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THE FORGOTTEN HOSTAGE

WHAT HAPPENED TO JOHN CANTLIE?

By ANTHONY LOYD

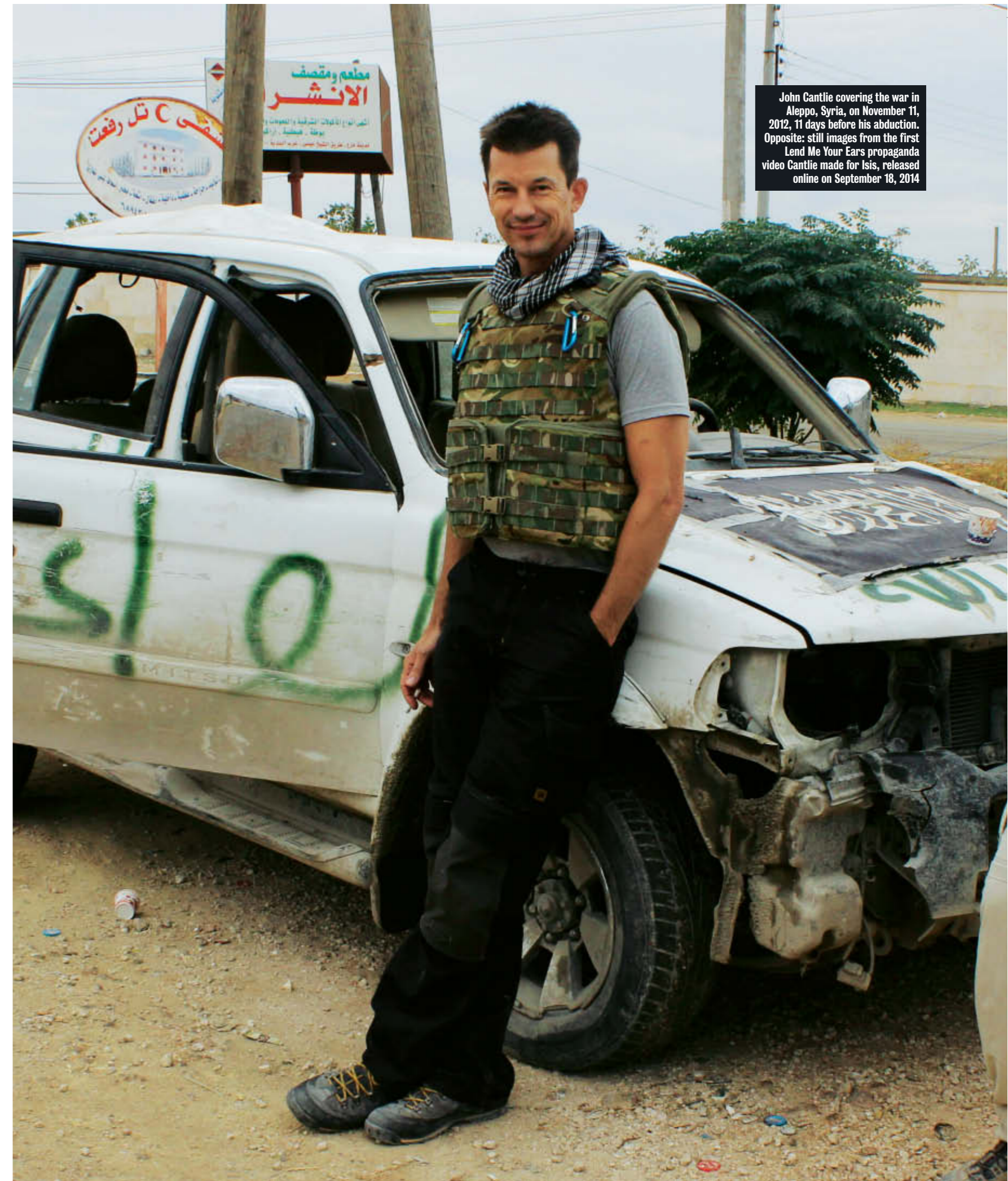




MY HUNT FOR ISIS HOSTAGE JOHN CANTLIE

The British war reporter Islamic State allowed to live

The fate of John Cantlie – kidnapped in 2012, last seen in 2016 – has long obsessed the award-winning Times writer **Anthony Loyd**. He knew Cantlie personally; he too was kidnapped and tortured in Syria. To uncover what happened, he speaks to Cantlie's cellmates and members of the group who held him. So was the charming, impulsive reporter sympathetic to Isis in the end? Or just trying desperately to stay alive – when the other hostages had been killed?



Cantlie in Afghanistan, 2012



American James Foley, taken hostage with Cantlie and beheaded by his Isis captors in 2014



A thin, horse-faced man with a narrow beard and slender hands described the English captive he once knew, as a warm summer breeze rolled along Morocco's Sebou river, plucking at the canvas awning of the bankside café where we sat talking, rattling it with occasional grains of blown sand, and running in silver tumbles through the bulrushes below us. From time to time, the zephyr grew into a wind that was strong enough to steal away the thin man's words too, making me lean forward and ask him to repeat himself; sometimes he did, sometimes he didn't.

The café was otherwise empty, though a Moroccan intelligence agent in a casual blue shirt and jeans sat across the table listening to the thin man speak. I noticed a second operative seated some distance away, further along the riverside, reading a paper in another empty café, and I felt there was a third nearby.

The thin man was called Abu Hajer al-Maghribi – at least, that was the alias he was given by Islamic State, and one which I'll stick with here in keeping with the conditions under which I was allowed to speak to him by the Moroccan security services in the coastal city of Kenitra that July day last year.

Maghribi had been a member of Islamic State's media wing in Syria, working as a photographer and videographer for Isis's Amaq News Agency before eventually becoming disaffected with the group. On his return to Morocco, he had been arrested and jailed, serving two years of a three-year sentence for membership of a terrorist organisation before being released from prison on a tightly monitored parole. The security services said that Maghribi may have held information back, but that he had not been found to be lying about the information he did disclose.

He had an interesting background, and the transformation he had undergone from his own extremist beginnings as an online jihadist

influencer, through his days as a serving member of Islamic State in Syria, to his eventual disenchantment with the group's wanton killing and cruelty, is in itself a story. Yet the thin man was not the focus of my interest. I had gone to that place of whispering reeds and warm desert wind to ask him questions about John Cantlie.

"Why was John chosen to live when the others died?" I asked. He paused momentarily and his hands danced like wounded birds on the tabletop.

John Cantlie remains an enigma, a man whose endeavour to survive captivity as a hostage of Islamic State after his abduction in 2012 involved a supposed conversion to Islam, his appearance as presenter in 14 propaganda videos for the terror group, and his authorship of 8 articles for Isis's online magazine *Dabiq*. This all bought the photojournalist two more years of life after the last of his fellow British and American cellmates were murdered on camera, but also left a trail of unanswered questions, long after he disappeared without trace in Mosul, Iraq's second city, in December 2016.

What happened to the longest surviving hostage? Were these videos and the articles Cantlie wrote for Islamic State just part of the price he was forced to pay for his life or, lacking any alternative, part of a fantastic

gamble of his own construct designed so that he could survive long enough to be rescued or ransomed? Or, as some believe, did they chart a transformation within the hostage, whereby Cantlie's relationship with his captors evolved over time until he became a willing advocate of Islamic State's messaging?

By rights, the British journalist's name should be fresh in public consciousness after the conclusion in April of the trials in America of two London men, Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, who were once part of the infamous Islamic State cell nicknamed "the Beatles" by Cantlie, whom they tortured and brutalised in Syria along with his fellow hostages. Kotey, 38, was sentenced to life imprisonment by a US court having pleaded guilty to eight charges relating to the abduction, torture and beheading of Isis hostages in Syria. Elsheikh, 33, was also found guilty and will be sentenced in August. The third member of the cell, Mohammed Emwazi, the multiple murderer better known as "Jihadi John", was killed by a coalition drone strike in Raqqa in the autumn of 2015.

Yet barely a backward glance has been given to the fate of the British journalist who was the longest surviving of the seven British and American hostages who fell into Islamic State's hands, and whose lone fate remains shrouded in mystery.

James Foley, Steven Sotloff and Peter Kassig, all American, and the British aid workers David Haines and Alan Henning, were beheaded in Isis propaganda videos between August and November 2014. Kayla Mueller, a 26-year-old American human rights activist, was killed in Isis captivity in February 2015.

The slain hostages have a kind of release, allowing their memory to be sanctified and enshrined. The missing hostage has no such repose. Neither rescued nor ransomed – nor likely to have been killed by his captors – John Cantlie's success in surviving so long while his companions were murdered has left a legacy of ambiguity and judgment that lingers

The last known picture of Cantlie before his kidnapping, Syria, November 2012



Olive tree memorial to Cantlie at the al-Nouri mosque, Mosul



still: the itchy riddle in history's recall of the hostage crisis. Without answers, he remains a wandering ghost.

Even in memoriam, the photojournalist's peace is troubled. Last December, an olive sapling was planted at the request of the journalist's family in his memory in the grounds of the al-Nouri mosque in the Old City of Mosul.

The 12th-century mosque, so central to the identity of the Old City, but also the site from which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had proclaimed his caliphate in 2014, was blasted to pieces by Islamic State in the final days of the battle to liberate the city from their grip in 2017.

Walking through the courtyard of the mosque last month amid the tapping of the stonemasons rebuilding it, I was led to John Cantlie's olive tree, a thin sapling in need of water, growing in a raised stone bed. It had a tag when it was planted in December, dedicating it to the journalist's memory. That has since disappeared.

When word of the newly planted sapling was released on social media in Iraq, it caused anger among Mosulis. In the absence of alternative explanation, they knew of the British reporter only as a man whom they had once seen in the Islamic State videos shown on the plasma screens in the terror group's media kiosks sited throughout their city. Much of the rage was vented on social media, but men also turned up at the gates of the Nouri mosque demanding the tree be removed.

"We don't know how to regard John Cantlie as there are so many unanswered questions around him," I was told by Saker al-Zakaria, a prominent Mosuli activist, when I met him near the mosque to ask about the controversy.

"All we know is that John Cantlie came to our city with Islamic State, and that he seemed to serve Islamic State while he was here. Now we learn that a tree has been planted in memory of his soul, and many are angry about it. We would like to know, has the tree been planted in memory of a man with

HE WAS ON THE GROUND WITH HIS HANDS BOUND. 'JOHN SAID, "PLEASE HELP ME." I COULDN'T'

the soul of an Islamic State member, or a man with the soul of a hostage?"

That question accompanied me on a long journey looking into Cantlie's fate. It began on an autumn day nine years ago.

That day, working with the *Times* photographer Jack Hill, I accidentally drove into an Islamic State checkpoint in Atmeh, northern Syria.

We were travelling heavy: tinted windows, a second vehicle as back-up, four gunmen, satellite trackers, good comms. Every asset wilted to nothing as soon as the first teenage fighter, an Iraqi, stepped out into the dusty road ahead of my car.

"Isis," murmured my interpreter. The very word seemed to suck the oxygen out of the vehicle.

The man in the road wore a turban and a camouflaged shalwar kameez. The moment he saw two westerners in the vehicle he became enraged, jabbing a finger at the car window in repeated accusation, as if the very sight of us caused him loathing. His body jerked with rage as he shouted. Spittle flew from his lips.

Others soon joined him. One wanted to shoot us as spies then and there. That autumn of 2013 encountering Isis as a westerner had only one outcome. You disappeared.

The man who saved my life that day was a Syrian doctor. We had been en route to see one of the hospitals deeper in Syria. Among the wounded his staff were treating were Isis fighters. The caliphate had yet to be properly established and at the time Isis were critically short of staff in their medical sector. So,

while we were held at gunpoint in the car, the doctor held a meeting with an Islamic State emir who had arrived on the scene, a tall Algerian by the alias of Abu Baraa. The doctor told the emir that Jack Hill and I were also doctors on a fundraising visit to Syria, a mission that was vital to his staff's work. My bones were sweating tears. Islamic State released us.

It is not the gratitude of improbable escape that later drove me to investigate John Cantlie's fate, nor necessarily the feeling of debt to fortune. It is the memory of abiding remorse. Sitting in that car that day, the words "I'm gone" playing through my mind on a loop, I was beset by a moment of terrible remorse at how what would happen next would harm my family for ever. Trying to match all the choices I had made that were now about to cause such devastating harm to those I loved, I felt the guilt of the cruel and conscious fool, called to account for repeated folly.

The following year, the feeling entrenched when I was shot in Syria during an abduction. My life was again saved by others.

It is those memories that abide when I consider why John Cantlie's fate has so obsessed me: the cognisance of shared guilt, folly and the roulette of luck.

With this awareness, the journey began. Along the way I met former hostages, friends and journalists who knew Cantlie; with hostage negotiators and analysts; with Iraqis and Syrians who had encountered him as a captive; and with Islamic State members who had either abused the journalist or worked alongside him.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: REX FEATURES; AP; THIS SPREAD: FASTFEATURES.COM, AP; MOSUL/UEVE

'GO, GO, GO!' CANTLIE SCREAMED AT THE DRIVER. IT WAS TOO LATE. THE VAN FORCED THE TAXI FROM THE ROAD

So it was that I came to Morocco to meet Maghribir, who had known Cantlie over a crucial six-week period during the autumn of 2014, when the last of the journalist's British and American cellmates were beheaded in Syria, and when Cantlie began a new chapter of survival.

The last time I saw John Cantlie was one evening in the autumn of 2012 in Antakya, southern Turkey. He had just come out of Syria and was sitting at a table with James Foley in a restaurant that was often frequented by the small cadre of reporters who worked there.

Jim – most knew James Foley as Jim – was a friend. The charming American was an easy man to like. We had met in Kandahar, Afghanistan, two years earlier standing around in a sandstorm five days in a row, waiting for a helicopter that never came. When he saw me that evening in Antakya he stood up, walked over and said, “Hey, brother.” John stayed where he was.

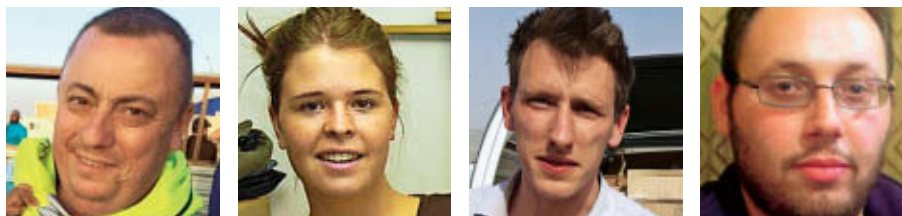
John Cantlie, who would be 52 if he were still alive, was the embodiment of complexity. A tall, athletically built, good-looking man, his friends use adjectives like “opinionated”, “funny”, “mercurial”, “irreverent”, “rash” and “brave” to describe him. He veered between moments of noisy extroversion and quiet reflection. Three of his friends, all men, wept when they spoke of him to me, yet at the same time expressed infuriation with Cantlie's impulsiveness. Others I met spoke of him with anger and blamed Cantlie's recklessness directly for the murder of James Foley.

His career path into photojournalism was a slalom too. The son of a former Scots Guards officer, he was raised in Sussex, one of three siblings, and came to journalism relatively late after a career that began first as a game tester for Sega, before he moved on to become a journalist for bike magazines. Nicknamed “Sonic” after the manically energetic computer games hedgehog, he soon realised the power of video journalism, and his work as co-presenter on the show *Bikes Aloud* (which included a classic Cantlie episode in which he was filmed being dragged along the tarmac by an accelerating car to test a set of bike leathers) displayed his natural gift of the gab, his confidence with high-octane risk and the presentational ease that he later showed when producing videos from Syria – all the qualities that were to keep him alive.

(His love of motorbikes still allowed him to roam, even when he was a prisoner in an Isis cell. One day, a former hostage told me, in a time of despair, Cantlie had asked his fellow hostages to roll their blankets up as saddles and take an empty water bottle in each hand as their handlebars, at which point Cantlie took them on a three-hour bike tour, leading their minds from the horrors of their captivity

PA, AP, EPA, REUTERS

From left: Alan Henning, Kayla Mueller, Peter Kassig and Steven Sotloff, all killed by their captors in 2014/early 2015



ISIS DEMANDED \$100 MILLION FOR THE MALE UK AND US HOSTAGES AND \$5 MILLION FOR MUELLER

on a journey that recreated a bike trek he had once made with Prince William and Prince Harry across 1,000 miles of Africa.)

By 2010, Cantlie's career had shifted shape once more, this time into covering wars, and after working in Afghanistan he had teamed up with James Foley, two years his junior, in Libya. They were a tight team, but many of Foley's friends were wary of the relationship.

I stood in the Antakya restaurant speaking to Foley for a while. The eve of going into Syria was always a tense moment, so I was uneasy. There have only ever been two places I have worked which have felt akin to walking blindfold and naked through a sawmill: northern Syria was one of them. Reporting in Ukraine seems simple by comparison. Then we said our good lucks and goodbyes. He went back into Syria with Cantlie shortly afterwards.

The next time I saw Jim Foley was two years later, on August 19, 2014. He was in a video, about to be beheaded. A month after he was killed, John Cantlie also appeared on video. He had been chosen for something else.

The two men had crossed back into Syria not long after I saw them. Cantlie's fixer and friend, the budding Syrian photographer Mustafa Karali, was with them.

There was a fourth entity with the group: Cantlie's recklessness.

“Johnnie was a great man, a brave heart, and he helped me and others many times,” Karali later told me. Cantlie had mentored the photographer and, nine years after the events he described, Karali at times wept at the memory of his friend.

“I really love him. In ways, he was my best friend. He was my teacher. He was funny. He was brave. And he was kind. He was all these different things. Some of them good. Some of them bad. Some of them dangerous. He was a troublemaker.”

War is governed by the dynamic of chaos. Death or sudden calamity can occur in an instant, under warm blue skies and amid fields of flowers. Everyone makes mistakes in a war

zone. Good war reporters are by necessity bold: the best are those who also make the fewest mistakes. John Cantlie repeatedly made bad mistakes in a very short period in Syria.

His earlier work in Afghanistan and Libya had already garnered him a reputation for courage. He had a good eye as a photographer, could write well, and shoot and edit videos too: a rare combination. Yet he appeared to have little grasp of consequence, and to be ruled by an impulsion that he found hard to control.

In one of his earlier stories from the war in March 2012, in the Syrian town of Saraqib, Cantlie had famously shot a close-up photograph of a regime T-72 tank as it advanced towards the rebels he was accompanying. His account of the day's battle there, a strong piece of writing alongside his photographs, was published in *The Daily Telegraph*. It never mentioned that at one point in the battle, Cantlie had put his camera aside, grabbed a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) from a rebel, and was preparing to fire at the tank himself until James Foley, screaming at him in anger, forced him to put it down.

“James started shouting, ‘John, what are you f***ing doing?’” recalled Karali. “There was a lot of shouting and swearing. James forced John to leave the RPG. It was James who had the calm mind.”

Cantlie had already been lightly wounded in Syria by shrapnel in the spring, when he was shot in the arm in July – this time escaping an abduction by a group of foreign jihadists. A dozen English speakers, nine of whom had London accents, were among them. He had crossed the Syrian border with a Dutch photographer, Jeroen Oerlemans, and stopped by a group of fighters for a cup of tea, not realising that it was an encampment of foreign jihadis belonging to Majlis Shurah Dawlat al-Islam, a forerunner group to Islamic State, commanded by a Saudi-born Syrian, Firas al-Absi.

The two journalists and their fixer were taken captive. A couple of days later, while attempting to make a run for it, both were

Cantlie in three Isis propaganda films in Mosul dating, left, from July 2016 and, right, January 2015. The central image is from December 2016, after which Cantlie was never seen again



shot and wounded. They were saved from a worse fate by mainstream Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels who, on learning of the journalists' plight and angered at the presence of the Islamist group on the border, rescued them from the jihadists after a week's captivity.

Back in the UK, Cantlie's story of the incident had gone viral. His account of the casual cruelty and radical convictions of the foreign fighters who had imprisoned him, dominated by British jihadists, marked a key moment in the changing face of the war, which he wrote as a gripping, first-hand piece in *The Sunday Times*. The photojournalist described his ordeal on television and radio too, and his story was amplified around the world by social media.

There was immediate fallout. Just a month later, Firas al-Absi, the commander of the jihadist group, was killed in a clash with a rival unit seeking to crush the extremists' influence in the area where Cantlie had been abducted. Then, in October, one of the British men Cantlie had described as being among the jihadists, NHS doctor Shajul Islam – already connected by marriage to one of the most infamous jihadist networks in London – was arrested on his return to the UK on terror charges.

Cantlie's story was also a major professional break. Recognising the need to capitalise on success, eager anyway to be back on the road after the setback – and despite the specific risks posed to him – he resolved to go back to Syria.

Yet once inside the country again, rather than try to avoid foreign fighters, he went seeking them. In Aleppo he soon angered his companions when he wandered off alone to a nearby jihadist checkpoint. Noticing that Cantlie had gone missing, Karali and a senior FSA commander went looking for him, and found the British journalist in a building, white with fear, surrounded by foreign fighters whom he had tried to interview. Instead, they were questioning him to see if he was the British reporter who had been abducted by jihadists earlier in the year.

"He was pale and he was shaking," recalled Karali. "The FSA commander managed to persuade the jihadists to let John go. They weren't exactly sure who Johnnie was, but they were very suspicious of him. Immediately afterwards, I took him to James Foley and said, 'We must get clear of this area. Right now.'"

Cantlie tried to assuage his friends' anger. "It's OK! I've got it under control," he told them.

"You are not f***ing controlling anything," Karali erupted.

The reporters left the city, moving westward to work in Idlib governorate, where Cantlie was again lightly wounded on a front line, this time in the leg. Worse followed.

Deciding to return to Turkey, the three men stopped at an internet café in the town of Binnish before taking the road north to the border. It was November 22, 2012 – Thanksgiving Day. They spent 3 hours there, just 20 miles south of the area where

'I HAVE BEEN ABANDONED BY MY GOVERNMENT,' SAID CANTLIE IN HIS FIRST VIDEO IN 2014

Cantlie had previously been abducted. While they were in the café, filing stories and emailing friends, a bearded foreign fighter wearing a beret walked in through the door.

Unable to resist himself, John Cantlie twice stepped forward in attempted greeting with the jihadist, saying, "Hey, Che Guevara." The foreign fighter stared back at the three men in silence, an expression of loathing on his face. He sat down, opened his laptop for a couple of minutes, then got up and left the café, never having said a word. It was a fateful moment.

Thirty minutes later, Cantlie, Foley and Karali left and took a taxi to the border. On the way, they passed a grey van parked by the side of the road. The van began to tail them.

John Cantlie, often so oblivious to threat, noticed the vehicle speeding up behind them in the wing mirror and suddenly realised what was about to befall the group.

"Go, go, go! Don't stop!" he screamed at the driver.

It was too late. The van overtook the taxi and forced it from the road. Five masked gunmen leapt out, dragged the journalists

from the car and hurled them to the ground, firing bullets around the men to freeze them in shock. They wanted only Cantlie and Foley.

Karali's lasting memory of that moment is of Cantlie lying on the ground, his hands bound behind his back. Karali wept as he recalled the scene. "Johnnie said, 'Please Mustafa, help me.' I couldn't. He said, 'I don't want to be with those people again. They are so bad. Please help me.'"

The van sped away with the two reporters captive inside.

John Cantlie sat in an orange Guantanamo-style prisoner's jumpsuit alone at a table in a darkened studio. His teeth were rotting, his hair was cropped and his shoulders, usually broad, were so narrow that the hanger mark on the overalls had space to bulge.

"Hello, my name is John Cantlie," he began, looking, calm, directly into the camera. "I am a British journalist who used to work for some of the bigger newspapers and magazines in the UK, including *The Sunday Times*, *The Sun* and *The Sunday Telegraph*. Now, I know what you are thinking. You're thinking, 'He's only doing this because he's a prisoner. He's got a gun at his head and he's being forced to do this,' right? Well, it's true. I am a prisoner. That I cannot deny. But, seeing as I have been abandoned by my government and my fate now lies in the hands of the Islamic State, I have nothing to lose. Maybe I will live, and maybe I will die. But I want to take an opportunity to convey some facts that you can verify."

Released online on September 18, 2014, nearly two years after his abduction, in those first few lines of the introductory episode of *Lend Me Your Ears*, John Cantlie set the scene for the six-part series of short films he presented for Islamic State that would follow.

The hostage crisis was at its peak. Foley, Sotloff and Haines were already dead; Henning, Kassig and Kayla Mueller yet to die. Against this backdrop, Cantlie's appearance marked a new moment in terrorist propaganda. Part chat show parody, part snuff reality series in which the hostage acknowledged that his life hung in the balance, rather than being just another brutal beheading video, the start of the *Lend Me Your Ears* series was unique for the twisted sophistication with which Isis messaging was woven with Cantlie's own sense of anger. ➤

On occasion, the captive reporter mouthed a few lines of Islamic State's clunk-click sectarian bigotry, but for the most part the script was clearly his own. Rather than plead for his life, the journalist spoke unblinking from the threshold of death, articulating a cold rage against the British and American hostage policies that had failed to prevent the murder of their nationals imprisoned by Isis in Syria, while the 15 European hostages also held by the terror group were freed on payment of ransom.

"We were left to die," Cantlie said in a later episode. "It's the worst feeling in the world to be left behind like that. We'd been in the longest, paid our dues... Then, wham! Have some of that. You're not worth negotiating for."

Embedded within the series was the occasional coded message from Cantlie too. In that same episode the hostage referred to a failed rescue attempt by US special forces, who on July 4, 2014, had raided a refinery on the outskirts of Raqqa where the captives had earlier been held. Cantlie quoted a special forces spokesman describing the possible impact of a failed rescue. "Missions like this are very risky," said Cantlie, reading the spokesman's quote, "because if they go wrong, you don't know how it will affect the hostages further up the road."

"You don't say," Cantlie added, in emphasis. Yet the name of the imaginary spokesman belonged to Cantlie's youngest nephew. The message was key: I am here, he was saying, but we suffered consequences for the raid.

Cantlie's attacks on UK and US hostage policy, which forbade the payment of ransom to terror groups, was the central theme in that first series of videos.

The policies deserved scrutiny. Isis had demanded \$100 million for the release of the six male British and American hostages, and \$5 million for Kayla Mueller. The sums were huge and may or may not have reflected a genuine desire to start a bargaining process. However, as neither the UK nor US would even try to negotiate for the lives of their captives in Syria, it remains unclear as to whether the hostages could have been saved.

The policies also prevented private efforts to pay ransom. In the days prior to his murder, James Foley's mother, Diane, had been threatened by a White House official, who warned her that if her family attempted to raise their own ransom, they would be liable to prosecution. Governed by the same rules, in Britain's case the Foreign Office's additional preference for a news blackout on details of the hostage crisis looked like a ploy to minimise publicity around government inaction.

Cantlie was quick to focus on the hypocrisy of the different rules that were applied to

different cases. In May that year, he reminded viewers, the Obama administration negotiated the release of Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, held by the Taliban in Afghanistan, in return for the exchange of five top-level Taliban commanders held in Guantanamo. No similar avenue was explored in the case of the journalists and aid workers held by Isis.

As the *Lend Me Your Ears* series rolled through the autumn, the same simmering anger coursed through the stories written by Cantlie that began to appear in *Dabiq*. "That was a bitter pill to swallow," he wrote in the first of eight articles, describing how he had watched his European fellow captives walk to freedom, while the British and American hostages walked to their deaths.

"Now I've had to watch as James, Steven Sotloff, David Haines and Alan Henning walked out of the door, one every two weeks since August 18, never to return, knowing they were going to be killed," he continued. "What

under attack from Islamic State, in which he mocked US air drops of weaponry intended for the Kurds that had accidentally landed in Isis hands, and advertised an impending Islamic State victory. "The mujahideen is being resupplied by the hopeless US air force," Cantlie chided. "The battle for Kobane is coming to an end. The mujahideen are just mopping up now."

No longer an obvious prisoner in an orange Guantanamo jumpsuit, Cantlie's role appeared to be undergoing a metamorphosis.

Maghribi, the Moroccan jihadist, was 33 years old at the time, an established member of Islamic State's media wing who had already been involved in the filming of the notorious hour-long documentary *Flames of War*, when he first saw Cantlie that autumn.

Shortly before his appearance in Kobane Cantlie had been moved away from sharing a prison cell with the surviving hostages and

SOME FILMS HAD CODED MESSAGES. AN AMERICAN 'SPOKESMAN' HE QUOTED HAD HIS NEPHEW'S NAME

does that do to a man? After enduring years of pain, darkness and regret, to see it all end in such a ghastly way... because of 'policy' – can you begin to imagine how that feels?"

Though it was obvious that the journalist in orange prison garb was a captive under threat of death, the videos triggered anger among quarters of the government and security establishment. The first voices questioning whether the hostage may somehow have "turned" were raised, fuelled by media speculation that Cantlie may have developed Stockholm syndrome – the unproven psychological condition that suggests hostages develop trust in their captors.

Senior British intelligence staff spoke of him with barely concealed disdain; some of their military counterparts made no attempt to mask their feelings. "If Cantlie ever makes it back, he should be charged with treason," a serving British general told me as the last of the hostages were murdered. "He's a traitor."

Then, in late October that year, just three weeks after the beheading of the aid worker Alan Henning, the journalist's role seemed to change again. In the first of a three-part Islamic State series, the British hostage – better fed, bearded and in a black shirt – reprised a version of the war correspondent persona, presenting a propaganda video, *Inside Kobane*, from the streets of the Syrian-Kurdish city, then

placed in solitary confinement. Foley, Sotloff and Haines had been murdered over the previous four weeks, but when the Moroccan met Cantlie, Alan Henning, Peter Kassig and Kayla Mueller were still alive.

Maghribi, no stranger to horror having filmed the massacre of 170 captured Syrian soldiers near Tabqa airbase earlier in the summer, said that the decision to spare Cantlie and utilise his presenting skills had been made by British Isis members. Cantlie had come up with the idea, he said; the British cell had backed it.

"John Cantlie had the proposition, saying, 'Let me shoot as well. Let me show the world whether you are really as they see you or something else.' These are things that helped him. He was saved after the intercession of some English brothers on the basis that he could be used," Maghribi explained. "Those brothers saw that he had skills, and said that it was possible for him to repent and film."

Yet the reality was more twisted than that. Like every hostage, Cantlie was desperate to survive. Throughout his captivity he had been deeply sceptical that the British government would ever pay ransom for his release, yet he cherished the thought of somehow gaining his freedom and had spoken to his fellow captives of his wish to see his elderly father before he died; to have the chance to see his family, his nephews and niece once more. ➤

"The only strategy any of us had was survival," recalled Didier François, a veteran French correspondent held with Cantlie. "We could not fight the guards; we could not beat them. We were prisoners. So, the essence of the whole experience became about survival."

Brash and opinionated before his abduction, Cantlie had become a changed man. The torture that he and James Foley had been subjected to during the first year of their captivity, the long periods of darkness and deprivation, had left him sombre and reflective.

"I had known John in Libya, where he was so full of energy and stamina," remembered Xavier Espinosa, the Spanish correspondent from *El Mundo* who was also held hostage. "He wasn't like that in captivity. The energy was broken. My feeling was that the torture he had endured had really affected him. He was quiet and thoughtful, and very pessimistic about his own chances of ever being released."

He and Foley had been waterboarded so badly as punishment for two escape attempts in their first year of captivity neither could entertain further thought of absconding. One hostage told me, if ever the subject of escape arose, John Cantlie would physically remove himself from the conversation.

Yet, despite having been so regularly involved in his torture from the earliest moments of his captivity, the British jihadists of the Beatles gang had an interest in preserving Cantlie. Surviving European hostages remember Mohammed Emwazi, the Isis killer who had studied information systems at the University of Westminster, as paying the British hostage particular attention.

"Emwazi was trying to manipulate John," recalled François. "He was focused on John, and he wanted something from him. He had something specific in mind for him. It was a weird relationship – deeply manipulative."

At times, after Emwazi had come into the room and beaten hostages, he would demand Cantlie perform a series of impressions, mimicking the clichéd tropes of television news reporters, for the terrorist's own amusement.

"And John was incredibly funny and good at doing it," the French reporter continued. "He could change accents and make stories from nothing. He was an amazing actor. As John did his act, you could feel the wheels turning in Emwazi's mind."

In the dark hinterland of Islamic State thought, where the message of terror was as important as the act, the seed of an idea to have one hostage, a journalist already skilled in presentation, exploited into presenting Islamic State propaganda as his comrades were murdered, found fertile ground.

In the early days of the captive's new role, Maghribi described Cantlie, dazed after two years of darkness and abuse, his death

Paul Cantlie pleads for his son's release in hospital, 2014



'IN LIBYA, JOHN WAS SO FULL OF ENERGY AND STAMINA. IN CAPTIVITY, HE WAS BROKEN'

sentence suddenly on hold even as the other British and American hostages were killed, as being under a form of parole, in which the journalist was permanently accompanied by two British Isis members: an unidentified British-Egyptian man in his late twenties who acted as an interpreter, and a white-skinned fighter who did not speak Arabic.

"They had a good relationship with Cantlie. There was harmony and laughter between them," said the jihadist.

Cantlie's tasks for Isis involved more than merely presenting and writing. He was issued with a video camera too and, accompanied by his minders, regularly appeared at an Isis base in the small town of Shuyuk al-Fawqani, on the east bank of the Euphrates, halfway between Kobane and Manbij, where he was sent on assignments to film Isis in action.

"At the beginning, the British journalist was scared because he was still a prisoner, and at any point he could be subject to the death penalty," the Moroccan remembered. "Later, he gained more trust. Even then, he always had chaperones. But in the beginning, there was a question mark over him."

Soon after they first met, Maghribi had worked with the British journalist in Kobane, where the captive was filmed at the start of the second Isis film series. For a time, during the battle there, the Moroccan said he lived alongside Cantlie in an operations room at the edge of the city. The other Isis fighters did not call Cantlie by a Muslim name, he recalled, despite the journalist's earlier conversion to Islam.

"We always referred to him as 'shafi al-Britanni' – the British journalist," the jihadist said.

The last time the Moroccan saw the hostage was at the end of 2014, in the Syrian city of Manbij.

Just before we parted company, I put one final question to Maghribi. It was one I always asked at the end of interviews with those who had encountered the captive during the making of his videos.

"Has anyone else from Britain, perhaps an official or a diplomat or an investigator, ever come before me to ask you anything about John Cantlie?" I asked.

"No. No one," said Maghribi.

They usually said that. No one was looking for John Cantlie. Abandonment was a constant companion.

Two months after his sudden appearance in Kobane, the next episode of the *Inside* series saw Cantlie surface in Mosul, eulogising the city's prosperity under Isis rule and mocking Iraqi security forces. Appearing at ease with the Isis camera crew, he took a stroll through parts of the Old City, derided an overhead drone – "Rescue me! Do something! Useless! Absolutely useless!" he jeered skywards – and at one point, tipping his cap at his biker past, he rode an Isis police motorbike down the road past the university, with a jihadist riding pillion.

Mosulis who met Cantlie in the city, or saw his videos shown at the outdoor public Isis film screens, never assumed he was anything else but Islamic State.

"When he came by, he was like any other Isis foreign member," said Ammar Ghanem, a soap seller in Najafi Street who encountered Cantlie when the hostage walked up to his stall one December day during the making of the *Inside Mosul* video.

"He came and asked for the price of the soap. He was happy, making jokes with us. He bought a bar of soap from me and then went to my friend Nashwan and bought halawa from him. He was very at ease. Anyone that saw him wouldn't have been able to tell if he was a captive or a Daesh member. He was laughing with us, having fun. We thought he was from Daesh."

A couple of weeks later, the soap seller saw Cantlie again, this time having lunch in the al-Jandool restaurant in the al-Zirai neighbourhood, beside the ancient Nineveh wall, eating with an Isis media team.

"He was sitting outside, having lunch, looking relaxed," Ghanem said. "No one could have known he was not one of them."

Yet looking like "one of them" was the essence of his survival. Nothing else was keeping John Cantlie alive.

Behind the public façade of Cantlie's Islamic State videos and the sincerity of his anger with the British government, the hostages who knew John Cantlie intimately in captivity had no doubts as to where the hostage's fealty lay. None of the former hostages I spoke to suggested John Cantlie had ever turned. ➤

When Daniel Rye Ottosen received the order to leave the cell he shared with the last British and American hostages in the refinery at the edge of Raqqa, he said farewell to Cantlie. It was June 17, 2014, three weeks before the US raid, two months before Foley's murder, three months before Cantlie's first *Lend Me Your Ears* video appearance.

The 25-year-old Danish photographer's ransom, raised by his family back home, had just been paid: driven to a border crossing point at night and handed over to Islamic State by a Danish specialist hostage negotiator. Though the Danish government refused to pay ransoms, it did not prevent families from doing so. Danish newspapers said the price of the photographer's life was about €2 million. Ottosen would be the last western hostage to leave alive.

When the freed Dane later saw Cantlie presenting the first episode of *Lend Me Your Ears*, he recalled the final thing the British hostage had asked him when they said goodbye.

"John told me before I left the room, 'Daniel, can you please try to tell whoever you speak to from Britain to bomb the shit out of us, because I don't want to be used as propaganda for these arseholes,'" Ottosen told me.

"Did John ever sympathise with these guys?" Ottosen continued. "No f***ing way. If there was anyone who hated them it was John. He was British to the core. When I saw him speaking in the video, dressed in an orange jumpsuit, I knew he must be throwing up inside."

Though Cantlie had converted to Islam earlier in his captivity, it seems that too was just another facet of a survival strategy.

In the summer of 2013, a year before the videos began, a teenage wannabe jihadist from Belgium, Jejoen Bontinck, had been imprisoned by Islamic State. The 18-year-old, radicalised by Sharia4Belgium, had travelled from his home in Antwerp to Syria to fight. Bridling at the reality of the extremism he found there, when he tried to leave the movement he was arrested, tortured and sent to the Isis jail in Aleppo, a former children's hospital.

While in prison, the Belgian was moved to a cell to advise two newly converted men on the correct path of Islam. Walking in, he had found Cantlie and Foley, both bearded and wearing long, traditional Islamic clothing.

Bontinck spent several weeks with the two men, praying with them, playing word association games and discussing faith. Cantlie and Foley told him how they had both been terribly tortured, whipped with cables and waterboarded while held at a prison near Atmeah in Idlib. Cantlie had scars from chains on his ankles. (His original kidnapping still haunted his captivity: Islamic State's

Screengrab from Cantlie's final Isis film, December 2016



emir of Aleppo and the individual in overall charge of the prison at the time was Amr al-Absi, the younger brother of Firas al-Absi, who had commanded the jihadist group that had detained Cantlie during the journalist's first, brief abduction.)

Looking back, Bontinck said that he doubted the men's conversion to Islam was much more than a survival ploy. James Foley, a practising Catholic, had converted only so that he could be allowed to pray, preserving some space for spiritual communication. For Cantlie, it seemed that prayer allowed him the time to reflect.

"Their conversion wasn't really sincere," Bontinck told me. "It was the only option the two men had, either for better treatment or for more chance of one day being released. They would not have made the same choices to convert as free men."

Eventually released from prison by his guards back into the service of Islamic State, in October 2013 Bontinck finally managed to escape across the border to Turkey, and then to Belgium. Arrested on arrival, his description of the two hostages he had met in his Aleppo cell and the messages he had carried out to their families was the first confirmation that Cantlie and Foley, missing for a year, were still alive.

"Anyone who wants to suggest that John said what he did on the videos through his own free will should put themselves in his position first, then let's have that conversation," Bontinck added. "The two of them are still heroes to me."

The bullwhip crack of gunfire echoing through the streets was nothing unusual to Khdir Shwekh, the head of the nursing team at the al-Salaam hospital in the al-Wahda district of

Mosul. It was December 6, 2016, and the battle to liberate the Iraqi city from Islamic State had begun two months earlier, following a protracted campaign of coalition airstrikes that had intensified ever since the jihadist capture of Mosul in summer 2014.

The Salaam hospital, complete with hundreds of staff and patients, was the largest of its kind in Isis-held southern Mosul and was guarded by a detail of Islamic State fighters.

Shwekh sat at a desk, checking staff rotas, when suddenly an Iraqi armoured personnel carrier burst through the hospital gate, followed by another, and another. Dozens of excited Iraqi troops leapt out of the back of the vehicles, as Abrams tanks and Humvees took position around the hospital grounds. Liberation day had arrived. Or so the soldiers thought.

"They were so happy!" Shwekh, now 42, recalled as we walked through the hospital grounds earlier this month. "The soldiers thought they had captured the whole hospital with barely a fight."

Yet the sound of gunfire soon increased as Islamic State fighters inside the main hospital building fought back, holding out against the sudden breakthrough by a unit of the Iraqi 9th Division. Outside the grounds, Isis fighters swarmed towards the hospital to encircle it, while vehicle-borne suicide bombers sped down the road to explode among the Iraqi cordon positions.

In the space of a couple of hours, Shwekh's morning turned into a maelstrom of whistling shot, flying shrapnel and bursting flame, as the Salaam hospital became an epicentre for battle. The soldiers who had earlier cheered their apparent victory hustled him and about 40 other hospital staff out of the line of gunfire, into an H-shaped building, the doctors' accommodation block.

This in turn was soon surrounded. The Iraqi armoured vehicles parked in the hospital yard were blown apart by RPGs. Islamic State fighters scuttled through the flaming debris to hurl grenades through the accommodation block windows, as one by one the soldiers inside fell dead or wounded.

"The café room filled with the bodies of soldiers and wounded on saline drops," Shwekh told me. "An officer, a colonel, kept urging his men to fight on, assuring them that help was coming. But no help came."

By the afternoon of December 7, the colonel and all his men were dead. Some had their bodies hung from a nearby bridge. Shwekh and the hospital staff had escaped through a side window of the building, allowed their lives by Isis before the last of the surrounded soldiers were slain.

The H-shaped building, such a prominent bulwark of the two-day battle, was a

bullet-shredded, smoke-stained wreck of blood-smeared corridors carpeted with bullet cases and shrapnel shards. Adding to the destruction in the yard outside, US jets had bombed whatever Iraqi vehicles had not already been destroyed by Isis, to deny their use by Islamic State.

Then John Cantlie appeared, standing on the balcony of the H-shaped building, wearing a helmet and dressed in black.

"We're absolutely on the front line of the fight in Mosul," he said to the camera, a spark of energy still in his voice, a vista of burnt and twisted armoured vehicles over his shoulder. "Behind me it looks like a scene from a Steven Spielberg film, except this is for real."

The captive's manner had changed considerably since his first video in Mosul two years before. Though still purposeful and engaging as he stepped through the battle's aftermath, he was scarecrow thin, haggard, and moved stiffly through the wreckage as if unfamiliar with mobility: one of Bruegel's figures in a contemporary *Triumph of Death*.

Cantlie's films from Mosul over the preceding months had moved away from the theme of their original attacks on western hostage policy in the *Lend Me Your Ears* episodes of 2014. They had left behind the faux "caliphate travelogue" style of the *Inside* series too.

By 2016, looking ever more like a hostage again, the journalist denounced the coalition fight for Mosul in baser terms of propaganda, deriding airstrikes on the university, the city's bridges and Isis media kiosks. Now, in the middle of the battle, his report from the Salaam hospital was styled as a frontline despatch. It caused revulsion among many Iraqis who saw it.

"This used to belong to an Iraqi soldier," said Cantlie, picking up a dead soldier's helmet rolled to him by someone off camera. "But I don't think he's going to be needing it now," he added, tossing it aside.

Next, he crouched by the corpse of a 9th Division infantryman.

"Another Iraqi soldier bites the dust," the journalist remarked drily. "This is pretty much all that's waiting for the Iraqi army here in Mosul."

John Cantlie was never seen again.

I met not a single person among the dozens of people I spoke to about the missing journalist who believes he may still be alive.

Reports of his death in an airstrike in Mosul, already intimated by Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh when I interviewed them in detention in Syria in 2018 after their capture by Syrian Kurds, were repeated by numerous other Isis prisoners, though never confirmed.



Not even Kotey and Elsheikh knew for sure. So intimately involved in the hostage's earlier years of suffering, it seems the two Beatles members had remained in Syria during the later period that Cantlie was in Iraq.

The Salaam hospital, which became a hub of Islamic State activity in the weeks after its fighters routed the Iraqi army there, was hit by 25 airstrikes over a three-week period until it was finally captured by Iraqi forces on January 6, 2017. By that time an entire wing of the main building had been destroyed in a huge missile strike which obliterated five floors before exploding in the hospital's capacious underground complex, used by Islamic State as a headquarters. Many of those inside were vaporised. The word within Islamic State is that John Cantlie was killed in a blast here or nearby between December 2016 and January 2017.

If Islamic State had killed Cantlie, they would certainly have publicised it. No execution video ever emerged.

The fight for Mosul rolled on through spring and into summer, as Isis were forced back block by block until only the Old City on the west bank of the Tigris remained in their hands. There they fell back too, fighting for each alley in the Maydan district, which was transformed through repeated cataclysmic air and artillery strikes into a sea of rubble. Untold hundreds of civilians died there, entombed in pulverised buildings, adding to the huge toll already killed across the city.

By July 17, 2017, the day the last shots of the battle for Mosul were fired, nothing

remained of Maydan but piles of debris. Walking through the desolation three weeks ago, I saw that human bones still lay among the shattered masonry. In Mosul, the word "missing" describes the fate of thousands.

In 2019 there was a flurry of claims suggesting Cantlie may miraculously have survived Mosul and appeared in Syria. The claims proved empty. A falsified photograph of the captive was used by Islamic State, surrounded during the battle of Baghouz, to try to negotiate safe passage of their own key leaders in return for the British hostage's release. An extortionist in Istanbul tried to use a photograph in a similar ruse for money. Adding to the confusion, during the same period Ben Wallace, the UK's security minister at the time, wrongly remarked to a group of foreign journalists that the British government believed Cantlie was alive, instead of affirming only that, in the absence of a body, he had not been declared dead.

Nothing the US intelligence services picked up suggested the British journalist had survived the battle of Mosul. One American former senior official, who had detailed and direct knowledge of the Cantlie case and an oversight of the US specialist hostage cell responsible for tracking western hostages in Syria and Iraq, told me last summer under terms of strictest anonymity that the US never had a single credible piece of intelligence confirming that Cantlie was alive after they had lost sight of him at the Salaam hospital in December 2016.

The missing British hostage had withstood years of captivity. He had seen his fellow prisoners, men with whom he had endured torture, shared food, dreams, hopes, darkness, and tears, men beside whom he had shit, slept, and prayed, either go to their freedom or be murdered, one by one, until he was the last left. Then he had to find the resilience and ingenuity to keep going alone. He had done the best expected of any hostage survivor: he had done whatever it took to stay alive, hoping that one day, somehow, someone would come for him. They did not.

If Mosulis now question whether the olive tree planted in John Cantlie's memory inside the Nouri mosque grows in tribute to a man with the soul of an Islamic State member, or to a man with the soul of a hostage struggling to be free, then I hope in part this story will provide them with the answers they need.

"Mostly, John Cantlie was quiet and polite and kept to himself around us," Maghribi, the Isis cameraman who had known the hostage as he assumed his guise to survive, told me above the rustling of the reed beds that summer day in Morocco. "But my feeling was, if he was given real choice, he wouldn't have stayed. He would have left. He wasn't into being with us. I could tell he did not believe." ■