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We are driving to the Turkish border. A car appears ahead. 'Don't stop!' I shout. Men leap out, assault rifles in hand. Then they take us...



**ANTHONY LOYD:
MY CAPTURE AND ESCAPE
FROM SYRIA**

Photographs Jack Hill

ONE DAY HE FED US. THE NEXT DAY HE KIDNAPPED US

In May, Times correspondent Anthony Loyd was taken hostage in Syria with photographer Jack Hill. He tells the extraordinary story of their betrayal and capture by rebel leader Hakim Anza – and his shooting at Hakim's hands

PHOTOGRAPHS Jack Hill



Anthony Loyd (centre) and Jack Hill (right) in the house of rebel leader Hakim Anza (left) in Tal Rifaat, shortly before he took them prisoner

Marea, northern Syria: May 14, 2014

A doctor stood by my bed. He was a young man with slicked-back hair and limpid brown eyes and he wore the familiar uniform of a Syrian doctor, an end-of-the-world weariness stitched with visions of terrible, indescribable wounds by three years' too many dead. I had been tied up, beaten until I blacked out, then shot twice, then beaten a lot more so that one of my eyeballs had haemorrhaged; I had had a rock smashed on my head and been stripped naked, save for a set of handcuffs and a coating of blood. I was not an especially interesting casualty. Later they wrote "torture history" on my medical file – I would not have agreed – but even that phrase made me an unremarkable member of a very big Syrian club, and the doctor's eyes kept flicking to the bed on my left, where a badly wounded rebel lay in a pile of moaning bandages.

Nevertheless, out of decency the doctor offered me his phone. It had two bars of signal and one minute of credit. He suggested I call someone. I called my wife. I told her that I had escaped, that I was with the good guys and that I was sorry. I did not say I had been shot.

Then the doctor offered me a choice. It was the first I had had for a while.

"We have some morphine," he said, and paused before speaking again. "Unless, of course, you think you can handle it?"

His question was tinged with a kind of hope. I understood exactly what he was trying to tell me: they had a little morphine in that Syrian field hospital and would give it to me if I asked for it. Really, though, they would prefer to keep it for casualties who needed it, which was too bad, because my wounds were just beginning to lose their numbed-jelly feel and were moving fast towards the throbbing run-over-by-a-truck stage of pain.

It had been a hot, heaving, mange-crusted, tartar-toothed, yellow-eyed, rabid dog of a day. Only a few hours earlier as a hostage, I had considered bludgeoning someone to death with a rock while tricking them into kindness. A friend of mine had beaten a man to the ground with a hammer. Then came a desperate breakout: the roofs; the run. Now I was alone, with little idea of the fate of my comrades.

So I could have done with a good boot of morphine to take the day away and slick my passage home. It had been a while. Hell, I felt like I had earned it.

I stared at the doctor out of my good eye and I took a bit of time, thinking about it all, before I replied ...

I had known by the way the hand moved that things were going horribly wrong. A man's

hand, his left, it waved through the window of a dark blue BMW X5. That car already boded ill. Everything about it – the gleaming paintwork, untouched by so much as a pebble on that empty, dust-encrusted road; its value in a war-ravaged land of poverty; the vehicle's predatory low-speed prowling just ahead of us – suggested that something very bad was about to happen.

The hand confirmed it. The fingers were slightly plump. I saw no dirt, no scar on that smooth skin, but the way it emerged from the driver's window, the languid confidence with which it waved us down, as entitled and effete as that of a Bourbon aristocrat dispensing commands to a verge-side dolt, suggested something much worse than the confidence of power and authority: ownership. We were already a possession.

"Don't stop for this guy!" I ordered Mahmoud, my trusted friend and fixer, and our tinny saloon sped past the more powerful car in front as he gunned the engine.

It was 8.30am. Only minutes earlier, the four of us – the *Times* photographer Jack Hill, Mahmoud, his sidekick, Avo, and I – had said goodbye to our host of the previous evening, Hakim, aka Hakim Anza, otherwise known as Abdel Hakim al Yaseen. A local rebel commander whom we had known across a two-year span, this former accountant had bade us farewell on the threshold of his house in Tal Rifaat with a flawless display of warmth, clasping us in an embrace – and I can barely write the words now, four months later, without feeling my face twist with loathing at the depth of his deception.

We had dined with him under his roof, met his newborn daughter, played with his

I HIT THE DISTRESS ALARM ON MY SATELLITE TRACKING DEVICE. IT MALFUNCTIONED

son, discussed dead and absent friends, the course of the war against the regime and the conflict between rebel groups and Isis.

We had slept as guests in his home. He had even ensured that we did not depart for Turkey without first being given breakfast and coffee. And behind all that, he was all the while planning our downfall, manoeuvring to have us abducted and sold as hostages: a fate that guaranteed lengthy captivity in abysmal conditions, heartbreak for our families, possible beheading. The skill with which Hakim masked his treachery seems somehow a worse crime than the treachery itself. I despise him.

Then, clearing a gentle hill less than 20 minutes from the sanctuary of the Turkish



border, I saw the BMW heave into view. One second I had been imagining supper that night in Turkey, toasting the success of another Syrian assignment, and the next I saw the ravine of captivity open up ahead of me.

In those last few seconds of liberty, I reached for the satellite tracking device in my pocket. Capable of pinpointing our location to within a few metres, I had learnt to respect that device after a nightmare near-abduction by foreign fighters from Isis the previous year. The tracker was fully charged and logged in. I surreptitiously removed the safety arm from the panic button, designed to trigger an immediate distress alarm and locator signal to the UK. I pressed it. It malfunctioned.

For the previous 18 months, ever since James Foley and John Cantlie were abducted, I had been terrified by the thought of joining "the others" in Syria. "The others" were the western hostages, predominantly journalists and aid workers, held there by Isis, the

ultra-fundamentalist terror group known locally as the Daesh, the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State.

In most cases, these hostages' identities were never revealed to the outside world before they appeared in Islamic State murder videos, and in the UK few people knew the scope of the abductions.

By January this year, "the others" numbered between 15 and 20. Few had been abducted by Isis in the first instance. Most had been seized in feral, small-town hovels such as Tal Rifaat and Atmeh by criminal gangs among the mainstream Syrian rebel groups, and then sold on to Isis, which was the biggest and wealthiest shareholder in these kidnapped commodities.

Some of the hostages, like James Foley, I knew personally. I loathe false claimants, and I spend too much time hanging around with death to want to be any nearer to it than I am, so I am not going to come out with some phoney line about what great friends we were now he is dead. This is what is true,

though: James Foley was cool, Lucky Luke cool – a charming American with an aura of goodness who engendered warmth and harmony in almost everyone he met. He was kind and brave and funny, all of which made him cooler still. When he was killed like that, it was hard to imagine ever laughing again.

Once taken, the rules governing the fate of these hostages, James and the others, were chillingly simple. Once in Isis hands, those nationals belonging to ransom-paying countries were eventually freed for hefty sums after lengthy captivity in horrible conditions. Between spring and summer this year, four Frenchmen, three Spaniards, an Italian and a Dane were released by Isis after ransom payments.

Yet if you were an American or British hostage, a citizen of a nation unwilling to pay a ransom, there was little hope of rescue or release in Syria. So the thought of being taken hostage there had always appalled me. I had no faith that my government was capable of freeing me. Understanding that if I was ever

abducted then murder would be a possible conclusion, the resolution to escape was already entrenched in me.

An internal voice kicked in as soon as I saw the take-down gang leap out of the BMW, yelling, assault rifles in hand. I had encountered this voice a few times before. It spoke only in the most extreme situations. It had been there when I ran away from boarding school; in a West African jungle, when I tried and failed to save a man's life, both of us bleeding and injured; in Grozny in Chechnya, one snow-laden day when a maddened babushka, unhinged by shellfire and shredded bodies, accosted me using her husband's severed leg as a club; in an ambush in Bosnia; beside the body of a great friend shot dead; when I was abducted in Sierra Leone and held beside a dead soldier whose corpse was being eaten by vultures; when I held my mother's hand as she died.

I knew it as "the Navigator". It offered reason even as time bent inside out.

Now it spoke again. "Endure the shock of this moment," it told me. "Build any rapport you can with your captors. Deceive and trick them in any way you are able. Fight paralysis. Escape at the first opportunity."

The gang had obviously done this before. They knew when to shout and when to strike, when to be calm and silent. They sprang out of their vehicle, seized us, and within 15 seconds had all four of us pushed down as prisoners in the X5's luggage compartment. There was a flurry of blows to subjugate us and a pile of blankets over our heads to mask us from view as the vehicle sped away.

Was this a kidnap gang, I wondered. Or, fear of fears, had we fallen into the hands of one of the ultra-radical jihadist splinter groups intent on securing four victims for an immediate beheading, a filmed execution?

The answer came minutes later, and in an unexpected fashion. As the vehicle roared onwards, two of the gang leant over the back seat, lifted the blankets and deftly removed every item from our pockets. They came to my asthma inhaler.

I rarely suffer the condition, but I always keep an inhaler on me in war in case I should have to spend the night somewhere where the dust can precipitate an attack

So when one of the gang, a young, bearded fighter in his early twenties, took the inhaler from my pocket, I sat up and asked for it back. He slapped me around the head a couple of times as a default reaction, but I pushed the issue. He hit me one more time but then, curious, he shrugged a question. I pointed at the inhaler, then at my chest, and gasped dramatically. He seemed to understand. He handed the inhaler back.

It was an epiphany. My health was

important to them, which meant that my life was, too, in the short term at least. I determined to exploit the situation and deceive them.

In this way I adopted my hostage persona: the sick one, an unlikely escapee of little concern. It was not an especially glorious identity, but at that moment there were few horses in town, so I clung to the one nag available and waited for my chance to run.

Our captors drove us to an abandoned farm. In a cellar there, we were pushed to the ground, blindfolded, shrouded with blankets, and had our hands tied with plasticuffs.

The fighter who bonded my wrists was overzealous, and behind my shoulder I heard the voice of his commander issue a rebuke as the cuffs zipped tight into my skin. My fingers went numb. The incapacitation bothered me much more than the blindness.

So I coughed and gasped, feigning an asthma attack to see where it got me. After a time, a guard led me up some steps. The blanket and blindfold were lifted and I was handed a glass of water. I saw a gunman in front of me. Two others watched from the top of a stairwell. The building was made out of orange stone and, through a window, I noticed an orchard. Come the night, I thought, looking at the trees.

As they replaced my blindfold, a guard tried to take the chain from my neck. On it was my daughter's name on a dirty silver tag, alongside a tiny silver fish engraved with the word "Hope" beside "7.7.07", the date I married. Strapped to the inside of my left knee, which they had yet to discover, was a brass vial containing the ashes of my friend and mentor, the reporter Kurt Schork, who was killed in an ambush in 2000. Each of these talismans – the tag, the fish, the vial – were more essential to me than the asthma inhaler. They were juju, my war magic, and I would not give them up easily.

So I resisted the guard, and called the word "daughter, daughter", pronouncing the Arabic version of my daughter's name. The man grunted and released his grip on the chain. It was another small achievement: I had identified myself as a father. I knew from my hostage training that it is sometimes harder for a man, especially if he has children himself, to kill another he knows to be a parent.

Back in the cellar a few minutes later, as the shock receded, I felt the first bite of traction in our situation. It seemed I knew what I was doing. I raised my bound hands. It was time to establish dialogue.

"Speak that one!" a captor commanded. "Who are you and why have you taken us?" I asked.

As fate would have it, that was the last moment of input I had into events that day, and any sense of "control" seems laughable when matched against what happened later.

The dialogue wandered briefly into the role

of journalists in Syria. One of our captors asked what good we did. Dodging obvious pitfalls, I replied that independent reporting was essential in establishing factual record. The captor paused for a second. During some of those preceding few minutes our captors had merely been playing with us. The gang were just the snatch element of a chain that likely led east to Isis in Raqqa. They had neither personal animosity towards us, nor much interest in dialogue. We were just cargo.

Yet when the man responded, his words were considered and sincere.

"What good is factual record to us," he said quietly, "when our children are dying?"

After a while, kneeling there in the dark, I wondered whether I would have to kill one of them to get back to my wife and daughters. Would I have to crush a sleeping guard's head with a rock? Would I do that? What if it were the young one who gave me back my inhaler? Could I dash his brains out? How heavy would the rock have to be? How big? Smash his crown or temple? Rock edge or flat?

Memories of that moment still linger. Yet even today, so long afterwards, it is still the kidnapper's softly spoken remark that gnaws louder in my mind than my own desperate evaluations that day, eating away at my professional raison d'être. What good was factual record to Syrians when their children were dying?

If I could answer, then it would start with a gassed mechanic, a barrel rolling from the sky and the silhouette of a dead child cut from ash into a classroom wall.

In April 2013, months before the large-scale gas attack in Damascus, I met a young mechanic whose wife and children had been gassed to death during a chemical strike in Aleppo. In 21 years as a reporter, I can think of few stories I have written that might or should have made a difference. His story was one of them.

He was waiting for the rain to wash the nerve-gas contamination from his home when I found him. Waiting for the rain! Water falling from the sky was his only hope of help. His experience, of a life carelessly ruined between a regime few liked and a rebel force few invited, epitomised that of the Syrian Everyman.

Yasser Yunis was his name, and his account of the gas attack became a groundbreaking story, for President Obama had warned the Syrian regime eight months previously that the use of chemical weapons marked a trigger point, a "red line", in US response.

Yet there was no response. America's were hollow words. Four months later, the regime gassed hundreds more Syrians to death in the Damascus suburbs. Britain and America studiously avoided intervention, as the war's death count raced off the graph.

No wonder, then, that as time went by, many Syrians began to regard the few journalists



WAS THIS A KIDNAP GANG? OR A RADICAL JIHADIST GROUP SECURING VICTIMS FOR AN IMMEDIATE BEHEADING?

daring to return there not as their moral champions, but as the emissaries of western cynicism: voyeurs recording and documenting a suffering sure in the knowledge that nothing would be done to alleviate it.

I returned repeatedly anyway, because I gave a f*** and because it was the most important conflict in the world. Each of my 14 assignments there was worse than the previous one.

In this way, I had spent the days before our abduction working alongside Jack and Mahmoud in Aleppo once again, where the regime was methodically destroying rebel-held zones in the city using barrel bombs and conventional air strikes. Schoolchild, stallholder, pensioner, doctor, nurse or rebel: barrel bombs made no discrimination when blasting Syrians into smears of gristle and shards of bone.

In the ruins of a school in Ain Jalout, in the south of the city, I came to the aftermath of an air strike that ten days earlier had killed thirty children, two teachers and fifteen parents during an open day. Children's shoes still lay in pools of congealed gore on the



Jack Hill's Syria pictures
Main images, clockwise from far left: the bombed-out Salahuddin area of Aleppo; fleeing residents; at bombed Ain Jalout school, where 30 children were killed; a victim's silhouette on the school wall. Below: Loyd in hospital



floors. Tresses of their hair were plastered with gobbets of flesh on the ceilings.

Then, at chest height on a corridor wall, overlooked by paintings of Tom and Jerry and Mickey Mouse, I saw the silhouette of a small child clearly imprinted among the scorch marks from the blast. The child's arms were outstretched. I presumed, from two long strands of black hair, that it was a little girl, smashed against the wall by the explosion, branding her outline onto the plaster so that her moment of death was marked for ever.

The shape of that nameless child seemed emblematic of the forgotten thousands the world chose to ignore in Syria. That dead child's unheard scream was the reason I was there to report. I never wanted to write about the moral erosion and treachery of a small-time warlord who had me abducted for ransom.

Unfortunately, in Syria their stories were entwined.

Later that morning, still blindfolded and hooded, we were led from the basement and

handed over to a new group. The voices and mood were different. They moved us elsewhere in a vehicle, having first adjusted my blindfold so that it covered my ears. Semi-deafness added to the disorientation of blindness, but I could tell by the dull sound of traffic outside that we had entered an urban area. I had an impression that Avo was inside the vehicle with me, and I presumed Jack and Mahmoud were locked in the boot. A few minutes later, the vehicle slowed and stopped, and behind us the muffled rattle of a shuttered garage door told me we had been secured in a lock-up.

Doors slammed. Voices murmured outside. The door beside me was unlocked and someone struck me. My blindfold was readjusted and my cuffs checked. The process was repeated within the hour. Between times, unseen hands slapped the car window beside me and rocked the car.

I wondered if Hakim had learnt of our abduction. If so, would he be mobilising his men and allies to search for us? Or, I wondered, was he the architect of our kidnap? Looking back now, I notice different details

in the last supper. Just after we had eaten together, Hakim had sat back and, ruminating on the two years of our acquaintance, emitted a long sigh. "Those two years seem like twenty to me," he said.

I heard a thump from the boot of the car, where Jack and Mahmoud were being held. A furious drumming sound ensued, then more thumps and gasps followed by the sound of a terrible beating. The Navigator's rationale was sickeningly logical. One of my comrades had been caught removing his blindfold and was being beaten as a punishment, it warned me. Or else a brutal interrogation process had begun for us all.

Powerless in the darkness, I pulled my bound hands to my chest, pushed myself back against the car seat, and sucked air deep into my lungs to oxygenate as best I could against my beating.

But it never came. The sounds of violence stopped as suddenly as they had begun, perhaps ten or fifteen seconds after the thumps from the boot. A door was wrenched open and I felt a cool breath of air on my face. Then I heard a voice, as indistinct and distant as that of a wisp on a fog-shrouded moor. "Mumblemumblemumble." It was Jack. I recognised three words: "Run for it!"

I lifted my hands, pushed back my blindfold. My vision and hearing reintegrated in an instant. Of my comrades and captors I saw no trace. Curtains masked the back windows. Beyond them, in the gloom, a spear of light illuminated a set of narrow concrete steps running to a trap door in the ceiling: Jacob's ladder. On the other side of the back seat, a door was open. I lunged through it and ran.

Without Mahmoud and Jack I may still be languishing in captivity. Or dead. Mahmoud, a natural survivor and wise to the ways of that war, had known that as westerners the kidnap gang would trade Jack and me to Isis as soon as they could. And that as Syrians of no special monetary value, he and Avo would likely be killed that same night. So as soon as he saw an opportunity, he had seized it.

He had found himself shut in the boot with Jack as the group moved us from the farm to the lock-up. The engine noise masked their voices so they could talk. The two men agreed that they should take the first chance they had to overpower a single guard. Next, in the lock-up, the captors made a key mistake, opening the boot an inch to allow the pair to breathe. Removing their blindfolds, the two captives noted through the gap that their captors included men from Hakim's gang. They managed to free themselves of their bonds. Then, at the point they saw that only one guard remained in the lock-up, Mahmoud gave a kick to the open boot. The guard, one of Hakim's lunks named Ala, tried desperately to close it, but failed. The two captives leapt out. A fast and terrible struggle ensued until ➤

Jack grabbed Ala in an arm lock. Noticing a hammer lying in the gloom, Mahmoud brought the fight to an end, smashing Ala around the head repeatedly until he dropped to the ground.

So far their plan had gone smoothly, no more than ten to fifteen seconds passing between the moment they kicked free of the boot and Ala, pouring blood, falling to the ground.

There was one problem: sequestered in the locked car in a curtained section of the back, blindfolded and unable to hear properly, I had no idea that an escape was under way. Instead, I naturally presumed that the gasps and blunt thuds meant one of my own guys was getting punished by our captors.

It was not until I felt the breeze of Avo kicking open his door, and discerned Jack's warning, that I had any idea what was happening. I was haunted by a feeling of shame long afterwards, sensing my honour impinged by this confusion. Friends say it is illogical, ridiculous, and matters not. They are wrong. Without honour, men are nothing in war. I was the architect of the assignment and in their moment of need I was not there for my friends. It is shameful.

Only my hands, swollen in their bonds, undermined the celestial superpower I felt at the moment I made my bid for freedom, hurtling up those steps on winged feet – weightless, fearless, my brain a roaring engine stoked with adrenaline – onto a flat, sun-baked roof in the centre of a town I recognised all too well: Tal Rifaat.

I sprinted across the roof, managing to scale two further walls with my hands angled clumsily before me, before climbing a ladder onto another storey – up, up and onwards.

Below me I heard shouting from the street. It was Jack, and he was in trouble. Peering over the side of the roof I could see him two storeys down. He was on his back, fighting with two men, swearing and yelling.

I felt angry at that moment, vexed by my apparent exclusion from an escape plan. "F*** you, Jack," I thought, "for doing a f***ing runner without telling me."

It was only much later that I discovered that the seconds Jack had spent trying to alert me in the car had cost him his own freedom, for he had bowled out of the lock-up straight into some of the kidnap gang as Mahmoud, bloody hammer in hand, made good his own getaway with Avo on a stolen motorbike, to raise the alarm and rouse rebel units to come to our rescue.

Then my anger was replaced by a bigger bolt of rage. For, as Jack flailed and swung, the bearded figure in a white shirt momentarily lifted his face to dodge a punch, and in that second everything fell into place.

For the man I looked down upon, Judas in the street, was Hakim.

Motherf***er. I spat it. Never did a word fit a man so well.

Yet there was no aftermath to that bolt of fury. Jack's fate was unfortunate, but I could do nothing to help him. Hakim? A regrettable betrayal. I continued my run.

Then the roof ran out, disappearing into a wall that was too high to scale. I dropped into the narrow slice of shadow cut at the wall's base by the high midday sun, and lay hidden there, catching my thoughts. The shadows fell over my right shoulder, pointing northward to Turkey and the border. In the worst case, I reasoned, I could stay concealed on the barren roof space, lying in the shadows until nightfall, when I could drop into the unlit streets and move north through the countryside to Turkey.

Within minutes, though, I had been spotted. Though the elevation of my hiding space concealed me from the view of anyone in the immediate vicinity, it was just about visible from the vantage point of an intersection a couple of hundred metres away. Two small boys, perhaps seven years old, their attention already drawn to the area by Jack's street fight below, stared into the general area of my

THEN I HEARD A VOICE, INDISTINCT AND DISTANT. IT WAS JACK. I RECOGNISED THREE WORDS: 'RUN FOR IT!'

hiding place as they stood in the middle of that junction. Eventually they were joined by a man. One of the boys pointed. It was time to run again.

I changed my plan mid-flight, deciding to drop down to street level and place my trust in the Syrians there, hoping that they would give me shelter and safe passage. The more people saw me, I reasoned, the less likely the kidnap gang would be able to reinstitute their plan.

Various locals noticed me, my blond hair and bound hands, as I dropped awkwardly from one storey to another.

"Come down, come down here," a fat, kindly-looking man urged from one side of the street. "It's OK, come down this side," two young women, dressed in black abayat and niqabs, called from an expansive courtyard directly below me.

I listened to the women. But they had disappeared by the time my feet touched the ground of their courtyard garden. Sure of another trap, I ran a lap of the empty compound, examining each room as I passed in the hope of seeing a doorway into the street. In a kitchen I saw a knife. I grabbed

it, clamped it in my teeth, and frantically tried to saw through my bonds. It was too blunt, so I searched for a lighter or matches, hoping to melt the cuffs from my wrists instead.

From one end of the compound came the crashing of a door being kicked open followed by the unmistakable sound, heavy and urgent, of armed men as they burst into the courtyard.

I ran into a bathroom, knife in hand. A dead end. I squeezed behind the lee of the door. In the midst of it all, fearing death may be close, I could not help but notice how clean everything looked, and wondered in a moment of bizarre extremity if the homeowner had a cleaner or cleaned it themselves. In the tiles' reflection I saw several armed men searching the edge of the courtyard. A fighter approached the bathroom door and stared inside.

He was a young man in his twenties, and held an AK-47 at waist height. For a few seconds he seemed not to see me. But as he backed away from the door he noticed my reflection, swivelled right and fired off a single round, which punched a hole in the wall beside me. Behind the shattered tiling a water pipe spurted water at the gunman, who stumbled backwards and blasted another round at me. Equally scared, I dropped the knife and stepped towards him with my bound hands raised, crying out, "OK, OK," wondering what he was so frightened about.

Six fighters ran up behind him and set upon me without a word, piling in with fists and rifle butts, hauling me through the courtyard. Someone smashed me hard and I blacked out.

The next thing I remember, I was in the street, being marched towards a crowd. A black semi-eclipse was moving over my right eye as it started to fill with blood, and my face was misshapen with punches.

The crowd included civilians and fighters. They stared in my direction, turning occasionally to look at a figure in their midst who, his back to me, was making an angry address. It was Hakim. He was denouncing us as spies. I could hear him saying "jasoos" many times.

The word *jasoos* gets people killed every day in Syria, and the thought of being lynched by a mob was among my worst nightmares. But the crowd looked far from convinced by Hakim. They were sullen, but not angry, as they listened to his unlikely explanation for the sudden appearance of bound and beaten journalists in Tal Rifaat's streets.

"British journalist," I said as I was pushed towards the centre of the crowd, wanting to sow my identity as firmly as I could in the minds of everyone there. I felt extremely scared, but logical. "Anthony Loyd. British journalist. *The Times*."

Hakim swung round to look at me. His eyes were feral and glittering. He looked faintly desperate, too. There was silence as I was pushed towards him until we faced one another.

"Hello, Hakim," I said, as coolly as I could. "I thought we were friends."

"No friends," he rasped, as his silver pistol arced across his chest and down towards my ankle for the traditional punishment shooting.

He blasted two bullets into me at almost point-blank range.

For many years I had expected that one day I might get shot, as so many of my friends have. Now that it has finally happened, I am amazed when people ask me if I will return to work. Do they suppose that I was stupid enough never to have expected this in war? Did they imagine that whenever I saw other people wounded and dying, I believed it would never happen to me? I have felt the pursuit of those bullets for two decades, and only hope they are the last. I felt many things that day: fear foremost. But there was no surprise at being shot.

The first sensation I was aware of as Hakim's bullets slammed into me, other than the twin sensation of heavy impact and electric shock, was relief. It hurt not nearly as much as I had expected. Moreover, I could still walk. The first bullet, penetrating my leather boot, smashed to smithereens a small part of the inside of my ankle bone on its way through my foot, before coming to rest near my sole. The second round pumped into my ankle high and to the rear of the joint, tumbling 180 degrees on itself before breaking my heel.

"Phew," I thought. "That wasn't too bad."

The gunman behind me pushed me past Hakim with a forceful shove, as if he wanted me out of the situation before Hakim shot me some more. The crowd stepped back, too, as I was led through the press of men into the ground-floor room of a security headquarters.

It was crowded with armed men. Some stared at me, others at another prisoner in a corner of the room, a man with a similarly battered face and an impossibly swollen nose: Jack.

"Ant!" he greeted me, looking as maniacal as everyone else that lunging, violent afternoon. "It's all going to be OK! These are revolutionary police! It's going to be OK!"

Barely had he uttered those words before fighters tried tying him to a radiator as he bawled and yelled at them in defiance, while other men, noticing the bloody trail I was leaving on their floor, marched me back out into the street. "OK" never came into it.

A vehicle waited outside, and when I saw the figures within, I knew my own ordeal was far from over. In the front sat Abu Tawfiq, Hakim's grim deputy. He had two men with him whom I did not recognise. But in the back seat, brimming with the spite of a hateful

and thwarted brat, sat Ala. His face was streaked with blood. It was then I began to realise that perhaps the man beaten beside the car boot had not been one of my team, but Ala, as he was hammered by my comrades. Now, as I was pushed into the back of the vehicle beside him, beaten, shot, my hands still tied, his every dream of retribution had come true.

Apparently determined to keep their injured commodity alive, they drove me to a field clinic for treatment. Ala beat me all the way there. He held my head by the hair and, gasping with delight, smashed away, his farm-boy fists slamming my face one way and another. I have never heard one man make such ecstatic sounds over inflicting pain. He was slobbering like a homicidal gimp. I watched my own blood splattering around the inside of the vehicle, joined by fistfuls of hair. At times, another man in the vehicle joined in.

There was little I could do. I like to think I handled it pretty well. I never asked for mercy, nor cried out, and emitted only enough "oofs" and "ahs" to give them the satisfaction of knowing they caused some pain, lest they became totally frenzied. Eventually the

HIS PISTOL ARCED DOWN. HE BLASTED TWO BULLETS INTO MY ANKLE AT ALMOST POINT-BLANK RANGE

vehicle pulled to a halt outside the clinic. I was dragged out and made to stand. By this time my left leg was numb beneath the knee as shock from the bullets took hold. I could not walk. As his final act upon a shot and bound captive, Ala picked up a rock and felled me by smashing it on my head.

Inside the clinic a thin, consumptive-looking man kicked the shoe off my shot foot as I lay on the floor. Then he and another took turns kicking and stamping at my bloody ankle, quite unable to stop themselves, their quivering, instinctive behaviour not dissimilar to the way that some dogs cannot help but hump strangers' legs.

The memory of that moment is hard to revisit and write about, even now. It makes me choke and want to hurt people.

Next, I was laid on a stretcher and my clothes cut from me, until I lay there quite naked save for my handcuffs and a pair of boxer shorts, my face caked in blood, while Syrian medics peered into my ears with torches, apparently searching for a spy's transmitter. After a while, they took down my boxers, too.

Yet they were not unkind (although, Abu

Tawfiq, a brooding crow still keen to peck advantage from the situation, loitered in the background with some of Hakim's gang). The faces of the doctors and medics pressed above me, asking me repeatedly who I was, bearing expressions of concern and unease.

Then a short, smiling civilian man appeared and stood at the head of the stretcher.

"It's OK," he said. "We know who you are. You are safe."

In an instant, the atmosphere changed. The doctors relaxed. Abu Tawfiq seemed suddenly alone. Another man arrived, a commander from the Islamic Front, a powerful rebel agglomeration in northern Syria. Tall, heavily bearded, he stared at me for a time, then ordered my bonds to be cut.

Abu Tawfiq, still desperate even at the last moment to retain Hakim's vanishing financial asset, stepped forward to remonstrate with them. The commander swatted him from the room with a single gesture. Then he looked at me again and laughed.

"We are sorry this happened to you," he said. "But in your job, a few cool scars are no bad thing."

Some men drove me further east, to a field hospital in Marea. Staring at the roof of an ambulance through one eye, I enjoyed the sense, unique in life, of sudden and unexpected escape from a certain and terrible fate: salvation when all seemed lost. Much later, I found there was a price to this quenching relief. When Isis began murdering its western hostages this summer, I felt guilty: not guilty that I had escaped, but guilty that the murdered hostages had not been able to escape, too. Why not they? Were they no less deserving of life and freedom than I? A retributive rage snapped at the questions' heels. But that lay ahead.

So this is how the Syrian doctor found me in Marea. He, with his manners, his morphine, his question.

"You think you can handle it?"

It was not really about pain, I thought, as I considered his offer. It was about the civilisation of choice, of taking the portal back to the world I knew, to the dignity of option. To have given the wrong answer would have been to refuse myself passage to the place I most needed to return to.

"Thanks, doctor," I said, after a while, trying to sound cheerful and decent. "I don't want your morphine. I can handle it."

We understood each other. In this way, I came home. ■

Anthony Loyd and Jack Hill will be at the Times and Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival (0844 8808094; cheltenhamfestivals.com)