The American

Can a former prep schooler from Baltimore help protect the Christians of Mesopotamia from the Islamic State? A dispatch from northern Iraq.

by Adam Linehan

IF THERE WERE AN AWARD FOR THE AMERICAN WITH THE LONGEST rap sheet in the Middle East, Matthew VanDyke would be a top contender. By his own estimate, the 36-year-old from south Baltimore has been arrested in Iraq no fewer than 20 times, each time for essentially the same offense: being an American with no official business in Iraq. The last time, he and a friend were mistaken for Al Qaeda operatives at an Iraqi Army checkpoint on the road from Kurdistan to Baghdad. They were on motorcycles, headed to the Iraqi capital to begin filming an adventure documentary called *Warzone Bikers: Baghdad to Bagram*.

VanDyke's bike was damaged during the arrest, and after he defiantly asked the Iraqi soldiers to fix it, the duo were hooded, beaten, and driven to a compound in Baghdad where they were lined up against a wall and mock-executed. "I figured we were going to die, but I wasn't about to give them the satisfaction of seeing me afraid," VanDyke says matter-of-factly. "But don't worry. Those days are over." I'm glad to hear it, because right now, as he's telling the story, we're driving through Iraq on some very unofficial business.

There are two others in the Toyota Hilux: an ex-U.S. Army paratrooper called Kojak and our driver, a burly Iraqi in his early 30s with a DIY tattoo of a cross on his wrist. The Iraqi, I'm convinced, is trying to kill us–swerving

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **SEBASTIANO TOMADA**

through an endless procession of oil trucks at 90 miles per hour as we ascend along a narrow two-lane road into the bright green mountains of Kurdistan.

Sitting shotgun, VanDyke is the only one wearing a suit, his chin-length hair slicked back like an '80s-era investment banker or a Hollywood hit man. Kojak is sporting the usual gun-for-hire getup: a baseball cap, tactical cargo pants, and a vigilant stare on his bearded face. I'm hungover, squinting like a newborn because I left my Ray-Bans back in Erbil. It's a confusing sight for the peshmerga soldiers manning the numerous checkpoints that line the route to Dohuk, a remote mountain town about 50 miles north of Mosul. Each time we're stopped, I try not to imagine what the soldiers would do if they discovered the cache of flak jackets, camouflage uniforms, and tactical radios hidden beneath our luggage in the bed of the truck. Or if they knew that we're on our way to meet with members of a Christian paramilitary group so my two American compatriots can begin training and equipping them to go to war. But VanDyke doesn't seem the least bit concerned. He's done this before.

IMAGINE IF SOMEONE handed you a button and said that if you pressed it, a firing squad would wipe out a whole platoon of Islamic State fighters. Chances are you'd press it all day. The importance of defeating the Islamic State is one thing citizens of the civilized world can agree on. But when a guy—a civilian, a Baltimorean, with no actual skin in the conflict—picks up a rifle and heads to the front, his motives are immediately called into question. Is he a lunatic? A zealot? A profiteer?

Since taking up arms with rebel forces during the Libyan civil war in 2011, VanDyke has found his life's calling as a frontline player in myriad Middle East conflicts. To some, he's a man of action, a champion of the underdog, a self-styled revolutionary who's willing to give his life to help justice and democracy prevail in one of the most oppressive regions of the world. To others, he's simply a guy who likes sticking his nose where it doesn't belong.

VanDyke's latest endeavor, a "nonprofit security contracting firm" he recently established called Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), might just be his most polarizing yet. Its mission is to provide "free security consulting and training services to vulnerable populations to enable them to defend themselves against terrorist and insurgent groups." Right now, that vulnerable population is the Christians of northern Iraq—an ancient ethnic minority group known as Assyrians—who took up arms last summer when ISIS rampaged through their native land. The plight of the Assyrian people has sent shock waves through Christendom, raising concerns that their very existence is at stake. "More biblical activity took place in Iraq than in any other country in the world except Israel," says former U.S. Congressman Frank Wolf, who thinks Washington should provide more military aid to alleviate the crisis. "Abraham is from Iraq. Ezekiel is buried there. Daniel is buried there. It's the birthplace of Christianity."

In many ways, SOLI's approach to counterterrorism mirrors a key pillar of U.S. military strategy in the Middle East: training, advising, and assisting indigenous forces on the battlefield.

VanDyke, however, has never served in a conventional military, and SOLI has no official ties to any government, Iraqi or otherwise. But as the international community scrambles to devise an effective strategy to "degrade and destroy" the most formidable terrorist organization to emerge in the 21st century, the situation on the ground is sliding further into chaos—an "anything goes" environment with scores of private militias, advocacy groups, and mercenaries pouring into the fight daily, each with its own unique motivations and objectives. "Now, obviously, ISIS isn't a nation-state, but this should be dealt with by nation-states," says Gen. Stanley McChrystal (Ret.), who commanded NATO forces in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2010. "Whenever you have private organizations or armies enter in wars, you get dynamics that can be bad, no matter how well-intentioned they are." As for VanDyke, his intentions are clear: help the Assyrians drive the Islamic State from their ancestral territory, which includes the ISIS stronghold of Mosul. It's a ludicrously ambitious undertaking, fraught with gruesome possibilities. But the chaos of war is fertile ground for grand strategies. Which raises a very big question: How far is he willing to go?

An NPU soldier maneuvers during a simulated-combat exercise.
Previous spread: VanDyke at the head of the SOLI classroom. A projector screen displays a lesson in combat leadership that's been translated into Arabic.

MATTHEW VANDYKE'S story begins among the narrow streets and row houses of south Baltimore. After his parents separated in 1980—a year after VanDyke was born—his father moved to Louisiana. "My grandparents lived with us, so I might have been more spoiled as an only child," he says. "But generally it was a pretty normal upbringing." VanDyke's mother, then a public school principal, entered him into Baltimore's prestigious private school system. There were piano and tennis lessons during the week and science club at a local college on the weekends. But VanDyke never embraced the lifestyle of his affluent peers. "I didn't get along with the kids I went to high school with," he says. "I didn't go to their country clubs, and I wasn't part of their social circles."

Clockwise from top left: Airsoft rifles in the SOLI classroom; soldiers with the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) conduct room clearing drills; Kojak gives a lesson on door-breaching.

He prevailed in academia nonetheless. After graduating with a degree in political science from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, VanDyke was accepted into the extremely competitive Security Studies program at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service at the ripe age of 22. "They almost didn't take me because I was too young," he says. "But I came out of undergrad with a 4.0 GPA and good recommendations from professors. So they took me purely on academics." At Georgetown he decided to focus on Arab culture and the Middle East—a decision that in the aftermath of 9/11 all but guaranteed a career in foreign service. But not quite. "My first semester, the CIA gave me an offer of employment," VanDyke recalls. "I got really far through the process: passed the initial interview and the assessment of my analytical abilities. I even went to Langley and met my future coworkers. But then I got nervous during the polygraph. The position was supposed to start that summer. It was already spring by then, and they said, 'Just apply next year.'"

The American-led invasion of Iraq got under way soon after, and VanDyke quickly decided the U.S. military strategy was doomed to failure. No longer interested in pursuing a career with the CIA, he instead got involved in the antiwar movement at Georgetown. "Most of the people in the movement were peace-loving types," he recalls. "Not me. I was like, 'We do need to get rid of Saddam, but we need to do it a different way.' I wanted what was later done in Libya: air support and supplying local ground forces to have people liberate themselves."

After a year of working in a boatyard in Delaware and "basically just chilling on the beach," VanDyke embarked on a dangerous journey that would consume the next three years of his life. Inspired by Australian documentary filmmaker Alby Mangels, known for his *World Safari* series, VanDyke's film *Warzone Bikers: Baghdad to Bagram* was to be a chronicle of his journey biking through some of the world's most hostile territory. "When Alby did his adventures in the '70s and '80s, it was a big deal to go to Africa," he explains. "But now a lot of people go to Africa. So I had to update it for the 21st century. But I didn't just throw a dart at a map. I had a strong background in what I was doing." Equipped with helmet cams and a handheld recorder, VanDyke captured his travels through Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Libya, and everywhere in between. It was, in his words, a "quest for adulthood"—one that nearly cost him his life on several occasions.

"Most of the people in the movement were peace-loving types. Not me."

When VanDyke returned to the States in late 2010, he thought it would be for good. And then news broke that the Arab

Spring protests in Libya had erupted into a revolution. During his travels, VanDyke had made "some of the best friends of [his] life" in Libya. Within a few days, he was on a plane bound for North Africa, en route to join them as they prepared to take up arms against Gaddafi's regime.

"You go to overthrow a government and you get caught—that's what happens," VanDyke says of the months he spent in solitary confinement after he was ambushed and captured by pro-Gaddafi forces in the early days of the war. "Maybe I can complain about the solitary confinement, because it's psychological torture. But I was fortunate to be a prisoner of war for only six months, not like the 42 years of Libyans living under Gaddafi."

Freedom came unexpectedly on August 24, 2011, when VanDyke was sprung from his cell during a prison uprising. News of his escape spread quickly. Suddenly, VanDyke was famous, and the world wanted to know how a prep-school kid from Baltimore had ended up a POW in war-torn Libya. During his captivity, it was widely reported that VanDyke had been abducted while working as a journalist, a rumor that had originated with his mom. Before he left, VanDyke told her he was going to film the uprising. She believed him, unaware that he would actually be filming his own exploits on the battlefield.

When word got out that VanDyke had actually taken up arms during the revolution, the close-knit cadre of Middle Eastern foreign correspondents and human rights workers rallied to condemn his involvement in the war. The Committee to Protect Journalists—which had worked closely with VanDyke's mother to secure his release—issued a public statement titled "VanDyke's deception increases risks for journalists." Peter Bouckaert, the emergencies director for Human Rights Watch, made a personal plea to VanDyke to go home. But he brushed off the entreaties and instead rejoined his old unit to finish the fight. Ultimately, his access to the rebels kept his relationship with the journalism community partly intact, and he ended up befriending several correspondents, including James Foley.

VanDyke had been on the ground since the start of the war, before NATO got involved and turned the tide in the rebels' favor. By the time of his release, the revolution felt like his own. "When it started, there were only a few hundred of us in eastern Libya who had gone to fight, so it was very possible to make a difference on the front line," he recalls nostalgically. "Then, after escaping prison and going back to the front line, that was the time—after Tripoli fell—when a lot of people had quit the revolution because they didn't want to be the last guy to die in a war. Everyone knew the fall of the regime was going to happen." VanDyke continued fighting—and filming—until October 20, 2011, the day a bloodied Gaddafi was paraded through the outskirts of Sirte and killed. Much of the footage he captured during that time would later appear in Marshall Curry's *Point and Shoot*, a film about VanDyke that won the Best Documentary Award at the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival, and a film VanDyke has come to resent. Curry, he says, got his story wrong. (The director dismisses the claim.)

Meanwhile, after more than 30 years of estrangement, VanDyke's parents rekindled their relationship during his imprisonment. "The first time I met or even talked to my father was in the airport the day I got back from Libya," he says. His parents have remained a couple since.

From top: Moses Moshi recently returned to Iraq after 25 years of self-imposed exile to join the NPU; Behnam Aboosh Abelmasseh is the commander of the NPU.

Months later, he smuggled himself into Syria with the goal of making a film to build international support for the Free Syrian Army. After a month in the besieged city of Aleppo, he released a short documentary about the resistance movement there. It's unclear whether the film, titled *Not Anymore: A Story of Revolution*, achieved its purpose, though it's been viewed more than 120,000 times on YouTube. Still, VanDyke insists he's not a journalist, preferring to call the film "a revolutionary effort."

During the month VanDyke spent in Syria, the battle of Aleppo was in full swing and journalists were rushing in to cover the fight. James Foley was among them, and the two crossed paths several weeks before Foley was kidnapped in November 2012. Less than a year later, journalist Steven Sotloff—another friend of VanDyke's—was also abducted in Syria. Then, in the summer of 2014, videos of Foley and Sotloff being beheaded by an ISIS fighter surfaced on the Internet in quick succession. VanDyke says a desire to avenge their deaths motivated him to do more than make a film.

In December 2014, several months after ISIS took Mosul and unleashed a campaign of terror in the Nineveh Plain region of northwest Iraq, VanDyke and three ex–U.S. soldiers moved into a small Assyrian village about 10 miles from ISIS-occupied territory. In short order, they established a training camp for the newly formed Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), a Christian militia composed of volunteers from Iraq and abroad. VanDyke called the operation Sons of Liberty International. Infighting between VanDyke and his American colleagues eventually derailed the operation. But a few months later, VanDyke launched a publicity campaign to draw attention to his cause, appearing on Fox News and MSNBC. "We give people around the world an opportunity to have a tangible impact on fighting ISIS, rather than just retweeting something or clicking 'like' on Facebook," he told the *Christian Post* in April.

"It's really a place where you can start over or reinvent yourself. It's the Wild West. Well, the Wild East."

And it worked. Soon, private donors in the U.S. began sending money (most were Evangelicals, VanDyke says, eager to support their besieged fellow Christians), and U.S. military veterans began signing up to help train the militia and even join the fight. He says he hired a company to vet applicants—"to avoid recruiting psychopaths"—and began making arrangements to procure body armor, radios, and Toyota Hilux trucks for the NPU. "We have the ability to take a platoon of 40 men, completely equip it, train it, pay its salaries, and provide everything else it needs for a year," VanDyke said back in April. The NPU was conceived as a local defense militia—like a National Guard unit for the Christians of Iraq—but VanDyke and the senior members of the NPU soon decided that they could help prepare it to go on the offensive, first to take back the Assyrian villages that had fallen to ISIS and then to join the battle for Mosul.

THESE DAYS, VanDyke has two homes. One is a loft in east Harlem, which he shares with his girlfriend. The other is a five-bedroom apartment in Erbil, SOLI headquarters, where VanDyke spends long stretches of time alone. "I haven't slept in weeks," he says, wincing in the bright Iraqi sun. It's an oven-hot morning in May, and we're standing on VanDyke's balcony, which offers a panoramic view of Erbil, a confused landscape of newly and partially constructed residential skyscrapers, with names like Park View and the World Trade Center, rising awkwardly amid blocks of modest concrete homes and domed mosques. There's an American-style mega-mall, a Hardee's, and a TGI Fridays with a full bar that serves nothing but nonalcoholic cocktails.

To our left, we can see the backside of the Erbil International Airport, where about a dozen U.S. military helicopters sit in a perfect row. VanDyke says they've been flying more frequently these days.

VanDyke writes a press release for Sons of Liberty International. With Kojak, his trainer, on the ground, he has assumed a more administrative role in the operation.

Since ISIS advanced through northern Iraq last summer, Erbil has become the region's main staging ground for the counteroffensive. Officially, there are soldiers with the U.S. Army's 1st Infantry Division here providing "command and control of the ongoing advise-and-assist efforts in support of Iraqi and peshmerga forces," as the Pentagon put it. There's also a contingency of military trainers from several European countries training the peshmerga. Then there's the unofficial reality, a *Casablanca*-like mix of factions and freelancers, journalists, and adventure seekers.

"Erbil reminds me of that bar in *Star Wars*, the one in Tatooine," says Georgetown University professor Sean McFate, author of *The Modern Mercenary*. "It's a strange jumping-off point for a lot of different people." Recently, the U.S. government has pressured the peshmerga to prevent American citizens from joining its ranks (though a few occasionally slip in). That has done little to deter scores of Americans—mostly ex-soldiers and Marines—from making their way to the Kurdish front line, where a patchwork of paramilitary groups fighting alongside peshmerga forces are eager to put their skills and experience to use. Some groups, like the YPG in Syria, actively recruit on Facebook; others pick up recruits in bars in the Christian quarter of Erbil, where foreigners hang out. An independent researcher who has interviewed dozens of American and British mercenaries in Iraq, and who asked not to be named, tells me many are on a quest for redemption. "They're guys who feel guilty about things they did when they were deployed here years ago, or they believe that ISIS wouldn't exist had they never invaded Iraq. Or they're just running from something. This is a place where you can start over or reinvent yourself. It's the Wild West. Well, the Wild East."

"I used to live over there," Kojak tells me, pointing with a cigarette toward an airplane hangar adjacent to the row of American helicopters, where until a year ago he was reportedly stationed as a security contractor making $565 a day for a firm he refuses to identify. "It's crazy being on this

side of the fence without a sidearm." Before that, he says, he was an Army paratrooper, retiring as a senior noncommissioned officer after a robust 20-year career that included a stint as an instructor at West Point and two combat deployments–the last to Mosul, where he trained and advised the local SWAT team. Now he's working for VanDyke pro bono. "I love the contracting work," he says, lighting a cigarette, his third since waking up an hour ago. "Hell, it put my daughter through college. But this means a lot more." When I ask him if his faith had anything to do with his decision to join SOLI, he holds up the silver cross that hangs from his neck. "Yeah, I'm a Christian. But I would train these guys regardless. After ISIS took Mosul, I guess I felt a bit of survivor's remorse." He tells me SOLI seemed like a more reasonable option than going straight to the front line. Maybe it is.

At one point, I travel to Makhmour, a ramshackle Kurdish village 31 miles north of Erbil, where a fierce three-day battle was waged during the ISIS offensive in northern Iraq last August, and where I meet Chris Smith, a 25-year-old ex-soldier and the newest member of the peshmerga unit stationed there. With his blond hair and sunny demeanor, Smith cuts a peculiar figure in a Kurdish uniform. It's his first day on the front line, and the peshmerga soldiers want to see him shoot an AK-47, which he does, unloading a full magazine of 7.62 over a no-man's-land of dry grass toward a tiny row of trees where a contingency of ISIS fighters is apparently dug in. As far as I can tell, he passes the test.

Smith takes a deep breath when I ask him what he's doing here. "One of the things we value as Americans is freedom of religion, and ISIS is promoting its own brand of intolerance," he says. "I had a little military experience, so I just thought I was the man for the job." He tells me he deployed twice to Iraq as an infantryman with the U.S. Army but never saw combat. When he decided to drop everything and return to Iraq, he had been working at a hotel in California. Later, as I'm leaving, he stops me. "Hey, does this mean I get a free copy of *Maxim* when the story comes out?" Sure, I say, where do I send it? He shrugs and grins widely. "I don't know."

"If we had half of what the other forces have, we would never retreat from this place."

AROUND NOON, we hop in a cab to Dohuk, a two-hour drive northwest of Erbil. VanDyke wants to introduce Kojak to Behnam Aboosh Abelmasseh, commander of the NPU, so they can discuss plans for the upcoming training rotation. The focus of the training will be combat leadership, attended by a small group of would-be officers and sergeants. VanDyke plans to eventually fly over more trainers from the States, including experts in marksmanship, hand-to-hand combat, and first aid. But for now, Kojak will run the show. The meeting takes place on the edge of Dohuk, inside a compound that serves as housing for a few dozen Christian refugees, who peer down at us through dusty windows as we approach. Abelmasseh and several of his advisers greet us in a room furnished with nothing but four fluffy couches, all the color of grape candy.

Sporting a crisp gray suit, the elderly, soft-spoken Abelmasseh has the air of a Mafioso. Before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, he says, he was an officer in the Iraqi Air Defense Force under Saddam. (Like many in the NPU, he hails from the Assyrian village of Qaraqosh, which fell to ISIS in June of last year.)

VanDyke, 36, is one of just a handful of Westerners who live in Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan in northern Iraq. Despite the dangers, he intends to continue working in the region until ISIS is defeated.

After formal introductions are made, VanDyke hands the floor over to Kojak, who snaps open his laptop and begins showing Abelmasseh the PowerPoint presentations he says he used during his stint at West Point. Abelmasseh's eyes light up, and he casts VanDyke an approving nod. "You've brought me a real trainer," he says, almost surprised.

Abelmasseh has just returned from Baghdad, where he's been working to secure permission for the NPU to exist. Without the Iraqi central government's blessing, the group–like the dozens of other militias operating unofficially in Iraq–runs the risk of being labeled a terrorist organization. Past attempts by the Assyrians to stand up an army have been met with a crushing backlash.

"How long will this training take?" Abelmasseh asks. "How long do you want it to take?" Kojak replies respectfully. "No, I asked you a question," says the NPU commander, placing a finger inches from Kojak's chest. "Don't answer me with a question. Answer." Kojak says he'll need two weeks. Later, when I ask Abelmasseh why he wants his men trained by Americans, he tells me it's because nobody else in Iraq is capable of doing it. "The Iraqi Army and the peshmerga are trained by Americans," he says. "So how can they train us?"

His goal now, he says, is to have the NPU fight alongside the Iraqi Army when it goes on the offensive in the Nineveh Plain and Mosul, likely in the autumn. The push–which was originally supposed to happen this April–will probably be one of the bloodiest campaigns of the war, and Abelmasseh knows it. He insists that Kojak teach his men the value of conserving ammo in a firefight. Bullets are expensive, and the NPU is desperate for funds. Every shot must count. The survival of the Assyrian people hinges on their ability to fight, and fight well. Or at least that's what the events of last August have led many of them to believe.

At the NPU outpost in Alqosh, an ancient Assyrian village situated at the base of a gently sloping mountain in the Nineveh Plain, I meet Athra Kado, a 25-year-old member of the all-volunteer unit stationed there. There's a peshmerga base in town as well, but Kado isn't the first Assyrian to tell me he doesn't trust them with his security. Early last August, he says, when ISIS tore through the region, the Kurdish forces fled in droves. Alqosh was spared, but now only about 15 miles of rolling grassland and the peshmerga line of defense are all that stand between it and ISIS.

From the roof of the NPU outpost, there's a clear view of the Plain, including the neighboring village where Kado was taught the basics of soldiering by the Americans VanDyke recruited for the initial SOLI rotation. Kado used to be a teacher. Now, he wears an AK-47 slung across his chest, one of just a few in the NPU's slowly growing arsenal. "From that one month of training, I can tell you I'm about 30 percent capable of fighting," he says in English. "But I want to fight and I want to make that percentage more."

Athra Kado, 25, stands guard on the Nineveh Plain. A self-taught English speaker, Kado was a schoolteacher before joining the NPU.

That evening, on a hill where the NPU has set up a machine-gun position overlooking the road that leads to ISIS, Kado unsheathes his knife and starts playfully jabbing it in the air. "If we had half of what the other forces have," he says, "we would never retreat from this place."

BY 1989, MOSES MOSHI, then a young sergeant in the Iraqi Army, had spent the better part of a decade fighting in the Iran-Iraq War. "I was tired of fighting," he says. "So when Saddam started with Kuwait, I ran." We're speaking on the lawn of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) headquarters in Dohuk, where Moshi and the 20 other NPU volunteers chosen for SOLI's leadership course are about to receive their first lesson. "I took my wife and strapped my infant daughter to my back, and walked for seven days in the snow to Turkey." The journey cost him four toes, and he takes off a boot to prove it. After 25 years living in Australia, Moshi returned home for the first time last September. Now he wants to fight. "My mother and brother were in Mosul, and ISIS kicked them out. When I heard about the NPU, I told my wife and daughters I had to go." Moshi, who still sports the signature red beret of the Republican Guard, is the sergeant major of the NPU. He tells me he's one of eight Assyrian expats who've recently returned to join the militia.

Today is the first day of training, and the students–each having been issued an AK-47 and a notebook–appear eager to prove their mettle. Kojak, in uniform, introduces himself in the steely tone he honed over many years as an army NCO. "It's an honor to be here," he says, pausing for the translator. "I heard about what you guys were doing here, and I was inspired." On the projector screen behind him, there's a photograph of American soldiers on patrol in Iraq superimposed with Arabic script. Not wasting any time, Kojak jumps into the first lesson, titled "The Basics of Infantry Leadership." I'm immediately reminded of the early days of my own enlistment, which began at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 2006. Everything–the slide shows, the terminology, the way Kojak holds his hands behind his back when he speaks–is straight out of the U.S. Army handbook, literally. VanDyke stands rigidly at the back of the classroom, quietly surveying the scene.

The following afternoon, VanDyke hands each of the trainees a pair of goggles and an airsoft rifle for a lesson on squad-level tactics. The trainees are broken into two teams. One is assigned the role of liberator, while the other vanishes into the compound to play ISIS. After a quick pre-mission briefing, the home team locks and loads and rushes into the fray, shooting frantically as pellets zip overhead. Kojak, cigarette in hand, jogs alongside his pupils shouting pointers, like, "You guys need to be communicating more," and "Move, move, move!" Realizing that the enemy fire is coming from above, the team funnels into the headquarters building and begins pouncing from room to room en route to the staircase. On the roof, the final skirmish is quick and decisive. When the dust settles, ISIS is defeated, but spirits are high on both sides of the fight. From behind a satellite dish, a lone gunman in a boonie hat emerges and peels off his goggles. It's VanDyke, blood trickling from pellet wounds down his hawkish face.

IT'S DIFFICULT TO PREDICT how all of this will play out. "There aren't enough Christians in Iraq, and they don't have enough arms, to take on a group like ISIS," says McFate. "And if somehow the NPU did become a crack assault force, I think the peshmerga would view them as a threat. So, best-case scenario, the NPU isn't taken seriously, they have almost zero effect, and VanDyke doesn't get his head cut off (CONT. ON P. 97)

(CONT. FROM P. 91) on YouTube."

The battle to reclaim Mosul is widely expected to begin in the fall, and VanDyke vows to be there. The U.S. State Department rejects VanDyke's repeated claim that SOLI enjoys tacit support from the American government, which means he may be violating U.S. law. There are other obstacles as well, primarily involving other organizations competing for influence in northern Iraq. Right now, VanDyke's biggest adversary is a California-based political action committee called the American Mesopotamian Organization (AMO), "founded to influence and guide U.S. policy on matters of interest to the Assyrian American community." The AMO is the chief supplier of funds to the NPU, and it is campaigning to sever SOLI's involvement with the group.

"Once you become aware of the brutality of the modern world, there's no plugging back into the matrix."

"Matthew VanDyke is a fraud," insists Jeff Gardner, director of communications and media at Restore Nineveh Now, a subsidiary of AMO. "He represents himself as a combat veteran, but he's never served in any recognized service anywhere–and hanging out with Libyan rebels doesn't count." Gardner continues: "He misrepresents the narrative: This is not a Christian army that will storm into cities like Mosul. It's not even an army. It's a protection unit. Its main function will be keeping the peace in places that have been liberated so people will go back home. Look, we have a major refugee crisis on our hands."

In late May, halfway through the training session, ADM officials informed VanDyke that SOLI would no longer be allowed to conduct training at its headquarters building. "AMO pressured them into doing it," says a frustrated VanDyke on the phone from Erbil. He's making certificates for the abridged version of what was supposed to be a two-week course. "I've never seen the NPU so angry. They needed more training. But AMO doesn't care about training, and it's going to get people killed." It was a heavy blow, but not an unexpected one. Over the past few months, tensions between VanDyke and Gardner have been growing, with the NPU caught in the middle.

VanDyke tells me he's looking for a new training facility, and that when he finds it, he and Kojak will train the entire NPU force full-time, five days a week. He has also been meeting with other armed Assyrian groups, just in case the NPU gets cold feet. "If they decide not to be an offensive force, we'll identify another militia who will," he says, his voice resolute. "Look, the primary mission is to have a tangible impact in the fight against ISIS."

At that moment I realize VanDyke is all-in, that when the gates of Mosul are flung wide open, that's where he'll go, and hell will be waiting. I recall a conversation we had one night in Iraq. We were driving into Dohuk, and it was raining so hard I nearly jumped out of the taxi to get to higher ground. It felt like a good time to ask VanDyke if he ever thought it was a mistake, this life he's chosen. "Sometimes I question if it was a wise decision," he said. "But once you become aware of the brutality of the modern world, there's no plugging back into the matrix. There's no unringing that bell." Then, after a long pause, he added: "I'm fully committed to the cause. I'll do whatever it takes." ■

p. 18: Trunk Archive.
p. 21: John Dominis/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images.
p. 34: D Dipasupil/FilmMagic/Getty Images.
p. 35: Raider's fan, Joe Robbins/Getty Images; Old School, PYMCA/UIG Universal Images Group/Newscom; New School, Peter Kramer/Getty Images; Dr. Dre, Raymond Boyd/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images; Ice Cube, Howard Tyler/Retna; Eazy-E, Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images; Mc Ren, PYMCA/UIG Universal Images Group/Newscom; DJ Yella, © Corbis.
p. 66: Records, Mika/Corbis; album cover, courtesy of Light in the Attic Records.
p. 69: Top, Edward Colver; bottom, Max Rivlin-Nadler.
p. 70: Jacket, $1,474, Dsquared^2; select Dsquared^2 boutiques. Jeans, $188, Diesel; shop.diesel.com. Shoes, $320, Red Wing Heritage; redwingheritage.com.
p. 71: Jacket, $245, Joe's Jeans; Bloomingdale's stores. Watch, price available upon request, TAG Heuer; select TAG Heuer stores.
p. 72: Jacket, Calvin Klein Jeans, $348; available at Opening Ceremony. T-shirt, Express, $20; express.com. Jeans, AG, $235; agjeans.com. Watch, Bell & Ross, $5,900; bellross.com.
p. 73: Top, Prada, $930; select Prada boutiques. T-shirt, Dior Homme, $290; Dior Homme stores. Jeans, Denim & Supply Ralph Lauren, $125; denimandsupply.com.
p. 74: Jacket, AG, $248; agjeans.com. Shirt, Bottega Veneta, $830; 800-845-6790. T-shirt, Calvin Klein Underwear, $40 (pack of three); calvinklein.com. Jeans, Buffalo David Bitton, $119; buffalojeans.com. Watch, Tissot, $650; us.tissotshop.com.
p. 75: Shirt, Club Monaco, $70; Club Monaco and clubmonaco.com. Jeans, Topman, $70; Topman, 608 Fifth Ave., NYC, or topman.com.
p. 76: Sweatshirt, Todd Snyder x Champion, $100; mrporter.com.
p. 77: Shirt, AG, $188; agjeans.com. T-shirt, Michael Kors, $75; Michael Kors, 520 Broadway, NYC. Jeans, J Brand, $225; jbrandjeans.com. Shoes, Converse, $50; converse.com. Watch, Tissot, $650; us.tissotshop.com.
p. 78: Amanda Marsalis, Trunk Archive.
p. 81: Iceland, Danita Delimont/ImageBrief.com; Deception Island, Ilan Rosen/ ImageBrief.com; Thorofare, Mark Meyer/ImageBrief.com; Tristan du Cunha, Holger Leue/ImageBrief.com; Grootberg Lodge, © Chris Schmid Photography/Alamy.
pp. 82-83: Joe Keohane.
pp. 92-95: Brin Deuk Morris; Bike built/designed by British Customs; BMW R90/6, Evelina Kremsdorf/ImageBrief.com; vintage photo frame, Getty Images; all others, courtesy of the manufacturer.

Correction: *In the June/July issue on page 38, the portrait of Daniel Arsham was photographed by James Law.*

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