



The *Hurt Locker* editing crew on location in Amman, Jordan. From left: Sean Valla (first assistant editor), Chris Innis (editor), Rupert Lloyd (post-production assistant), Bob Murawski (editor). Photo courtesy of Sean Valla

Between Iraq and a Hard Place

***The Hurt Locker's* Editing Team – on Location in the Middle East**

by Chris Innis

"No one goes to Jordan with just two days notice." This is what my sister's well-traveled Washington, DC insider friend said when she heard that our picture editing team had to get our crew and equipment packed up to head off to the Middle East. But that's exactly what *The Hurt Locker* team did during the height of the Iraq invasion's "surge."

After reading the warnings issued to travelers, I rushed out to get the suggested immunizations for typhoid and hepatitis. The US State Department also had a serious warning for Americans traveling to Jordan, a Middle Eastern country next door to Iraq. One well-known Hollywood movie producer, Moustapha Akkad (of the *Halloween* movies) had been tragically killed two years prior when a terrorist bomb exploded at a wedding reception at a five-star hotel in Amman. Yet another incident occurred less than six months before our production, when a group of western tourists were brutally gunned down in broad daylight at one of the city's main attractions. During that attack one British man was killed and six other men and women were injured, including a Jordanian police officer.

Accompanying me on the trip was Sean Valla, an experienced first assistant with a host of travel experience. We flew from LAX to Chicago O'Hare. The Royal Jordanian Airlines gate of the Chicago airport was Casting 101 for an Iraq war movie: A few American soldiers wearing camouflage with menacing demeanors, Arabic women clad in head scarves and men who looked like extras from an Al-Qaeda movie-of-the-week. Thoughts raced through my head of a cutting room with a dirt floor and us having to duck an occasional rocket propelled grenade.

A digital GPS map on the airplane seat-back monitor provided an image of what we were flying over. I watched as the icon of the plane gradually neared the region of Middle Eastern turmoil we were so familiar with from the nightly news: the war-torn Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and, next to that, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. After almost 24 hours of total travel time, we were landing and all I could see was flat desert engulfing the Amman airport. Visible security was provided by perimeter guard towers, staffed with armed military.



The editorial department rides camels through the ancient city of Petra, Jordan. From left, Chris Innis (editor), Sean Valla (first assistant editor). Photo courtesy of Chris Innis

Once inside the airport, it was chaos. There was a wedding party and the guests were throwing rose pedals and candies. The covered, tattooed Bedouin women were wagging their tongues in a high-pitched chortle. Outside, a production van was waiting. As we left, we passed military posts where Royal Jordanian guards were manning tanks armed with M-60s and searching vehicles as they entered the airport. This would be a common sight in and around the city, as well as its hotels, embassies and tourist sites.

The very next morning, we made a trip down to the set. It was excruciatingly hot. Thirty minutes later, we arrived at the Baghdad-like location—a ghetto where real displaced Iraqi refugees were now living. Many of them would be hired on the film in bit parts or as extras.

This was no Hollywood back lot. The art department, headed by production designer Kalli Júlíusson and his team had dressed it to make it look even grittier. There was garbage strewn everywhere amidst a neighborhood that was

built of partially finished, sandstone cinder block-like houses with steel rebar poking from the rooftops, which were covered in rusty old satellite dishes. Skeletal feral cats roamed the gutters, scavenging amongst the refuse. The Muslim adhan, or "call-to-prayer," would be sung five times a day from the tinny speakers of every local minaret (mosque tower) and would echo across the city.

This "Baghdad" street set-up wasn't supposed to have been filmed for another couple weeks, as a real US military base in Kuwait was a planned location that suddenly became unavailable during the surge. The production organization, headed by whiz first assistant director David Ticotin, had scrambled to figure out how to quickly change the schedule.



Some members of The Hurt Locker crew on a trip to Wadi Rum Desert in Jordan, on the border of Saudi Arabia. Photo by Sean Valla

We met cinematographer, Barry Ackroyd and his crew of Brits. Ackroyd was sitting in the shade looking like he was about to pass out from heat stroke. He softly complained about the shooting conditions, which had consisted of over 100° degree weather with virtually no craft services—not even water. After a couple 12-hour days with little or no refreshment, the hearty guerilla camera crew was beginning to feel the pain. Many of the film crew would suffer from heat exhaustion and intestinal ailments during the more than two months on location.

The Hurt Locker is about an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) bomb squadron working to disarm deadly roadside bombs in war-torn Iraq. The star of the film, lead actor Jeremy Renner, looked the part in a heavy EOD bomb suit with a space-age helmet, which was designed and/or procured by costumer George Little. Unfortunately, as calm and cool as Renner seemed, he was sweltering in the thermometer-popping temps.

The other stars of the film are the real explosions made by the special effects crew, led by American Richard Stutsman, along with Blair Foord and Ernst Gschwind. These were not CGI-generated effects, but were bona fide bomb blasts. And the job was dangerous. Among several of the film's mishaps, one German special effects tech, Wolf Steiling, would be rushed to the hospital after suffering severe burns from faulty gunpowder that exploded in his face. Steiling eventually recovered, with the only permanent scars on his shins and feet, where his shoes literally melted onto his skin.

The director's assistant, "JR" Scott, showed us the way to his leader. Six-foot-tall Kathryn Bigelow towered over the crew, cloaked in a man's Arabic "keffiyah" headdress with a baseball cap over that. Her face was as white as ghost, covered in zinc oxide. She wore layers of gauze-like clothes, with a pair of jeans underneath and heavy motorcycle boots. Making her comeback, this was the pioneer female filmmaker of late 1980s genre films, *Near Dark* and *Point Break*.



Sandbag Productions in Amman, Jordan – the home of the production and editing offices of The Hurt Locker while on location. Photo by Sean Valla

Bigelow was frantically rushing around between the video hut and the trash-ridden street where the actors (Renner, Anthony Mackie and Brian Geraghty) were cavorting. A Jordanian production assistant, about half the director's size, was struggling to chase her around with an umbrella to keep her shielded from the sun. Bigelow seemed to thrive on the chaos. She and one of the producers expressed their relief that an editor was able to come out to Jordan on such short notice. I can't imagine why anyone else wouldn't want to travel within a couple miles of the Iraq border, during an ongoing war, for a low-budget movie.

That night, Valla and I dined in the open air, within the walled garden of the hotel. A band was playing Middle Eastern folk music. Locals were smoking from "hubbly bubbly" pipes, the hors d'oeuvres of choice. It was rather peaceful. Suddenly, we heard the sound of explosions in the nearby hills. Gunfire? Backfire? We both shifted in our seats, uncomfortably, and continued with our meal as if we didn't really hear it. Then we saw lights in the sky. Fireworks! We breathed a sigh of relief. The sight and sound show was a memento mori, if not a metaphor for the real warfare being waged just a short border's distance away. To be continued...

(Editor's Note: Part Two of this story will appear in this space the week of March 15.)

Chris Innis edited The Hurt Locker with Bob Murawski. She has worked as picture editor, music editor and assistant editor in the cutting rooms of film directors such as Ridley Scott, Adrian Lyne, Oliver Stone and Sam Raimi, and has previously been a contributing freelance writer for Script Magazine. She can be reached at girlyghoul@aol.com.



*The "Baghdad" set of The Hurt Locker, in Amman, Jordan. Real Iraqi refugees play extras in the film
Photo by Sean Valla*

Between Iraq and a Hard Place, Part 2

'The Hurt Locker' Editorial Team – On Location in the Middle East

by Chris Innis

*(Editor's Note: Part One of this story can be found
at www.editorsguild.com/FromTheGuild.cfm?FromTheGuildid=82.)*

Circumstances gradually improved on the set of *The Hurt Locker* and the film crew ended up canning an astounding 200 hours of Super-16mm. This was no surprise considering that there were always at least three or four hand-held cameras and many times five, six, seven or more cameras running all day, every day. The camera crew literally ran out of people to use as camera operators. The 22-person camera and lighting crew was not enough and the still photographer, Jonathan Olley, as well as gaffer, Matthew Moffat, were enlisted to operate along with high-speed camera operator Dory Aoun, camera assistants Stewart Whelan, Tom Taylor and Russell Kennedy, aided by Glenn Coulman, Max Glickman, Mouna Khaali, Imad Rechiche, and yet others. Ninety percent of what was shot was exterior daylight locations, which meant even more footage because there was no stopping for the crew to fiddle with lights. The production crew joked that the movie should be re-titled, "The Goat Locker," because there was enough footage of goats to warrant a feature documentary on that subject alone.

Despite the obvious language discrepancy, the hard-working Icelandic script supervisor, Aslaug Konradsdottir, found it challenging to keep up with the many camera crews and the logging of material became almost incidental, as several of the squad weren't always within eyeshot. Sometimes camera operators were tucked up on building roof tops or hidden hundreds of yards down the street under piles of garbage.

Although the main camera ops—Ackroyd, Scotty MacDonald, Olli Driscoll, second unit Niels Johansen and Iraqi-born Duraid Munajjim were adept at gathering footage—the good parts had to be excavated like gold nuggets. The raw uncut rushes were a hodge-podge of disconnected, nausea-inducing motion that was constantly crossing the 180-degree line. This was not fancy Hollywood movie cinematography—it was raw, blemished documentary footage gathering, with several guys running around stuffing magazines with film and shooting in every direction. In a panic, the irate producer Nicolas Chartier (warmly referred to by crew as "the mad Frenchman") phoned the cutting room during the first week to complain about the first raw uncut dailies. Chartier was begging to be promised that the

movie wouldn't be a jambalaya of "out-of-focus, two-second shots." I comforted him the best I could. Immediately I met with producer Tony Mark and let him know that we were being crushed in editorial and that we would need more resources and more time baked into the post-production schedule.



On the set of The Hurt Locker, near Madaba, Jordan. In foreground left, makeup and hair designer Daniel Parker peruses the set. In background, director Kathryn Bigelow, in blue scarf, under umbrella, convenes with crew members. Left of Bigelow is First AD David Ticotin, DP Barry Ackroyd and script supervisor Aslaug Konradsdottir. Photo by Chris Innis

With the noisy location, production sound mixer Ray Beckett and his boom operator Simon Bysshe also had their hands full. The sound team did an outstanding job keeping the booms and mics out of the picture, since any given shot usually encompassed 360 degrees of cameras all seemingly pointing at one another. Of course, radio mics were also used. Beckett had mastered this chaotic guerilla filmmaking and even owned a pair of unique eyeglasses with nearly invisible mics built right into the frames. He would record the sounds of bugs twittering in bushes by merely dipping his pale face as close as he could to the source.

Our ride into work in the morning was courtesy of our cheery production drivers, the Palestinian-born Ziad "Big Z" Faraj and alternately, young Jordanian Zied Darwazeh, whom we called "Little Z." Our location cutting rooms were at "Sandbag Productions." It was a building recently converted to production space by an enthusiastic Jordanian, Fadi Sarraf. Not to worry, the floor was not sand. In fact, Sarraf had made sure the facility was up-to-date. Educated in the West and with a keen interest in the film business, Sarraf's goal was (and still is) to make Jordan a top-notch filmmaking center.

We hired an eager, young post-production assistant, Rupert Lloyd, a British guy who was living in Jordan and who had done some photojournalism there. Lloyd became invaluable in the cutting room and getting around town. He always made sure we knew where the best restaurants were. Ramadan is the Islamic holy month when Muslims fast during the day, followed by feasting and parties at night. During that time, eating, drinking (even water!) or smoking in public during daylight hours is against the law—and you can be arrested for forgetting. During the holy month, we would have starved without Rupert's help, as almost every restaurant closed down during the day (as Westerners were required to hide behind rug-draped windows if they wanted to eat).

The production office staff lead by J. Gibson and her team, Isaa Sawaqued and Majd Hijjawi, were making frantic phone calls, worrying about how they could ship in armorer David Fenc'l's very real military weapons from the US while an actual war was going on a couple hundred miles away. Although editorial had discussed it prior to arriving in

Jordan, plans had not been made by the production for a dailies shipment schedule and several days worth of film cans were piling up on the production coordinator's desk.



*First assistant editor Sean Valla gets fitted with Arabic headdress in Jordan.
Photo by Chris Innis*

After the embarrassing situation at the airport—where I had been pulled aside into the "women's search line" and had to explain to a Jordanian security guard that what he had found in my purse was, in fact, a tampon (which he was scrutinizing and holding up to light to examine as if it was a strange alien object he had never seen before)—I knew we couldn't take any chances with the original film negative. We couldn't risk sending the undeveloped film through high-security airports where the cans could be opened, X-rayed, or damaged.

Our editing team, with the help of production management led by Karima Ladjimi, came up with a plan. The film would be hand-carried on a flight by production assistant Brit David Morris from Amman to London, transferred at a lab and then video dailies would be hand-carried back on a plane. The whole journey would take anywhere from three days to a week and was the modern-day equivalent of shipping via donkey cart. We had no choice as this was a low budget production that couldn't afford daily runs and there was a lack of nearby film infrastructure. Thanks to producer Mark's persistence, we were able to take over a local radio station late at night to receive low-grade quick times via file transfer protocol (FTP), so the crew wouldn't be shooting blindly. Nonetheless, the "figurative" dump truck of bi-weekly dailies tapes would back up to the cutting room [BEEP BEEP BEEP] and unload.

E-mails were easily sent and received in Jordan, though sometimes slowly. In one missive, my cousin joked, "Do you have to wear a burkha?" Jordan is quite modern and about 30 percent of the women do not cover their heads. Some on our crew did; I chose not to. Aside from small cultural differences, in many ways I felt more comfortable and even safer on Amman's streets than on those of my own Los Angeles. I would even walk back to the hotel from the cutting rooms at one or two in the morning, unaccompanied.

The Jordanians were a most hospitable people who were thrilled to have a feature film shooting in their homeland. Although as westerners we did have to keep a lower profile, there didn't seem to be terrorists popping out from every street corner as fear mongers would have us believe. There are probably those who don't wish our country well (ominously, we filmed near the hometown of top Al Qaeda leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "the man from Zarqa"). However, rogue radicals exist in almost every country of the world, including our own. Jordan is a moderate country where everyone lives in relative peace, including Sunni and Shia, Palestinians, Jordanians, Egyptians, Lebanese and others from the region, not to mention the nearly one million Iraqi refugees displaced by the war. Yet as much as it wanted to be, Jordan was not yet a filmmaking "Mecca" and has suffered due to its proximity to turmoil.



Editor Bob Murawski, right, makes friends with Jordanian military security on his visit to The Hurt Locker set in Amman, Jordan.

Photo by Sean Valla

Our job editing this war film felt like a war itself. After dealing with the subject of terror and bombs all week, we loved the relaxation that our weekend trips would provide. Our two-person editing crew would make Seventh Wonder of the World, Petra, our first adventure. We hiked through the craggy steep cliffs and canyons with a Bedouin guide and then rode camels through the ancient red cave city. Almost the entire crew would spend another weekend night under a meteor shower in the vast expanse of the Wadi Rum desert, where David Lean famously filmed *Lawrence of Arabia*. In fact, one of our crew members, hair and make-up designer Daniel Parker's father, had worked on that film. We slept and ate in tents provided by Bedouins and took jeep rides out to see the natural wonders of this valley, led by our Jordanian transportation team headed by the Nawafleh family.

Before we had been hired, a post-production schedule and budget were made as if this were to be edited and assisted by one person working out of the director's one-room guesthouse. Obviously, that was unrealistic considering that this was an ambitious high adrenaline war film with more than a quadrupled film ratio from what was originally planned. During the last week of production in Jordan, editorial was thus informed that we had no editing rooms to return to in Los Angeles. After a flurry of e-mails and long distance phone calls, we were able to secure rooms and settled comfortably at one in Burbank. Two days of filming (headed by DP Tom Sigel, ASC) were also scheduled for the United States and then re-located to Vancouver, Canada—hometown of Evangeline Lilly (who would play Renner's wife in the scenes).

I would edit for nine weeks on location, followed by more than a half a year back in LA, joined there by co-editor Bob Murawski. Murawski had made a trip to visit us in Jordan, but at the time had been recuperating after a grueling several years as the lone editor on Columbia Pictures/Marvel's *Spider-Man* series of films (directed by Sam Raimi).

From the beginning, *The Hurt Locker* was a very arduous film for us to cut, almost like editing a documentary. The film was written by first time screenwriter Mark Boal (a freelance writer for *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice*). The screenplay had a non-traditional, asymmetrical, episodic structure, much like the Iraq war itself. There was also no visible "villain." Aside from the character's internal conflicts, the "antagonist" in the final film is the "ticking time bomb" tension of what explosive device might go off next, or what sniper might pop up like "whack-a-mole" from which rooftop. In the script, the enemy is largely unseen. But how does one give the feeling that the antagonist is ever-present in a cinematic form, if he is virtually not present in the script or in the film footage, but just leaves his bomb-making handy work behind? How does one structure the nearly structure-less to milk the tension and suspense and thus prevent the movie from ending up a travelogue of pointless missions? These were some of the many "sand traps" we would face in the cutting room.



First assistant editor Sean Valla is swamped with dailies. The shooting ratio on the film was 100:1 (or 200 hours of footage) on location in Amman, Jordan.

Photo by Chris Innis

No one wants the audience to have to take Dramamine, nor did we want to have to hand out vomit bags to patrons as they enter the theatre. Instead, Murawski and I wanted to give the feeling of continuous action, not merely a series of disconnected, wobbly "jump cut" images. Jump cuts are exclamation marks and they needed to be sparsely used in this case. Bob and I also had a short hand and a familiarity with each other's work that enabled us each to take chunks of the movie, cut them, and then trade them back and forth for trimming. This gave a smoother, more seamless flow to the material.

The film couldn't be perceived as a preachy, arty, or politically correct, otherwise nobody would pay to see it. Audiences don't want to "take their medicine" and they are tired of watching the dour news coming out of the Middle East on their televisions every night. Other Iraq war films have been box office poison, largely by making this mistake. So we decided to downplay the inherent politics by keeping it as neutral and balanced as possible. We relied on the asking of "questions" rather than the "giving of all the answers" to allow the audience the freedom to connect the dots themselves.

From the 200 hours of film, we wrestled with the footage and our first pass clocked in at three hours and 45 minutes. Several months later, we had honed the film down to just slightly more than two hours. We had reached the tipping point where more cutting would have harmed the film instead of helping it, so it was time to say *The Hurt Locker* was a "lock."

True to its title, *The Hurt Locker* was a grueling adventure for the entire crew. We will always remember what was worth remembering, and we will learn from what would best be forgotten. As the tag line for the movie says, "*The Hurt Locker*...You'll know it when you're in it!"



*Editor Chris Innis poses with real weapon used in the film at a Jordanian military base outside of Amman, Jordan.
Photo by Sean Valla*

The Hurt Locker opens through Summit Entertainment June 26 in Los Angeles at the Arclight Hollywood and on the Westside at the Landmark Theatre, as well as in New York City at the Landmark Sunshine Cinema in the East Village. The film will be in wider US release in July.

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