sacco's stories focusing on the Iraq War was originally published as a comic extra for the *Guardian*. It illustrates the moral issues of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs, a.k.a. car bombs), the discussion of the war, and the comforts of home versus the harsh reality of life beyond the wire. Part of the story Sacco reported was about the thoughts of the Marines as well as the issue of when to use force (the idea of policing versus combat). This story explained that the Marines were, at times, unsure of the mission and the rules of engagement. Even when a potential adversary was acting in a manner that was clearly belligerent, the rules of warfare and response often meant that the Marines could do nothing until the individual committed an aggressive act, such as a shooting or car bomb detonation. By that time however, Americans might be either injured or killed and the culprits gone, only to resurface later.

Sacco incorporated the use of vehicle-borne personnel to respond to and pacify areas, like a kind of fire brigade, in “Complacency Kills.”<sup>20</sup> Sacco described in detail the concept of the mobile action platoon (MAP) and the Humvees used to patrol the area. The mobility and power of U.S. forces and their armored vehicles offered some protection against small arms fire but MAPs also were magnets for attacks by insurgents. It was additionally a physical symbol of the disconnect between U.S. forces and the Iraqi people, with the idea that superior technology would naturally win the war.<sup>21</sup>

The story centers on the fact that the Marines of 1st Battalion, 23d Marines, often had problems identifying enemy combatants. The fear of attack or contact from what at first glance appeared to be civilians but could turn out to be combatants made the job all the more dangerous and frustrating. One of the consistent

comments from both the media as well as some members of the military (albeit in very limited form) was that the mission in Iraq had no focus save that of placating politicians back home rather than doing what was necessary on the ground to pacify the area. In this regard, the comments were eerily similar to those of the Vietnam War.<sup>22</sup>

Servicemembers' thoughts about the war's purpose permeate the story. Two Marines, Corporal Chang (dubbed the “Iraqi lover”) and Sergeant Johnson, debate how the Iraqis feel about the American presence.<sup>23</sup> Often, the standard line from those on the ground was that the Americans were not wanted or were there to steal oil from Iraq or to otherwise push an agenda. Some military personnel and administration officials linked to the military have stated that the media had a deliberate bias against the war in Iraq specifically and the military in general.<sup>24</sup> In this story, Sacco tried to relate the facts as he observed them without overtly expressing an opinion in favor for or against the war. He simply noted, as the name of the story indicates, that if the Marines did not remain vigilant at all times, their complacency could get them killed. For Sacco, the article was a way to show civilian readers that the war was real and that there were consequences if Marines let their guard down.

All of Sacco's stories in the Iraq series centered on the average U.S. servicemember, for example, Captain Kuniholm, who was described as a liberal PhD student. Sacco identifying Kuniholm's politics and education was significant because it goes against the stereotype of servicemembers: that they are undereducated and often politically conservative in their views.<sup>25</sup> Political commentary at home was also in full swing by late 2004, when Sacco was in Iraq, as two presidential candidates' war records were argued. The 2004 presidential election centered on President George W. Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq due to Saddam Hussein's construction and storage of weapons of mass destruction. The discussion of Bush's war

<sup>22</sup> Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 909–10.

<sup>23</sup> Sacco, “Complacency Kills,” 76–77.

<sup>24</sup> Murray and Scales, *The Iraq War*, 196.

<sup>25</sup> Sacco, “Complacency Kills,” 75.

<sup>20</sup> Sacco, “Complacency Kills,” 74.

<sup>21</sup> Murray and Scales, *The Iraq War*, 259–60.



record and that of his Democratic opponent, John Kerry, also brought to light the struggle of military service and its relationship to the political landscape.<sup>26</sup>

One of the problems that Sacco noted in this comic dispatch was that the enemy, in this case the anti-American forces, would not conduct a “stand-up” fight—that is, fight in a military manner. The tactics of asymmetrical warfare frustrated the American forces, who had shifted from aggressive military operations to conducting operations more akin to peacekeeping or police work. The Iraqis certainly knew that they would not defeat the United States using tactics of conventional warfare, so they relied on tactics that did work, waging guerrilla warfare. Insurgents did not wear uniforms, nor would they necessarily attack military targets; rather, they conducted operations that were meant to sow terror and confusion. In that regard, even neutral Iraqis would perceive the United States as being unable to stop the attacks and engaged in a conflict that would ultimately fail.<sup>27</sup>

“Complacency Kills” captures the frustration of U.S. forces toward the Iraqi population as well as the enemy. It explores questions about who one trusts and when a servicemember should fire a weapon. The constant second-guessing and sense of impotence at what could not be prevented were sources of frustration for military personnel. Questions that seemed to have clear-cut answers in the United States were not so easily answered in the fog of war in Iraq.

The Marines (and the U.S. armed forces in general) were often frustrated and sometimes, though unstated, battled a sense of failure about their mission

when Sacco wrote his first story, which Sacco continued to note in his other Iraq War stories.<sup>28</sup> The city of Haditha was not particularly stable at that point, and sectarian violence as well as violence toward U.S. forces was on the rise. In “Complacency Kills,” Sacco conveys the impression that the Marines feel more like cops or that they are hamstrung by the rules of engagement. But was this story intended to influence British readers against the mission in Iraq or to blame Prime Minister Tony Blair’s administration for blindly following President Bush into a questionable war? The indication seems to be not overtly so. Though it was published in the *Guardian*, Sacco intended it for a mixed international audience. While he has lived in the United States and writes and illustrates primarily for a U.S. and Canadian audience, Sacco is Maltese, making him a British citizen by birth.<sup>29</sup>

Sacco noted that “Complacency Kills” could have been written about servicemembers during any time period.<sup>30</sup> It showed the disconnect of soldiers from a “moral” war, such as World War II, where the goals were much more stated and direct, with what was going on in Iraq in 2004, where the situation was more convoluted. The Marines at the Haditha Dam had all the comforts of home, including a workout space, snacks, and television. The location could have been on any base around the world, further emphasizing the disconnect between the Marines and the locals.

Though not directly connected, there is a link between Haditha, the Marines, and Sacco’s second Iraq War comic. Haditha was the site of a massacre of 24 unarmed Iraqi civilians on 19 November 2005 by eight Marines of Company K, 3d Battalion, 1st Marine Division, who were convicted of unlawful killing. This incident further blurred the lines between combatants, civilians, and terrorists and made a complicated situation more difficult.<sup>31</sup> For the U.S. military personnel fighting in the Haditha area who were the subject of “Complacency Kills,” the frustrations of controlling or

<sup>26</sup> In fall 2004, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth openly attacked presidential candidate Kerry’s Silver Star for valor, awarded for a combat situation in 1968. The organization claimed that his award for bravery was politically motivated, while others noted that while Kerry may or may not have deserved such an award, he was physically in the country of Vietnam serving when he could have sought some sort of exemption. Democrats questioned Bush’s military record because he served in the Louisiana National Guard and his military records were missing several details about his assignment. These comments were debated and reported on extensively in all the media outlets. See Kate Zernike, “Veterans Rebut ‘Swift Boat’ Charges Against Kerry in Answer to Challenge,” *New York Times*, 22 June 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Gerard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin, eds., *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 24–27.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Fainaru, “For Marines, a Frustrating Fight,” *Washington Post*, 10 October 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Duncan Campbell, “I Do Comics, Not Graphic Novels,” *Guardian*, 23 October 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Sacco, *Journalism*, 106.

<sup>31</sup> Langewiesche, “Rules of Engagement,” 137–38.

pacifying Iraq still made it seem as though the United States was hamstrung by the media, through either scrutinizing or demonizing any U.S. actions, as well as the rules of engagement that U.S. troops must follow.<sup>32</sup> Given the 2004 abuses in Abu Ghraib prison that had already come to light, this was not unexpected. The abuse allegations, followed by the Haditha incident, seems to have made the next story Sacco wrote for the *Guardian* a natural follow-on piece.

### “Trauma on Loan”

Another comic Sacco created for the *Guardian* in early 2006 centered on the issue of prisoners in Iraq and how misidentification might lead to further image issues for the U.S. military in Iraq. It also focused on whether the United States had contributed to either the implicit or explicit torture of Iraqis to gain information. Such interrogation methods and their results damaged U.S. credibility, especially during Iraqi elections.

Given the increasingly violent and elusive nature of the insurgency in Iraq, it was not surprising that American servicemembers felt considerable frustration and animosity toward the Iraqis or Afghans. The nature of insurgency often leads to acts of violence against locals, as it has in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The inability to clearly identify the enemy at times led to acts such as the abuse noted by writers Sacco, Axe, and Vaughan, among others.

The overall storyline seemingly exemplified the U.S. treatment of locals. In July 2003, businessmen Thahar Sabbar and Sherzad Khalid were arrested by U.S. forces. As with many aspects of the post-invasion occupation of Iraq, people often reported neighbors and others who they believed were colluding with Hussein’s forces as well as those against whom they held a grudge (e.g., a neighbor who had slighted their family); this may have been the case for Sabbar and Khalid, but no formal evidence has been uncovered to that end. Sabbar and Khalid were detained by U.S. forces and, according to their accounts, subjected to the same sort of torture that was associated with the Mukhabbarat (Iraqi Secret Police) or Hussein’s sa-

distic son Uday.<sup>33</sup> Sacco depicted how Uday’s use of his pet lions to intimidate prisoners was reportedly copied by the forces who held Sabbar and Khalid in “Trauma on Loan.”

In 2005, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit in the U.S. federal court system alleging that Donald Rumsfeld, then secretary of defense, authorized the use of torture to obtain information.<sup>34</sup> The lawsuit had eight plaintiffs to represent the mass of detainees from both theaters of combat active in 2004 (four Afghans and four Iraqis), of which Sabbar and Khalid were a part. While Sacco did not actually describe the lawsuit that brought Sabbar and Khalid to the United States, it is important to note that the suit itself was the first against anyone in the Bush administration, and it noted that U.S. forces—the U.S. Army as well as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—were using torture to obtain information.<sup>35</sup> In Sacco’s story, the reader is introduced to other protests against the use of torture, such as the public display by Jennifer K. Harbury, who demonstrated in front of the White House, standing in what has become known as the Abu Ghraib pose: arms extended and a black hood over her head. Harbury’s Guatemalan husband was tortured in the late 1980s by a CIA-trained group, and her protest was to note that the U.S. government was doing it again.<sup>36</sup>

The initial comments on the use of torture were dismissed by Rumsfeld and other administration officials as pedantic and weak. It has often been noted that when dealing with religious zealots or others willing to die for their cause, the rules change and the adversary’s willingness to commit suicide for a political end meant the use of torture was a necessity for gaining information to prevent future attacks on U.S. targets.<sup>37</sup> The wider issue that Sacco addressed in “Trauma on Loan” was the many different forms torture took,

<sup>33</sup> Sacco, “Trauma on Loan,” in *Journalism*, 98–105.

<sup>34</sup> “The Case against Rumsfeld,” ACLU, accessed 15 November 2019.

<sup>35</sup> *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program* (Washington, DC: Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Sacco, “Trauma on Loan,” 104.

<sup>37</sup> *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program*, 155–58; and Chaliand and Blin, *The History of Terrorism*, 360–61.

<sup>32</sup> Sacco, “Complacency Kills,” 80.

from debasing a person through either simulated rape with a water bottle and interrogation of naked male prisoners by females to beatings with clubs. Sacco further describes the borderline sadistic actions of a U.S. soldier taunting Iraqi prisoners and forcing a prisoner to debase himself for cigarettes. While many pundits countered by arguing that Saddam Hussein habitually used means of torture that were far worse, the idea of torture was one that could not be ignored in regard to U.S. policy.<sup>38</sup> Sacco noted that his attempts to gain information from Sabbar and Khalid caused them pain by forcing them to relive events and were therefore a form of torture for them as well as for Sacco, who needed the information to corroborate the events. Sacco noted that while he was trying to ascertain the truth of the matter, it was often vexing and ultimately unsuccessful.

From this story, one could easily conclude that the U.S. military was no better than Saddam Hussein in its use of torture to gain information, albeit in less obviously violent forms. At the same time, Sacco noted that he could not get a lot of information to later corroborate the accounts of arrest, or of the specific facts by which the men were detained. The larger question one takes away from reading “Trauma on Loan” was what sort of deleterious effects were left on the Iraqi people, and what of the future? Sacco did not come to any sort of conclusions, but his underlying tone was that the decision to go to war, rather than the immediate results of the actions of the Marines on the ground, was flawed.

## “Down! Up!”

The final story in Sacco’s Iraq War series was published in *Harper’s* magazine in 2007. “Down! Up!” follows the 1st Battalion, 23d Marines, again stationed at Haditha Dam, focusing on the training of Iraqi National Guard (ING) forces to prepare them for the United States’ exit from Iraq. However, the story demonstrates the ineffective nature of the training from the viewpoint of the Marines.

Two Americans—Marine Reserve Sergeant Tim Weaver and Navy Reserve Petty Officer Second Class Scott Saba—are featured, both involved in the training of the ING personnel. Their training methods seemed harsh at first glance, consisting primarily of physical exercises akin to those practiced in U.S. training camps, but it was intended to keep people alive. The story explores the underlying distrust that existed between the Iraqi trainees and U.S. forces. The training in fact varied little from that used by U.S. forces, except for one key difference: level of commitment to military service. The U.S. forces were professionally trained as a truly volunteer military, as opposed to Iraqi volunteers whose level of commitment might be widely varied or even nonexistent (that is, service may have been forced); and that the standards of training involved different levels of physical fitness.<sup>39</sup> One of the larger problems in Iraq after Saddam Hussein’s overthrow was that the ING were often targets of violence from a variety of sources. As one ING recruit named Qaid noted, “If you work for the Americans, the mujahedeen will kill you; if you work for the mujahedeen, the Americans will kill you; if you stay home you won’t earn any money.”<sup>40</sup>

The larger issue for both the American trainers and the ING trainees was a level of professionalism. In Sacco’s story, the overall position of the U.S. forces was that the ING needed to take on training and their military duties—such as patrolling, interdiction, and counterinsurgency—seriously, lest they become easy targets for anti-U.S. forces. Whether the Americans should have conducted the war in Iraq in 2003 was no longer of concern; it was simply a matter of learning the lessons to keep ING trainees alive when their forces took over Iraq’s security activities. The trainers depicted in the story noted that the Iraqis were not ready to conduct their own operations. The same

<sup>38</sup> *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program*; and Susan B. Glasser, “Scars Document Torture by Hussein Regime,” *Washington Post*, 19 April 2003.

<sup>39</sup> The use of the term *volunteers* is spurious here as it denotes that the Iraqis may have been forced to join as a way to avoid some sort of punishment from civilian authorities or due to a lack of other more applicable or suitable jobs in their area. While volunteers in the sense that they joined willingly, as opposed to some form of conscription, these troops were not always enthusiastic. Sacco, “Down! Up!,” in *Journalism*, 82.

<sup>40</sup> Sacco, “Down! Up!,” 97.



could have been said of the Afghan National Army troops as well.

The one issue of note in “Down! Up!” is that both groups were not active duty combatants, but Reserve forces pulled into a full combat role. One of the complaints from many Americans was that despite the official end of the war after a short seven weeks, formal hostilities did not end; the conflict merely shifted from formal combat operations to an insurgency that required more American troops for the role of training and advisement. The need for extra American troops required activating a considerable number of U.S. armed forces Reserve and National Guard units.<sup>41</sup> “Down! Up!” again featured the Marine reservists of 1st Battalion, 23d Marines, in Haditha in the fall of 2004.<sup>42</sup>

The Iraqis were in a similar situation. They were not full-time soldiers, nor did they expect to be utilized as such. The ING was meant to offer additional security to the Iraqi national police forces. The idea was that the old way of corruption and familial ties could be broken, and a new professional force could be instituted, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, many of the ING recruits were from large, poor families with limited opportunities to do anything other than become a soldier.<sup>43</sup> Sacco noted the Iraqis’ perception that the Americans were angry at them for being lazy and unmotivated.<sup>44</sup> There are several reasons this could have occurred.

First, the Iraqis had been effectively in a state of war or crisis for close to 25 years at the time Sacco wrote “Down! Up!.” Between the brutality of the Iran-Iraq War, the Kuwait invasion and Operation Desert Storm, the sanctions, the secret police, and Operation Iraqi Freedom and the sectarian violence it unleashed, it was not surprising that there were issues of morale, motivation, and training.<sup>45</sup>

Second, the prevailing assumption among the ING was like that of the National Guard in the United States: they were not full-time soldiers and therefore would not be needed on the front lines. The Iraq War changed that for both sides.

Third, the tribal nature of Iraqi as well as other Arabic societies meant that ING members’ loyalties were divided. As the groups within the country are often linked through blood ties and familial obligations, one’s immediate group takes precedence. Finally, add to that the sectarian violence connected to the branches of Islam, Sunni, Shi’a, and Kurd, and these cultural, societal, and national divisions led to further violence.<sup>46</sup> Sacco’s story explained that the U.S. concept removed the ING members from their communities for training and reunited them in another part of the country, where the idea of blood ties, and possible feuds, would supposedly dissipate. This idyllic theory of the training and integration process was supposed to allow more democratic ideas to flourish and subsume family ties and local identity. This approach did not bear any fruit. Instead, the distrust and violence remained.

The 60th ING Battalion was disbanded around the time of the initial reporting and was absorbed into the Iraqi Army by the time Sacco’s story was published in *Harper’s*. The idea that the Iraqis were unable or unwilling to conduct their own patrols was important to note as well, as it demonstrated the lack of trust—others would say lack of competency—of the troops slated to replace U.S. forces. Even the Marines noted that the necessity of Iraqi involvement was paramount to any sort of U.S. withdrawal. The idea of Iraqi readiness was also noted in the analysis by military officials at the time.<sup>47</sup> In summation, it was not those who carried out the policy for whom Sacco held negative feelings or ideas, but for the U.S. policy that seemed flawed.

## Conclusion

Given that realistic art is often a necessity in modern comics, a reader with a working knowledge of the world and a visual familiarity with military hardware

<sup>41</sup> Sacco, “Complacency Kills,” 77; and John Sloan Brown, *Keplar Legions: The Transformation of the U.S. Army, 1989–2005* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2008), 281.

<sup>42</sup> Sacco, “Down! Up!,” 82; and Langewiesche, “Rules of Engagement,” 137.

<sup>43</sup> Sacco, “Down! Up!,” 84.

<sup>44</sup> Sacco, “Down! Up!,” 95.

<sup>45</sup> “Old Iraqi National Guard, 2004–2005,” Global Security (website), accessed 15 November 2019.

<sup>46</sup> *Small Unit Actions*, 13; and Schlosser, *U.S. Marines in Iraq*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Langewiesche, “Rules of Engagement,” 142.

wants a story and images that are at least fairly accurate and an authentic story that resonates. For an informed reader, stories such as these may be a first step toward seeking out more detailed monographs on the conflicts written by the combatants. Illustrative stories such as Sacco's may also discuss lesser-known aspects of a conflict, such as the political background that led to it. The merging of journalism with the comic book format may also mean a future reevaluation of conflicts and the reporting thereof. What is most compelling is how Sacco's work brings a journalistic sense to the comic book field. This new style of journalism should be seen as biased due to its political leanings or vantage points, but at the same time as a springboard for further exploration of the events depicted in the story. As has been shown in the stories, Sacco shows an empathy for the Marines with whom he was embedded, but he also may show some bias against the reasons the United States entered a war in Iraq. Sacco's work fits in the first draft of history, but it is still from a journalist's point of view. If combined with more detailed accounts, and even unofficial comic sources such as Max Uriarte's *Terminal Lance*, perhaps a more accurate picture emerges.

For anyone reporting on combat or even those writing on it, the events of the moment are often not what is recorded by historians. Following the use and manipulation of the media in wartime for political goals, the new era of instant communication is a realm in which information can be manipulated, omitted, or forgotten. Innuendo becomes the norm and the events become clouded by the reporter as well as the

witnesses. Much of this stems from the fact that the lines seem to blur between the combatant and the reporter, especially when the latter is embedded with the former. However, the role that Sacco occupies is one that allows for personal reflection as well as time to check the facts. Regardless, Sacco reported on the general attitudes of the U.S. forces with whom he was embedded during the Iraq War and his stories point to the idea that the war has had, at best, a neutral impact and at worst has been a public relations disaster due to actions that have contributed to the general mistrust of U.S. policy in the region. The larger question might be how the United States can alleviate that damage.

Sacco is to be commended for his work in Iraq and for being willing to tackle subjects that many in the United States simply do not understand, either in its history or the combat encountered by those who serve a tour there. His medium is one that does not allow for the instant reporting that has become the norm. His works captured a part of the conflicts in a new form of historical documentation that offers a unique perspective on the struggles and frustrations encountered in Iraq. His work provides a means for people to form a greater understanding of aspects of combat operations in the post-9/11 world. As with any first draft of history, a review of the stories reported at the time might yield a different reading of events, and these initial observations might well have changed as more information and other reports surfaced. Regardless, it is a way to capture in visual form the moments and ideas in a wider conflict.