

Words: Matt Blake



# DEATH

## OF A BRITISH SOLDIER

**K**osta Scurfield left his native Yorkshire in December last year to go to war. But the young Royal Marine had no plans to fight for Queen or country. He was answering a louder calling: to join the growing influx of foreign freedom fighters helping Kurdish forces destroy Isis in Syria and Iraq. Four months later he would be dead. But who was he? And why did he give his life for someone else's war?

# “Why the fuck is that American guy even here, man?”

grumbled Kosta Scurfield as he cleaned his M16 rifle

by the side of the road leading out of Tel Hamis, northern Syria. A Yorkshireman, he wasn't one to mince his words. "I'm sick of these foreign fighters coming over thinking they know it all. They fuck about, don't listen to the Kurds and are making it more difficult for us to defeat Daesh [the universal name in the Middle East for Isis]."

It was the morning of 1 March 2015 and Macer Gifford, a 28-year-old former Young Conservative from Oxfordshire, had bumped into the ex-Royal Marine on the road back from the frontline. "He looked shattered after fighting all through the night," recalls Gifford. "But he seemed well."

The friends discussed the war and other Westerners who, like them, had joined the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) to help drive Isis out of Syria and Iraq. "He hated this one gung-ho American in my unit who had no real understanding of what we were trying to achieve with the YPG," says Gifford. "He had no time for people who didn't believe in the cause."

The conversation lasted a few minutes before Gifford's unit moved out. "I waved him goodbye and left him cleaning his gun," remembers Gifford. "That was the last I saw of him. He was killed the next day."

Scurfield became the first British national to die fighting Isis just after 8pm on the crisp evening of 2 March 2015. The 25-year-old from Barnsley had been there since December with a multinational outfit of fighters loyal to the YPG. Their mission that night was to shuttle injured fighters and refugees to safety from Xizêla, a small village on the outskirts of Tel Hamis, which, until recently, Isis had overrun. From accounts given to Gifford and Scurfield's family by those who were there, *FHM* has pieced together what happened next.

Scurfield, in an armoured truck with two Kurds and an Iranian Christian named Maziar, drove carefully through the fading light, guided by muffled radio communications sent by their comrades waiting for them about a mile behind the town. As the sun fell, the cold crept in.

The attack came, as they usually do, without warning. A rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) streaked into sight and slammed into the ground next to the vehicle, tearing a hole the size of a grapefruit into its side. Shrieks of "Takbir!" and "Allahu Akbar!" rang out as a swarm of Isis fighters opened fire from behind a nearby wall. Muzzles flashed and automatic-weapon fire ripped over Scurfield and his Kurdish friends' heads.

Maziar shot back from the machine-gun turret mounted on the back of the truck and the driver put his foot down. The quiet evening had come alive with the thunder of war.

They reached the Kurdish line in minutes. A support crew helped unload the wounded and the team turned back to rejoin their *hevallos*, the Kurdish word for brothers. They'd soon return to rearm, again and again, back and forth. During one run, Maziar was shot in the hand, so he could no longer operate the turret gun. Typically, Scurfield was first to volunteer to take his place.

"Kosta was under the most horrendous fire," Gifford tells *FHM* when we track him down on his mobile phone in a trench in Syria, "Bullets were flying everywhere, mortars were going off, RPGs whizzing in every direction. Yet, each time they stopped to rearm, it was Kosta thanking everyone for their help and spurring them on."

At one point, Gifford later heard, Scurfield turned to another Westerner helping to rearm and exhaled, "Fuck me, this is unbelievable, the fire that's going down; I'm going to get shot here." They would be the last words he'd say in his native tongue.

"It happened during the final run," says Gifford. "Kosta was in the rear of the vehicle

firing both his machine gun and numerous RPGs and, all of a sudden, a missile struck the front of the vehicle."

For the first time since battle erupted, Scurfield's gun fell silent. The driver managed to limp the truck back to safety where YPG fighters rushed to help. "They pulled out three Kurds," says Gifford. "One was bleeding from his ears, another was unconscious and the driver had a bad head wound. When they pulled Kosta out it was too late; he'd been hit by shrapnel. One of the most extraordinary men I've ever met had already gone."

Vasiliki, Scurfield's Greek-born mother, finds comfort in a single fact: that it took him two minutes to die. "My worst nightmare, every minute he was out there," Vasiliki tells us when we visit the family home in Barnsley, North Yorkshire, in April, "was that my son might die slowly calling for his mother; that he might have time to regret his actions."

Scurfield's father, Chris, travelled to Syria to repatriate their son in mid-March. But Vasiliki could not say goodbye without seeing her son one last time. She had to know the brutal truth. They identified the body together. "It was bad," she says. "There was catastrophic damage to his chest and a couple of pieces of shrapnel had hit his head. But he wasn't disfigured – there was only a bit of bruising on the left side of his face."

Scurfield's parents learned of their son's death not from the British Foreign Office, but from a journalist. After all, he had not travelled to Syria with his government's blessing – the Foreign Enlistment Act 1870 makes it illegal for any Briton to join a foreign army at war with a state at peace with the UK. Instead, he gave back his green beret and smuggled himself into the war-ravaged country alone. Royal Marines who served with him in Britain described him as a "one-man army" who "found his true calling with the Green Berets". Yet he died in the arms of a Kurdish guerilla fighter, 2,216 miles from home. He wasn't in a military-grade tank with RAF air cover or advanced medical support. No, his final hours were spent in a rickety pick-up truck with a jam-prone black-market weapon in his hands.



AS A 15-YEAR-OLD, LEFT, SCURFIELD DREAMED OF BEING AN ACTOR. RIGHT, AT HIS ROYAL MARINES PASSING-OUT PARADE

The question is: why weren't the Royal Marines enough for Scurfield? And why – when he was so proud of his Green Beret – did he sacrifice his life for someone else's war? His mother says he wouldn't have had it any other way.

Konstandinos Erik Scurfield was born on 22 September 1989 in Northallerton, North Yorkshire, to Chris, an archaeologist and Vasiliki, a teacher and author. Two years later his sister was born, then a brother came four years after that before his youngest sibling, another brother, followed in 1999 (we've withheld their names for security reasons).

Vasiliki and Chris don't remember the "one-man army" that his old comrades describe. They didn't know *that* Kosta. Instead they remember the three-year-old who, after his mother taught him to prepare cereal, got up at 6am every morning to make his baby sister breakfast. They remember the five-year-old who couldn't bear to leave an injured jackdaw to die in the road so brought it home to care for it. Better than that, they remember the wide-eyed school leaver who dreamed of becoming an actor and spent the summer after his drama BTEch at clown school.

"He even got a bit-part on *Hollyoaks*," Vasiliki beams, turning to Chris. "He was on TV, wasn't he?" Chris smiles and nods. "When Kosta set his mind on something, he wouldn't give up until he



**SCURFIELD, FRONT, WITH THE LIONS OF ROJAVA. AUSTRALIAN ASHLEY JOHNSON, FAR LEFT, DIED A WEEK BEFORE SCURFIELD**

made it happen. He was stubborn like that, especially as he got older."

Growing up, Scurfield was rarely cowed by authority. Vasiliki remembers neighbours complaining that her son had been hedgehopping through their gardens with his best friend, Matt. He was a boy who got things done. In Barnsley, for example, he hired an allotment where he grew tomatoes and kept chickens.

By 19, Scurfield had grown into 6ft 4in of towering brawn. He took up boxing and weightlifting. His world view was evolving, too. "He didn't tolerate apathy or people who weren't aware of what was going on in the world," Vasiliki remembers. "He'd get this silly grin on his face when you said something stupid or you wanted to challenge him."

Shortly after his 20th birthday, he announced that he was planning to walk to Greece to do national service (his Greek roots made him eligible). "He left with barely any money," Chris recalls. "I was furious. What if he got into trouble?"

Their frustration at their self-searching son was compounded when they received a collect call from Venice begging for cash because he'd given his last pennies to a beggar.

"We couldn't help because of the recession," says Chris. "To say I was pissed off is a bit of an understatement." Still, Scurfield found his own way and spent six months with Greece's Hellenic Army.

"He found it so boring and wanted to come home," Vasiliki tells us. "They kept giving him sentry duty and wouldn't let him box."

Chris laughs, "They tried to stick him in a tank but he didn't fit – he was too tall."

**T**he boy they knew came home a man. He no longer dreamed of a career on stage; now his sights were on the theatre of war. "I was horrified when he said he was joining the Marines," Vasiliki says. "I didn't think Kosta was suited to the military; his gentleness, his interest in the arts – he liked poetry and nurturing."

But there was no reasoning with Scurfield. "It caught his imagination," says Chris. "He researched what he wanted to do and which company he wanted to be in and off he went."

In four years with 45 Commando, based in Arbroath, Scotland, Scurfield never saw battle. Britain was pulling out of Afghanistan when he joined and was no longer deploying fresh

meat. Still, he excelled, specialising in battlefield medicine. One former colleague we spoke to, Patrick, described Scurfield as a "colossus of a young Marine, ruthless, but with a heart of gold".

"I remember doing a close-quarters battle package with him," he told us. "We were using Simunition [training ammunition] but it still frigging stings when you get shot. I also remember feeling apprehensive because [Scurfield] was playing the enemy that day... I was right to – I still have the marks to prove it."

**M**eanwhile, a new menace was rising from the rubble of Syria's civil war. Thousands of young Muslim men and women from all corners of the planet (including some 1,600 from the UK) were answering Isis's drum call to establish an all-powerful Islamic state in the heart of the middle east with religious, political and military authority over all Muslims worldwide. Their master plan was simple: to crush anybody who stood in their way. Stories of the group's barbarity were beginning to trickle into Western media. Videos appeared on YouTube of aid workers being beheaded, soldiers burned alive in cages and "infidels" executed by bazooka. Scurfield watched them, like the rest of us, with horror. His horror, though, turned to action.

"He went to his commanding officer to ask if Britain was going to Syria to fight Isis," says Vasiliki. "When he was told no, he couldn't comprehend it. He grew up on a diet of 'Let's save the Kurds from Saddam Hussein' or 'Let's save all the women in Afghanistan from the Taliban.' There was a constant feed of propaganda from the British government over why we went to those wars, so when he was told, 'Oh no, we're not going to Syria', he was frustrated. He's always been the kind of kid who never expected other people to do things for him: if something you want is not happening, get off your bottom and do something about it."

Scurfield told his mother he was going to war on Christmas Day 2013, while driving to a family get together. "Mum, I want to go to Syria and help," he told her. "The Kurds are dying and our government's doing nothing."

At first, Vasiliki thought he was joking. "I said, 'Yeah, if you've got no shoes and no coat and some Englishman tells you he cares, what are

you going to say? Oh, thanks for that." That silly grin she knew so well was already creeping across Scurfield's face. "Mum," he replied, "I'd give them *my* shoes and coat."

True to his word, Scurfield resigned from his commission in September last year. Through Facebook, he contacted a YPG recruiter and, within weeks, was on a plane to Iraq where he was swiftly picked up by Kurdish spies and smuggled into Syria. Paid only in cigarettes (Scurfield didn't smoke), his unit was promptly dispatched to the under-siege city of Sinjar, where battle was raging.

**S**curfield soon found himself holed up with three US Army veterans, Jordan Matson, John Foxx and Matthew Kowalski, and

## "BRITAIN ISN'T DOING ENOUGH TO COUNTER THIS THREAT TO OUR COUNTRY"

JAC HOLMES

Australian soldier Ashley Johnson. "We were under constant fire for a month," Kowalski tells us from his home in Florida. "We were sleeping through gunfire in bombed-out buildings, 50 metres from the Isis line, moving in tunnels, running for cover every time a mortar fell."

Isis attacks usually came at night. Dressed all in black, they would swarm over walls, illuminating the dark with gunfire. "We were heavily outnumbered but managed to hold them back each time, aiming at their muzzle flashes,"

**SCURFIELD, TOP LEFT, AND HIS UNIT ATE AND SLEPT UNDER CONSTANT ISIS GUNFIRE WHILE DEFENDING SINJAR**





IN THE YPG,  
SCURFIELD FOUND A  
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adds Kowalski. "We knew that if they pushed hard enough we'd be overrun, so we agreed to not let anyone get captured; that we would die fighting together, no matter what."

Weeks passed and no one was captured.

"Day to day, we held our line," adds Kowalski. "Kosta built a makeshift gym to keep us fit and cooked most of our meals. I have this image of him laughing while chopping frozen chickens on an Isis helmet, bombs going off in the distance. He could even make tinned meat taste good."

The day Kowalski was shot it was Scurfield, he says, who saved his life. "Rounds were flying everywhere when a bullet went through my thigh," he says. "While I was fighting to stay conscious, Kosta and an American named Cudi stemmed the bleeding, loaded me on to a makeshift stretcher and carried me 300 metres under constant fire to an evacuation vehicle. If it hadn't been for them, I would not be here today."

He remembers the last conversation he had with Scurfield before he blacked out. "He was joking, asking me how it felt to be shot and if I was happy that I could go home," he adds, his voice beginning to tremble. "The last thing I saw before I passed out was Kosta sprinting back to

the frontline. I had no idea that would be the last time I saw my friend."

**M**any soldiers who leave their country's armed forces eventually make the difficult transition into civilian life. Others never quite get there, ending up depressed, drug-addled and on the streets. Then there are a few who – missing the adrenaline and Hollywood glamour of battle – head overseas to take up arms again in someone else's war – like, perhaps, the American Scurfield hated so much.

Even the war itself has shades of the film *Mad Max*. One side, Isis, is formed of bands of bloodthirsty warmongers who publicise themselves with grisly public slayings and maraud across the desert in convoys of pick-up trucks and souped-up suicide-bomb cars. On the other side, Brits, Americans and other young men, such as Scurfield, are crowding in to defend what they see as civilisation itself.

There are estimated to be around 100 foreigners in YPG – whose Facebook page urges people to help "send terrorists to hell and save humanity" from Isis – from the UK, France, Spain, Austria, Australia, Denmark, America and Canada. Only a handful are thought to be British.

"We need to pick a side," Jac Holmes, a

## "WE AGREED TO NOT LET ANYONE GET CAPTURED; WE WOULD DIE FIGHTING TOGETHER"

**MATTHEW KOWALSKI**

22-year-old IT specialist from Portsmouth who has been fighting in Syria since February, tells us from an internet cafe near the Turkish border. "Isis won't stop until they have destroyed everything Western civilisation has built for the past 1,000 years. They rape, they murder and, as a nation, Britain simply isn't doing enough to counter this threat to our country."

"We don't even need troops on the ground here," Gifford elaborates from the trench. "What Isis has found in the YPG is a meat grinder that is chewing up their fighters faster than they can

send them to us. [Britain] needs to double the number of bombing raids against Isis. We then need to offer full diplomatic support to the YPG. If we want this war to end we need to build stronger relationships with those fighting and make sure the right support is given. It's only through unity that we can destroy Isis and build a new future for Syria and the Middle East. Kosta believed this as much as anyone."

It would be easy to paint Scurfield as a bloodthirsty adrenaline junkie. But the conversations he had and the Facebook posts he wrote (he linked to newspaper articles about Ancient Greek art and, in a nod to his future plans – and even a prophecy of his death – he changed his profile picture to a painting of Lord Byron, the British poet who died volunteering for the Greek War of Independence), point to a motivation more profound.

As one friend and former British soldier put it, "He wasn't just bored and looking for something to do, he thought it was his duty to humanity. He knew people needed him. And he knew the danger he was putting himself in."

In the Kurdish forces, Scurfield found an organisation that was far more inclusive and diverse than that of the alienated Muslim boys who have flocked from London, Paris and Vienna to join Isis. He also found a purpose that the British Armed Forces never gave him.

"He died doing what he wanted to do," Vasiliki tells us. "For the last two weeks before he left, he was so relaxed and happy. And you can see in the pictures of him out there how comfortable he is in his own skin. His life had a purpose and he will be happy that his death did, too."

**L**ast September, before he left for war, Scurfield posted this on Facebook: "How can we expect righteousness to prevail when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause? Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go, but what does my death matter, if through us, thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?" These were the last words of Sophie Scholl, a 21-year-old anti-Nazi activist who, in '40s Germany, handed out leaflets condemning Hitler's war. Moments after she said them, she was led out to her execution and beheaded. **FHM**

*Vasiliki Scurfield has launched a petition to urge the British government to support the Kurds against Isis. Visit [kostasolivetree.blogspot.co.uk](http://kostasolivetree.blogspot.co.uk)*

PHOTOGRAPHY: THE SCURFIELD FAMILY; MATTHEW KOWALSKI, JORDAN MATSON, YPG; MARCO VITTOR, ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK

## REBELS WITH A CAUSE

*Kosta Scurfield is far from the first man to have set out to join a foreign war. Here are four of history's most famous ideological warriors...*



**Marquis de Lafayette**  
*American Revolution*  
(1765 – 1783)

In April 1777, the 20-year-old French military officer left Paris and sailed across the Atlantic to fight with the Continental Army. His bravery and leadership caught

the attention of soon-to-be president George Washington and the two became lifelong friends.

**He said:** "Such a glorious cause had never before rallied the attention of mankind."



**Lord Byron**  
*Greek War of Independence*  
(1821 – 1832)

In 1823, the British Romantic poet joined the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire. He died of a fever a year later while fighting in the marshlands of Missolonghi. He was 36.

**He said:** "I don't come here to get involved in politics. I came here to save a country."



**Ernest Hemingway**  
*First World War (1914 – 1918)*

In 1918, the 18-year-old American author joined the Red Cross as an ambulance driver in Italy. By the summer, he was at the Italian Front where he was seriously wounded by mortar fire.

*A Farewell to Arms* is based on his experiences.

**He said:** "World War I was the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth."



**George Orwell**  
*Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939)*

Late in 1936, the acclaimed British author travelled to Spain to fight for the Republicans against Franco's Nationalists. His war came to an end the following year when he was wounded by a sniper's bullet.

He wrote of his experiences in *Homage To Catalonia*.

**He said:** "This fascism... somebody's got to stop it."