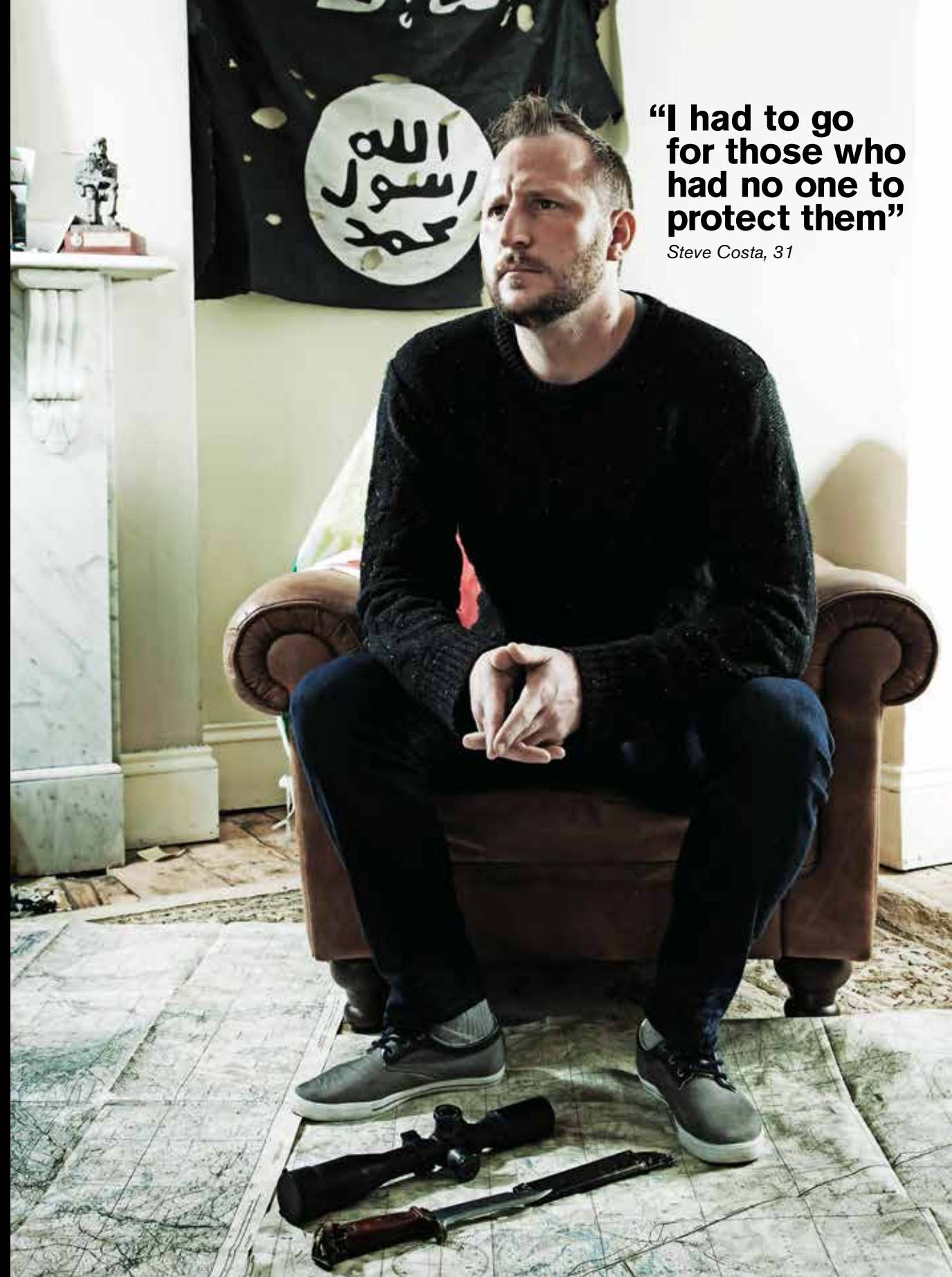


FIGHTING ISIS

The security services estimate more UK Muslims have joined Isis than are in the British Army. But what about the Britons who make the same journey to the Middle East to fight for the other side?

Words: *Matt Blake* **Photography:** *Leon Csernohlavek*



**“I had to go
for those who
had no one to
protect them”**

Steve Costa, 31

“It’s not just fear, it’s also excitement”

Polish, 27



Polish was walking through a poppy field when the first sniper’s bullet zipped past his head. The 27-year-old former British soldier had been delivering aid to a village on the eastern front of the war with Isis, near Kirkuk in northern Iraq. As he trudged back to camp, unarmed and without body armour, things seemed ominously quiet.

That’s when he heard the crack and thud of a bullet slamming into earth and saw a puff of soil a few yards ahead. “I could tell he had missed me by a few metres,” he tells *FHM*, when we meet him at a London bar. “I didn’t think, I just ran.”

As he raced through the field, zigzagging through the flowers to make himself harder to hit, he heard another crack and thud. His heart pounded as energy gushed into his veins. Another crack and thud. His senses felt crisp and in tune. A fourth. He’d never felt so close to death, or so alive.

“It’s not just the fear, it’s also the excitement,” he says. “It all comes up into one massive adrenaline rush and I shot across the field in no time.”

He dived for cover just as a Kurdish anti-aircraft tank rolled past and obliterated the wall, and sniper, with a deafening boom. As he watched the plume of smoke unfold into the sky, a wave of euphoria washed over him. He hadn’t felt that since leaving the Army six months ago. Finally, he had it back.

Polish – he’s asked us to use only his nickname for security reasons – is one of a handful of British volunteers who have offered their lives to help Kurdish forces fight Isis in Iraq and Syria. They go, they say, because their government doesn’t want to; after all, there is no place more dangerous for a British soldier to be.

“There’s a \$150,000 price on the head of every Westerner,” says Polish. “That’s dead. Alive is a lot more.” At 6ft 4in and with pale skin, Polish might as well have crosshairs tattooed on his forehead. “We often hear

Chechen snipers on the radios chatting about how they want to shoot us and claim the bounty,” he says. “We have fun chatting shit to them over the airwaves.”

The UK security services estimate that more British Muslims have joined Isis than are currently serving in the British Army. A lot has been said about those brainwashed boys searching for meaning in the modern world. But what about the men from the same streets, making the same journey, but to fight for the other side? They may be fewer, but their reasons are just as complex.

It starts the same way for all of them: watching the war on television, then acting on their feelings of anger and powerlessness. They buy plane tickets from London or Birmingham or Manchester and fly to Germany or Turkey, following the orders of a Kurdish agent on Facebook, before taking a connecting flight to Sulaymaniyah in Iraq. There they are met by a Kurdish militant and driven to the frontline. It is as exciting as it is nerve-racking.

“As soon as they knew I was peshmerga [Kurdish special forces], they couldn’t stop shaking my hand,” Polish says. “They even let me, a non-Muslim, drink from the same cup. It was a good feeling.”

Polish first heard of Isis while being medically discharged from the Pioneer Regiment in December after an explosion in Afghanistan left him partially deaf in one ear. “I was appalled at what Isis were doing to innocent people and gutted that I wouldn’t be in the Army to do anything about it,” he says. “But then I realised the Army wasn’t going there anyway.”

Still, he returned home to live with his father in Birmingham and found work in a factory. “I found it really hard on civvy street,” he says. “It felt so meaningless.”

Polish tried parachuting and bungee jumping, but nothing matched that feeling of war. When a friend sent him an email full of links to pages on ‘How to fight Isis’, he clicked a few on his lunch break. One, a Facebook page for British volunteers, was recruiting foreign fighters. It was affiliated with the Kurdish peshmerga, the military wing of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. In Kurdish, peshmerga means ‘one who faces death’. Polish sent the page a message and, within a day, a representative invited him to join the fight.

Was he worried about capture? “No,” he says. “Nobody leaves camp without a spare bullet in his pocket for himself. Nobody wants his head sawn off on the internet.”

By the first week of June, he was running for his life in a poppy field, the drug of battle filling his veins. It didn’t matter that it was in someone else’s war.

POLISH (LEFT) KNEW THERE WAS A \$150,000 PRICE ON HIS HEAD IN IRAQ



Belonging to war

It was less the excitement of war that drew Tim Scott to Iraq in September than the sense of belonging. The 33-year-old spent eight years as a heavy weapons specialist in the Grenadier Guards, deploying to Afghanistan once. Upon retiring in 2012, he got work as a maritime security contractor, protecting oil tankers from attack in the Persian Gulf.

But, single and living alone in a small south London flat when he wasn’t at sea, he couldn’t ignore the war-shaped hole in his life.

FIGHTING ISIS

"I'll be honest, because a lot of guys wouldn't admit this," he says. "I absolutely love being at war, not because I like fighting, but because it brings people together. At home you can call your mate who's served time with you, but it's not the same. In a war, if you have a tin of tuna, you share it five ways. Not because you have to; you just do it automatically because everything is shared. It's beautiful."

Tim saw a documentary about Isis on Channel 4 in December 2014. "When I thought about those defenceless women and children being murdered and sold, I realised I had to do something," he says.

He arrived in early July and was immediately draughted into a peshmerga unit for foreigners called The Legion. There he found a company of volunteers from Europe, America, Canada, South Africa and Australia. The toughest of all was a guy from South Korea.

"There were about 20 of us," he says. "But I didn't see as much action as I'd have liked to. We got shot at a bit on one mission but, apart from that, there was a hell of a lot of boredom mainly... like any war."

They could, at least, get 4G on the frontline, but Facebook can feel pointless, even over there.

Tim whiled away the next two months cleaning weapons, performing drills and eating soup. "I'm not a fussy eater, but the food was diabolical," he tells us. "It was rice and soup three times a day – you only got chicken if you were about to go on a dangerous operation and might die. I think I had chicken three times." Then he pauses for a moment. "The trouble is, the Kurds don't like sending Westerners to the frontline. Dead Westerners are bad for publicity."

Dreamers, drifters and body biters

Steve Costa needed publicity to do his job. As the first British volunteer to join the peshmerga, he was tasked not only with commanding The Legion but with recruiting for it as well. The latter was a tough job, but not for lack of interest. "I was getting three messages a day from guys all over the world asking me to get them in," says Steve, a week after he returned to his Devon home in September. "Trouble was, 90% of them were dreamers, especially the Yanks. They'd rock up, overweight and wearing GoPros, talking about how they wanted to kill Muslims – they had no idea the Kurds are Muslims, too. I had no time for fame-seekers whose only military experience was playing on an Xbox."

There were stories about drifters and lunatics – a British man who used his psychic abilities to hear Isis fighters speak; a lonely

American who wanted to commit "suicide by Isis".

Another was known for asking everyone, "Did the CIA send you?" Then there were the psychos.

"There was this American who was a convicted child molester," says Steve. "But he was sent home after rumours spread that he started biting dead bodies."

Steve had spent almost seven years in the Royal Navy, deploying once during the Iraq war, but he didn't leave his warship. Upon leaving the Navy in 2009, he moved into private security, protecting cargo ships from pirates off the Somali coast. He too became appalled at Isis' cruelty.

On 7 May 2015, he left his wife and two young children at home and set off to Iraq. "It's never easy, trying to explain you're going away to the most hostile place on the planet for free, to try to do some good," he says. "My wife wasn't happy, but I told her I had to go for the women and children who have nobody to protect them. If she and our kids were in their shoes, she'd want someone there to help them. She understood it was something I had to do, despite the risks."

Just one Briton, the former Royal Marine Kosta Scurfield, has been killed fighting Isis since the first foreign volunteers arrived in the autumn of 2014. He died in battle alongside the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) in Syria on 2 March 2015. On 11 September that same year, Steve should have become number two.

"We made a major assault retaking villages from Isis and had them on the run," he remembers. "In one, we were talking to villagers when we spotted a black sedan hurtling towards us in the distance." They weren't sure what the shimmering shape was doing at first. Then a man in black jumped out brandishing an AK-47 and started shooting. The car didn't stop.

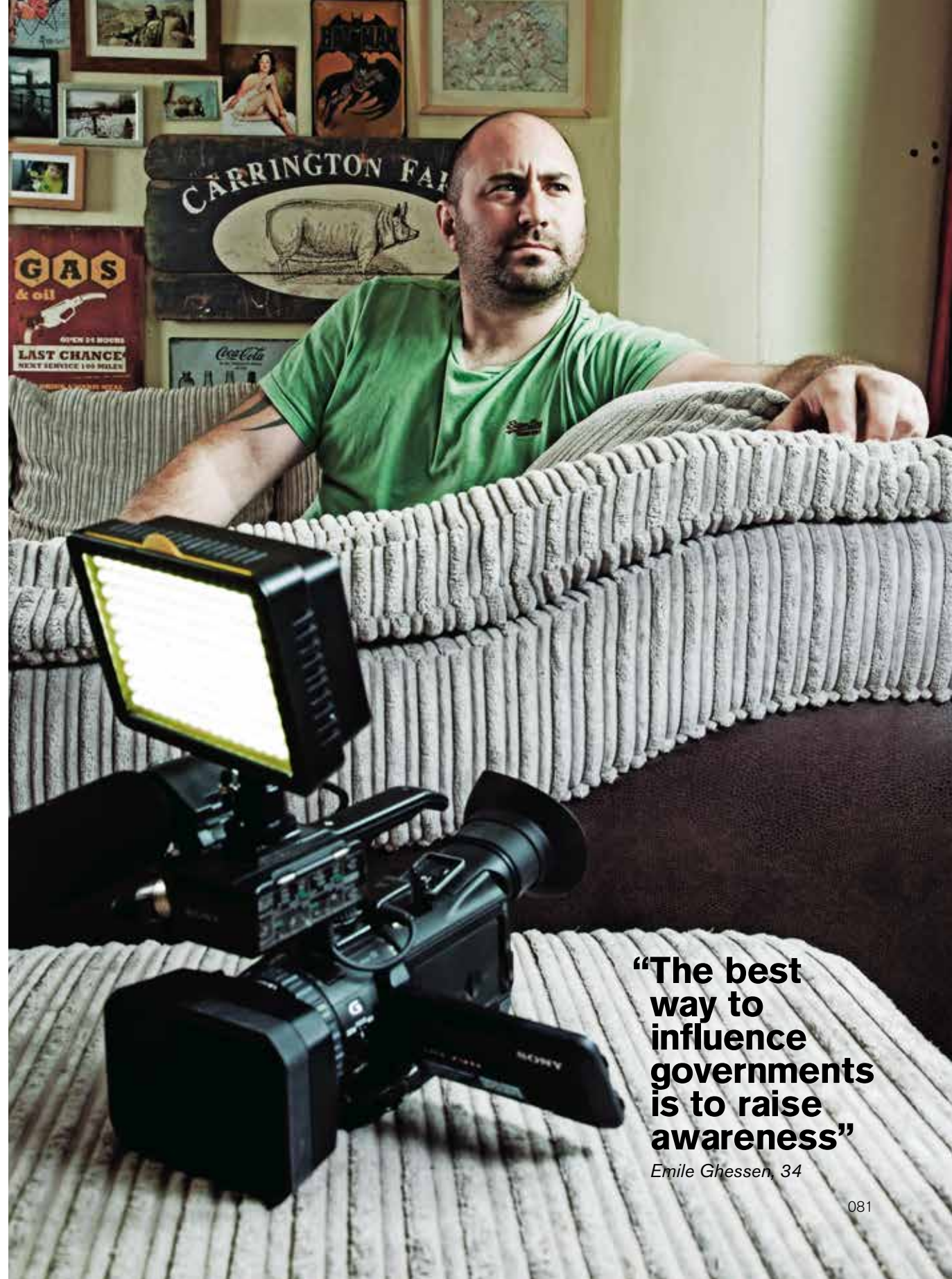
"We realised it had to be a suicide bomber and we all opened fire," he goes on. "The shooter fell in the dust but the car kept coming." Then, as it got to within 20m of Steve's position, it exploded. "A massive ball of fire went up and I got hit in the face by the shockwave," says

Steve. "If he'd got any closer, he'd have driven straight into me. A lot of peshmerga were killed that day."

How do you process an experience like that? "You don't," he says. "Not until you get home. I'm processing it now; the people I met, the things I saw."

We sense a touch of trauma in his voice, though he won't admit it. He won't talk about the dead on either side. All he'll say is this: "I don't believe in monsters or fairy tales, but I do believe in men. I've seen the quietest of guys become the wildest of animals and I've seen the biggest, most brutish

FILMMAKER EMILE (SECOND RIGHT) HAS MORE REASON TO FIGHT ISIS THAN ANYONE

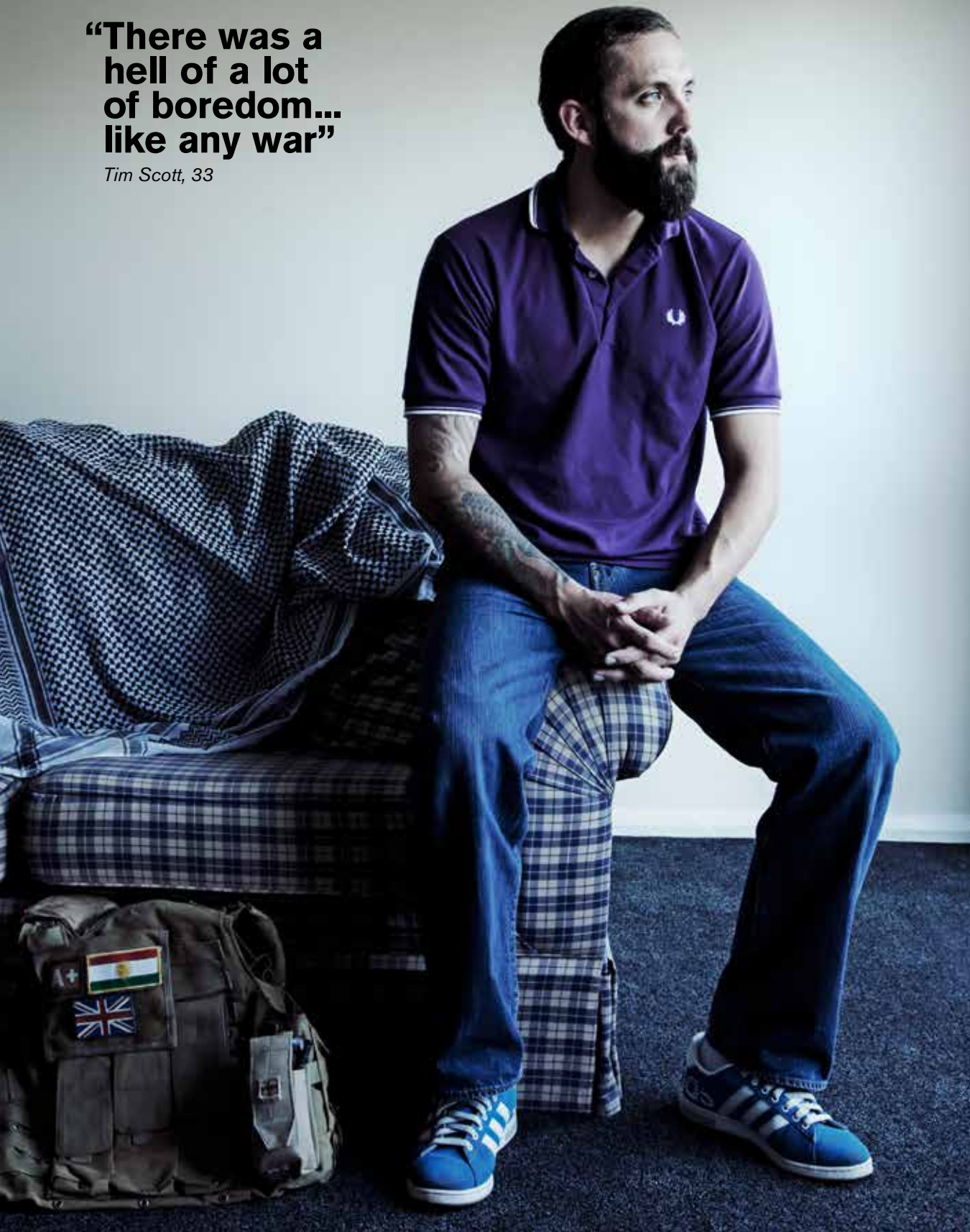


“The best way to influence governments is to raise awareness”

Emile Ghessen, 34

“There was a hell of a lot of boredom... like any war”

Tim Scott, 33



men become quivering sheep. Men are capable of doing absolutely anything to anyone.”

As weeks became months, Steve grew frustrated. “The Kurds are generous, wonderful people, but they do things very differently to us,” he says. “To someone who has been trained in the British forces, they can feel disorganised at times.”

This wasn't deployment in the sense Steve was used to. Decisions changed without warning or explanation, there was no advanced weaponry, no helicopters to airlift them to safety, few translators. Steve and his men had abandoned everything – jobs, children, wives. For this?

“Low morale is like rust; if you don't clean it off your weapon, it will spread very quickly,” he says. “In the end I just thought, ‘I didn't come here to argue and wipe the noses of grown men. But to be honest, I said I'd only ever stay three months and I was there for six. My wife wanted me to come home.’”

Talking to some of these men, one can't ignore a sense of unfulfilled destiny. They had crossed borders and seas to share their battlefield experience with a militia in need of numbers. But upon arrival, many found an alien army with confusing hierarchies and a global brigade of clashing cultures and untamed egos.

“Originally I went to help refugees, to make a difference, and took an alternative route when I arrived,” says Steve. “But the only real change I made out there was that the peshmerga are now properly trained. I'm happy with my contribution, but sometimes I feel I'd like to have done more. In hindsight, I should've gone out there with a camera. Cameras instead of guns – that's how to make a real change.”

Shooting with cameras, not guns

Emile Ghessen went to Iraq to shoot Isis in September, but not with a Heckler & Koch G3 rifle like the others. No, he went armed only with a Sony camcorder and an eye for detail. A former Royal Marine with three tours of Afghanistan and one of Iraq under his belt as well as specialisms including interrogation techniques, heavy weapons and desert warfare, the 34-year-old's services as a fighter would've probably made the biggest difference of all. And yet...

“In 12 years as a marine I served in Iraq and Afghanistan and what did I get out of it really, other than killing some people?” he says when we meet in north London. “These men that go over to fight can shoot as many Isis guys as they want, but it's governments that change

situations, not individuals. I've learned from experience. And the best way to influence the government is to raise public awareness of the bigger picture.”

You could say Emile has more reason to fight Isis than most. Not only is he from a family of Syrian Christians, many of who are still trapped in their homeland, but he also went to the same west London primary school as Mohammed Emwazi, who soon became better known as Isis' beheader-in-chief, Jihadi John (Emile's younger brother was in Emwazi's class).

“What with my Syrian connections, I was thinking about helping in some way, but then I read in the paper that Emwazi was at my school and it clicked,” he says. “It felt like a calling.”

So in May, Emile set off to film the men and women fighting Isis in Iraq for a documentary. Of the foreign fighters he met, he says, while all were united by a mutual hatred for Isis, he could see several sub-categories. “There are the guys who want to get a book deal and be famous, and ones who want security work on the back of it,” he says. “You've then got the guys who genuinely believe in the Kurdish cause and the lonely types who need to fill a void in life. You've also got the blokes who've not seen enough action in the forces and the ones who miss the adrenaline of war. Then there are the adventurers.”

IEDs, machine guns, snipers, fear, adrenaline, brutal desert sun, icy winter evenings, long marches with heavy packs, endless hours of boredom, pointless work details, inconsistent leadership, sleepless nights, purposeless days, children with outstretched hands begging for food, ambiguous emails from lovers, forgotten birthdays, missed parties, lost jobs, divorce. War. Why would anyone chose to return to that life over the comforts of Western civilisation? The answer is that, perhaps more than anything, they see it as their job. Their time in the forces mechanised them to protect, be it their nation or each other. They may now be civilians, but Isis provides an

opportunity – and obligation – to defend mankind's most valuable asset: civilisation itself. As one former soldier in Iraq told us: “You never leave the Army, you just stop getting paid and having to parade.”

There are, of course, a tiny handful of Western volunteers with no military background who want to head out. But for them, Emile has a message: “War is not like *Call Of Duty* – it is real and can be very ugly,” he says. “Killing someone isn't just about the time and the place. It's about living with what you've done for the rest of your life.” **FHM**

IN THE PESHMERGA, TIM (LEFT) FOUND A SENSE OF BELONGING HE COULDN'T FIND AT HOME

