ROAD WAR-RIORS

The ragtag American vigilantes who are fighting ISIS in Syria.

By Jennifer Percy

Photographs by Moises Saman


THE

May was the flowering month for the Syrian thistle. The pink heads grew from the rubble in a small village south of the city of Tel Tamer, in northern Syria. A local Kurdish militia had liberated the village from the Islamic State, or ISIS, in the night. Coalition airstrikes had set fire to the grass and blackened the earth. Concrete buildings and small mud-brick homes were charred and gutted, riddled with bullet holes. The belongings of residents confettied the ground. At a curve in the road lay the corpse of an ISIS fighter.

I found a 26-year-old American civilian named Clay Lawton standing alone, just outside the village. Square-jawed, with large eyes and bright teeth, he was a volunteer freedom fighter with the local militia. "I'm from Rhode Island," he said. "You know it? Most people confuse it with Staten Island or Long Island."

While we were talking, the unit he had arrived with drove off. Now he was alone, wondering how he would find a commander and return to the action. "I guess you could say I'm free-floating," he said.

Lawton first heard about ISIS on "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart." At the time, he was lounging around Key West, driving tour boats from island to island, going to parties, talking to girls. Three months later, he ran out of things to do and bought a ticket home. He lived with his parents and took a job painting houses, thinking he would start a career as a carpenter. After high school, he spent a couple of years in the Army but never deployed. He always wished he had. When a friend from boot camp sent Lawton an email full of links to videos made by the Islamic State — the execution of James Foley, clips from the day ISIS executed 250 Syrian soldiers in the desert — Lawton looked up "how to fight ISIS" on his lunch break.

A Facebook page called the Lions of Rojava was recruiting foreign volunteers. It was affiliated with the People's Protection Units, known by the Kurdish abbreviation Y.P.G., the military arm of a faction that since 2012 has controlled a sweep of land between the Islamic State's territory in northern Syria and Turkey. Rojava, as the Kurds call it, is a place that didn't exist until a few years ago, when civil war in Syria opened up a front for Kurdish nationalism.

Lawton sent the page a message, and within a day a Y.P.G. representative invited him to join the fight. He had about $800 in savings. In February, he flew to Norway and then to Dubai, and from Dubai to Sulaimaniya, in Iraq. "From there I was really nervous," he said. As he spoke, Lawton sipped water from his CamelBak. "I thought everyone was ISIS. I thought I was going to get kidnapped." A fighter picked him up in a fake taxi and took him to a safe house where another American who was scared and lost was still hanging out, because he was so desperate to get to the front. Lawton told him to come with him, and so they went together.

Lawton arrived in Syria, was given an M-16 and in just over two weeks was participating in the offensive at Tel Hamis. "Fighting ISIS wasn't high-profile yet," he said. "Wasn't a big deal. Easy ride to the front."

His nom de guerre was Heval Sharvan, but the freedom fighters called him Captain America. "I think, after this, I might want to relax and go back to work," he said. "Maybe New York or maybe Miami. Well, Miami might be too chill."

'I have a big heart, and I never pictured myself actually doing it.'

Lawton told me about the day he killed an ISIS militant. A Kurd gave him a sniper rifle to attack an ISIS-controlled village. Lawton took a position on the roof of a building and saw an ISIS fighter with a rocket-propelled-grenade launcher running below. Lawton shot him.

"The guy just exploded," Lawton said. "He was just gone." Lawton still had the rifle at his side, close to his body like a purse.

"That was my first kill," he said. "Kinda weird, but I had a nightmare that night."

"About the militant?" I asked.

"It's hard to explain," he said. "You know these guys are animals, but even with that knowledge … " He trailed off. "You know you have to let the brain figure it out on its own," he said. "He pointed the R.P.G. at me. He would have taken me and my

Previous page: A 45-year-old Texan known as Azad, who is fighting with the Y.P.G.

Photograph by Moises Saman/Magnum, for The New York Times

Kurdish Y.P.G. fighters arriving in a village outside Tel Tamer, Syria, after a retreat by the Islamic State.

friend. It was hard for me. Killing people, you know you are here to do it. But then, when it happens, and you see it. It's different. He just exploded."

We walked together up the road toward the village. Barley fields spread for miles all around us. "A couple days later, I was good," he said. "Ever since then, it's been no problem. I just have to remember the videos."

He meant the videos of Foley, of the Syrian soldiers. He looked down and softened the earth with his boot. "See," he said. "I have a big heart, and I never pictured myself actually doing it. I like to see the good in everybody."

The foreigners were sleeping in the villages, standing guard, burning trash, with no schedule and no plans. They were easy to spot. The Irishman with bright red hair and skin pale as the sky. Assorted Europeans who traveled in a pack. The Americans with too much sunscreen and gear. Some were fresh to the fight, and others had been on the ground for months.

At the village where I met Lawton, another American walked alone up a dirt road. The man

Name:
Avery Harrington

From: Ohio

"As soon as I leave here, it's big old steak time."

was almost six feet tall, fair-skinned and balding with a goatee. He was a 48-year-old Ohioan named Avery Harrington, though the Kurds called him Cekdar. He was sweating but in good spirits. He drank noisily from a water bottle. A purple-velvet Crown Royal bag that held empty magazines dangled from his belt.

"I'm 54 days over my visa stay," he confessed.

Harrington was in the Marines during the first gulf war but never made it to the desert. Before arriving, he worked in the Ohio Department of Transportation as a highway technician, plowing snow in the winter. After connecting with the Lions of Rojava, he flew to Iraq in March 2015 with $10,000, body armor with steel plates, two canned hams, turkey bacon, 25 pairs of clean socks and 10 packets of baby wipes. He was able to cite the customs regulation — Section 126.17, Subsection F — that allowed every citizen to take one full set of body armor, including a helmet and gas mask, overseas. He paid more than $500 in baggage fees. The hams never left Iraq.

In April, when Harrington finally arrived in Syria, he was part of such a huge influx of foreign recruits that the Y.P.G. started making special units for Westerners, groups of roughly 12 soldiers. They went through a kind of boot camp called the academy. Harrington was one of seven in his class, including two other Americans, a New Zealander, an Iranian and two Brits, one of whom was an actor named Michael Enright. They trained together for just more than a week, learning to clean and dismantle Kalashnikovs. Those with more experience, like Harrington, were given PKC machine guns. Drills started at 6:15 a.m., and the men sometimes practiced blindfolded to prepare for nighttime attacks.

'We perpetually give. And we are perpetually getting screwed.'

Why were the foreigners there? Some were escaping life back home. Others were old soldiers, trying to fill a void. A few just had delusions of grandeur. They came for the feeling of solidarity, or adventurism, or they came to fulfill a childhood fantasy, to act out some violent adolescent emotion. The youngest fighter was 19, and the oldest, I was told, was 66, a former English teacher from Canada named Peter Douglas. The veterans hoped to kill ISIS fighters and train the locals as they had been trained in the Marines or the Army. The civilians, among them a surf instructor and a philosophy student from the University of Manchester, wanted to learn what they could. They hoped their stamina was enough.

It started the same way for each of them: watching the war on television, then acting on their feelings of impotence and anger. They bought plane tickets from Philadelphia or Miami or Washington and flew solo across the Atlantic, following the orders of a Kurdish militant on Facebook who barely spoke English. It was exciting; it turned them on. They were there to help.

They crossed borders to join a de facto state run by a socialist militia with small arms, entering a battlefield where soldiers died of preventable wounds and untrained medics made tourniquets from broomsticks and torn blankets. The veterans had more experience with weapons than the Y.P.G., who fought with light infantry and without Kevlar. As one foreigner said, of a Kurdish unit, "I wouldn't play paintball in that outfit." These Westerners were genuinely brave, and yet the will to do good was not enough. The mind-set of the Y.P.G., some realized, had little to do with their own beliefs. "This is the Twilight Zone," one said. "Lovely fairy tale," said another. Many realized, far too late, that this wasn't a normal deployment. Ad hoc organization, no advanced weaponry, no Black Hawk to airlift them to safety, few translators. They had abandoned everything — jobs, children, wives.

Some fought in combat, but many did not. What followed were purposeless days, sleepless nights, and I sensed a bit of humiliation among them. Like Marlow on his way up the Congo, these men seemed to experience a disturbance in their Western consciousness. They had vastly overestimated their use. Their service was respected but insignificant. These were men who arrived with a stark idea of good versus evil, who thought of themselves as heroes, and found themselves turning in circles.

"We perpetually give," Harrington said. "And we are perpetually getting screwed."

In the months after the first volunteers arrived in the fall of 2014, the foreign fighters battled ISIS alongside the Y.P.G., but then they started dying. By the summer, at least six foreigners had been killed, including one American. The Kurds started using the foreigners for safer tasks — to secure remote outposts or cover guard shifts in rear areas.

Jordan Matson, a 29-year-old Wisconsin man who ran the Facebook page at first, was among the few who continued to join the most dangerous missions. He said he was the second foreign fighter to arrive. He had been in Syria's Kurdish territory for almost a year and was the darling of the Western militia movement. He was so popular that one woman, writing on Facebook, threatened to kill herself if he didn't marry her. Another, he said, tried to travel to Syria with her child to ask for his hand in marriage.

I met Matson while he was taking a break from sniper duty. We were in the basement of an apartment building in Tel Tamer, a ghost town with closed storefronts and dogs with cut-off ears. Matson was over six feet and had a big jaw, a goatee and a childish grin. He wore full fatigues and carried a Kalashnikov. I asked if he had time to talk. Yes, he said — he had nothing to do. "If I have no one to play chess with, then I'm going to stare at that wall," he said. "And then I'm going to stare at that wall. And when I'm done staring at that wall, I'm going to stare at that wall." Matson asked if I wanted any doughnuts or soda. He was going to get something from a man down the street who worked at the only operating store in town. "I have lots of money," he said. He wouldn't say where the money came from except a "generous benefactor." Harrington told me the foreigners were given a monthly allowance of about $100 for their services from the Y.P.G., which they used for extra food and toilet paper.

Before the war, Matson had never been outside the United States. He was working the third shift at a meatpacking plant in Wisconsin. He joined the Army and served for a year and a half before being discharged. "Hey, we think you have PTSD," he said his superiors told him. He added, "But I don't." He was going through a divorce at the time; he later decided he had an emptiness in his life because he hadn't deployed.

In June 2014, after the fall of Mosul, he learned on Facebook about an American named Brian Wilson. Wilson was in Rojava, fighting ISIS. They connected online, and Wilson gave him his contacts and suggested a flight route. That same month, Matson flew to Poland, then Turkey, and then drove to a town on the Turkish border. There, a Y.P.G. fighter picked him up in a fake taxi and drove Matson into Iraq. They stayed in Erbil and moved around safe houses; Matson pretended to be a doctor. They traveled deep into the mountains until they were able to cross the Tigris River at night into Syria.

Things happened quickly for him. There was no training and no induction. Matson joined a sniper unit. The soldiers' job was to attack a group of ISIS militants who were firing mortars at a Christian police station. It was a six-hour firefight. A Y.P.G. fighter died in a suicide bombing. Matson was hit by a grenade and injured his foot. An ambulance ferried him to the regional hospital in Serekaniye.

It was there, bored during his recovery, that he worked on a page to recruit foreigners to the Y.P.G.: the Lions of Rojava. The banner was an image, altered with Photoshop, of foreign fighters. They were holding guns on a hilltop next to a giant lion; behind them was the smoke of ruined towns. It was news to most everyone that there was a Western-friendly faction in Syria. So many queries came in from veterans and nonveterans that he couldn't deal with them.

Matson passed on the responsibility for the page a while ago. Kurdish Y.P.G. supporters run it and provide directions to prospective fighters

Photograph by Moises Saman/Magnum, for The New York Times

on how to apply: Simply submit a résumé and statement of purpose. So far, Matson says, he has met about a hundred foreign recruits, but no one keeps track of the numbers.

Because of the language barrier, the foreigners couldn't communicate well with the Kurds who were supposed to manage them. Conflicts between difficult personalities were allowed to fester. There were stories about drifters and lunatics. A British man who petted the dead ISIS bodies. Another who used his psychic abilities to hear ISIS fighters speak. One man requested to go home because of a bad case of attention-deficit disorder. Another said he understood what ISIS wanted and sympathized with their cause. Another was known for looking around and saying, "Did the C.I.A. send you?"

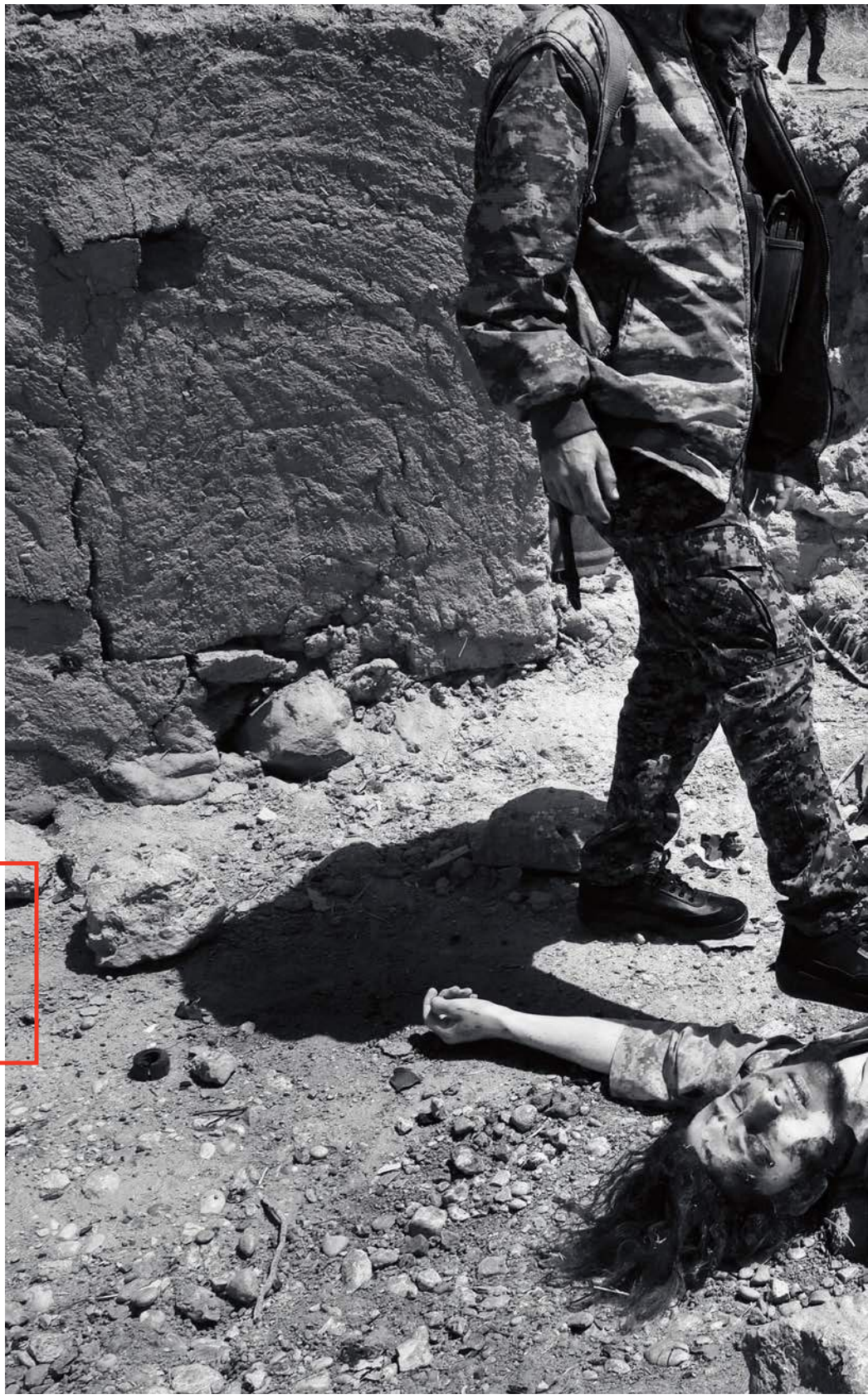
When Michael Enright, the British actor who trained with Harrington, joined the foreign fighters, he became a source of controversy. Enright is best known for his role as a deckhand in "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest." He also played Nick Libergal in Season 1 of "Law & Order: L.A." (In the show, the police find Libergal dead in a bathtub, his body dissolving in quicklime.) Enright had wanted to fight in the war on terror after Sept. 11, but his friends discouraged him. The rise of ISIS offered him a second chance.

Matson wanted Enright off the battlefield. He described Enright as "mentally unstable" in a Facebook post. "Enright is a liability," Harrington told me. "He's not just a danger to himself, he is a danger to everybody out here." The actor was considered reckless with weapons, disassembling his Kalashnikov without checking that the magazine was empty. At a meeting, Harrington asked who wanted Enright kicked out of the class. Everyone raised his hand. After training, Harrington said, their commander decided to keep Enright at the front but without a fighting role. He wasn't welcome in any unit. (When I later asked him about the comments, Enright said he did fight but didn't want to get into any of "the gossip": "I think it helps ISIS. I hate ISIS.")

'It's not that bad. Not that bad being dead.'

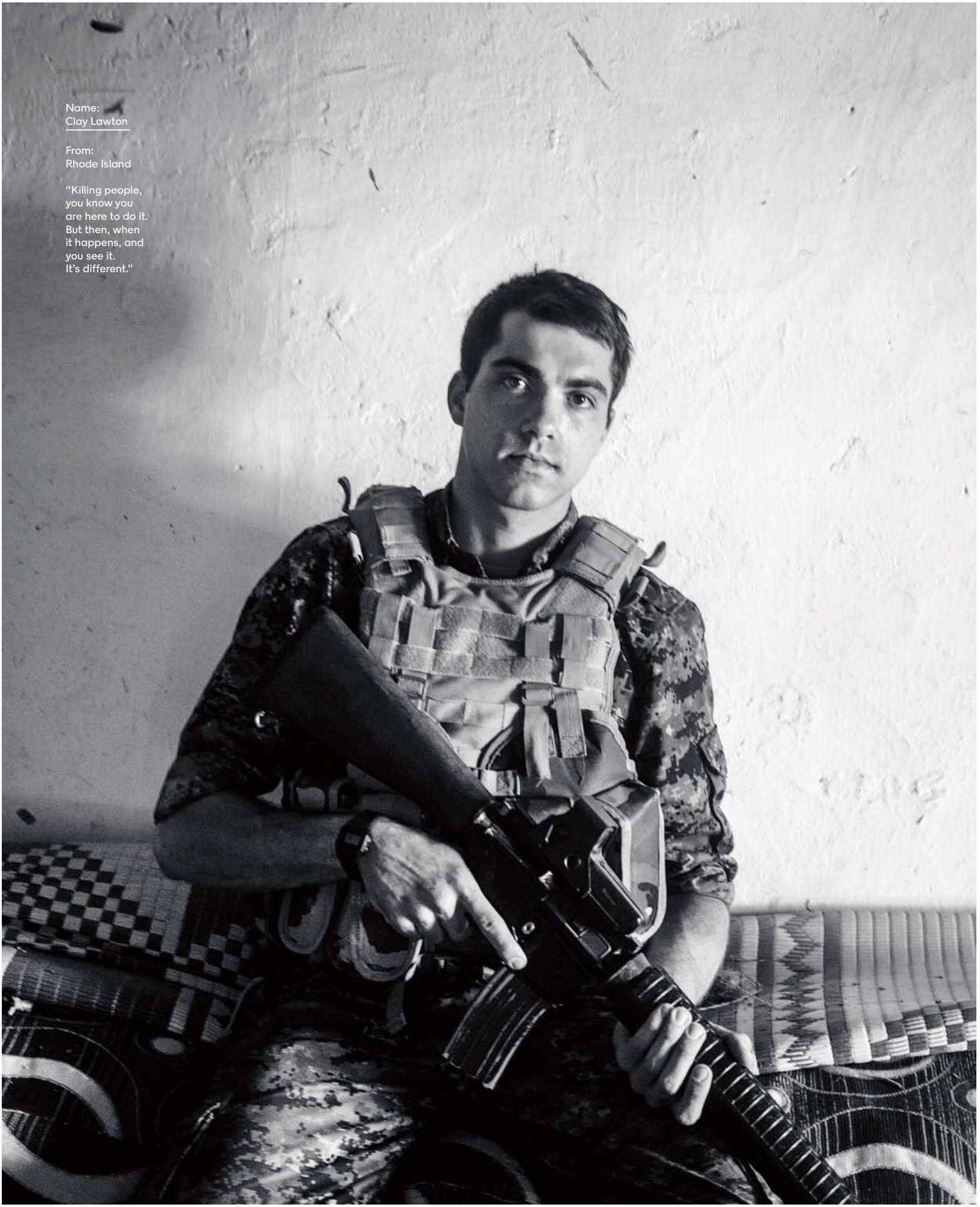
When Enright was ostracized during training, "the last thing he told me was this," Harrington said. "'Hope you don't get a bullet in your head, bro.' I thought, Dude, if we see you on the front lines, we'll put a bullet in *your* head."

The dead man in the village was lying on his back with his arms crucified, his lower half twisted. It looked as if someone had stuck a plum in his eye socket and left it to rot. The bomb tore a hole through his pants but preserved his bright blue boxer briefs. His head was tilted slightly



Kurdish Y.P.G. fighters near the body of an Islamic State fighter killed during overnight airstrikes near Tel Tamer.

Photograph by Moises Saman/Magnum, for The New York Times



Name:
Clay Lawton

From:
Rhode Island

"Killing people, you know you are here to do it. But then, when it happens, and you see it. It's different."

back, and his upper lip had slid toward his nose, leaving him with a permanent snarl.

"I've seen more dead bodies working for the Department of Transportation in Ohio," Harrington said.

"This is my first," I said. Harrington admitted it was his first in Syria.

"Someone stole his sandals!" he said. "He had trekking sandals on yesterday."

We hung out by the body for a while. Then Harrington decided to walk back to the village center for water. A truck rolled up carrying crates packed with flatbread and tomatoes on the vine. The soldiers gathered around the truck and ate the tomatoes like apples.

"I hate this," Harrington said. He was looking at the tomato he got for lunch. "I love rib-eye. As soon as I leave here, it's big old steak time." He had lost a lot of weight since he arrived, and he showed me the Leatherman he used to poke new holes in his belt, which tracked the progress of his diminishing waist.

"You know what I want," he said. "I want this to be a seasonal job. Go plow snow in the winter and fight ISIS in the summer."

We finished our tomatoes, and Harrington started talking about how the Kurds always threw rocks at the stray dogs. He said another fighter almost shot someone over it the night before.

"Who's that?" I asked

"He's the guy with the Mohawk. He's from San Antonio." He pointed to a man with a sunburned scalp, who was crouching and barely visible in the shade of a collapsed building. "That Texan has been here a bit too long. Decent guy, but doesn't know how to take a grain of salt. This is their country, play by their rules. Don't let [expletive] upset you. You can yell, scream and get mad, and all you are doing is raising your blood pressure."

The Texan asked that I refer to him by his warrior name, Azad. He wore Oakleys and a calculator watch. He had sold his gun collection to pay for the trip to fight ISIS. He seemed disappointed in the whole journey. "I was driving a truck for the oil fields when I decided to come out here. I got a job as a brick mason to try to get in shape. But it's frustrating," he said. "The arrogance of the Kurds. They don't know little things that could be done to save their lives." He spoke in a sorrowful monotone.

He had expected to be able to train the Y.P.G. But the Y.P.G. didn't care. They didn't need a Texan coming to their country to explain how to fight. Instead, they kept him on guard duty. Once they even told him to drive an ambulance.

"Came all the way over here for nothing," he said. "Seems like such a waste of my life. I'll never get the security clearance to go work the oil fields again. They will do a background check, and Homeland Security won't like that I'm in a foreign militia. Work your whole life, finally get to the point where you're making good money and blow that aside to do the right thing, and then when you get here, your hands are tied. It's a no-win situation. If you go home, you will hate yourself the rest of your life, because maybe you could have made a difference."

To escape the heat, we walked through some weeds to the shade of a ruined home. "I wouldn't go in there very far," he said. The home was about to collapse. It was full of the detritus of someone else's life. Scattered about the dirt were sticks and rotting clothes, the occasional gleam of a wedding photograph.

"The people who lived here left with only their clothes on their backs," he said. "A lot didn't make it out alive. I get choked up. Then you find out the Kurds are looting and stealing. Don't get me wrong, I've taken things from houses. Food, rope, cellphones. Only reason I'm here now is to kill *daesh*" — a derogatory word for ISIS fighters. "You know what they do."

Azad and I stepped away from the house and onto the road. It was around 4 in the afternoon. Up the road to our right, a group of Kurds next to a supply truck was yelling and grabbing at Harrington and another foreigner.

"Oh," Azad said. "That guy."

It was Michael Enright. He had been on the truck and had come to talk to Harrington about bad-mouthing him in a Facebook post. Harrington, a large man, put his arm around Enright, who was much smaller.

They screamed at each other, but I couldn't hear the words. Enright rammed his head into Harrington's face. Harrington swung his arm for a punch but missed. The Kurds started the engine. Enright ran and jumped into the truck bed. They drove off, and Enright stared out at us like a dog.

Harrington ran down the hill. He was screaming and cursing. "It's the [expletive] British guy. He [expletive] head-butted me," he said. A tooth had cut cleanly through his lip. A rope of red saliva dangled from his mouth. "He shouldn't have tried to be a fighter," he said. "Piece of [expletive], danger to everybody!"

'Came all the way over here for nothing. Seems like such a waste of my life.'

The fight seemed to disturb Azad. The threat of the Islamic State loomed over us, but the dramas of private life continued to take center stage. "Give up everything to come out here, and you've got these guys," Azad said. "They come here for personal reasons. Just trying to make themselves look good back home. They are out here playing games and risking lives."

Azad wandered off and sat down on a rock across from the dead body. He pointed at it and waved his hands. "Yeah we got *daesh* here for an interview. Hey, yeah, why you go rape and murder women and children? You just executed a 3-year-old?" The Kurds near him were laughing. He kept saying it. "Hey want to interview a *daesh*? *Daesh* here!"

He wouldn't stop, so I asked the corpse if he had anything to say. Azad smiled and spoke for the dead man. "It's not that bad," he said. "Not that bad being dead."

I walked with Harrington to a neighboring village, where I would meet a driver who would take me out of Syria. Clay Lawton was there, along with an Estonian, a Dutchman and a Spaniard. I said my goodbyes and left. During the drive, a flat tire stranded us on the bank of a river, and Lawton poked his head over the truck bed. "Just catching a ride," he said. "Mind if I go with you guys?"

We rode in the bucket of a bulldozer across the river and then crawled up a wet bank and entered a field of yellow barley. A thin road cut through the field, and we hiked it.

"See that village over there?" Lawton said. He pointed to a pile of concrete. "That's where I shot the guy. Yeah, ISIS is right there," he said. "We should probably not be standing here since we're within sniper range. They're probably looking at us right now. There still might be some ISIS guys left."

A white cloud rose from the dead fields. "Oh, yep, that's an airstrike. That means there are still some guys right there."

He dragged his arm up and pointed. Neither of us had slept much, and so we didn't make the effort to move.

Another driver waited for us at the end of the road. Lawton jumped in the van. "Where exactly do you want to go?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Just take me to America, or a combat zone."

His plan was to change into civilian clothing and cross the border into Iraq. But when we looked in his duffel, he had only fatigues. We made one more stop, at the same location where he was first abandoned by his unit. After discussing the plans, we decided that the political situation was too tense to bring him across the border.

Lawton started dropping his belongings on the ground: camouflage shirts, a bundle of tank tops in a plastic bag. He would find a way out on his own, he said, and wanted to lighten his load. I headed back to the truck and looked back to see Lawton, alone again on the hill. His clothes made a small trail behind him in the dirt. ◆

Photograph by Moises Saman/Magnum, for The New York Times