A missile nearly killed me on my way home from school

Asra’a Mizyad, 17, was badly injured when her village in Iraq was attacked. Now she’s speaking out for victims like her.

AS TOLD TO HOLLY AGUIRRE

The village of Abu Rass, Iraq, where Asra’a Mizyad lives with her parents and two brothers, was once a flourishing port village near Basra, the second-biggest city in Iraq. As recently as nine years ago, Abu Rass, located three hours south of Baghdad, was thought to be safe. But today, after years of conflicts involving Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, and the U.S. and its allied forces, Asra’a’s family and the other thousand or so village residents live in poverty. Back in 1990, the year Asra’a was born, Iraq’s leader, Saddam Hussein, invaded neighboring Kuwait. President George Bush Sr. sent U.S. forces into Kuwait and launched an air strike against Iraq called Operation Desert Fox in response to a dispute over military inspections for nuclear weapons. Residents of the town weren’t too alarmed; they thought their no-fly-zone status protected them. Then everything changed. Here is Asra’a’s story.

FATEFUL DAY

On January 25, 1999, about a month after Desert Fox began, I was walking home from my elementary school at 10 a.m.—we had exams that morning and were let out early. When I was two blocks from my house, I heard an incredibly loud explosion. Total chaos broke out; people started screaming and running. The pressure of the blast threw me to the ground, and I felt something warm running over me. Then I must have fallen unconscious. The next thing I remembered was waking up in the hospital 10 days later.

GETTING THE TRUTH

When I came to, I saw there were cuts and stitches all over me. But most shocking, my right arm was gone! The doctors told me that shrapnel from the bomb had tripped through my body, and my arm had been so mangled that amputating it had been the only way to save my life. I had also suffered numerous cuts and stitches, like a collapsed lung and damage to my other organs. I’ll have a piece of metal lodged in my head for the rest of my life because removing it would kill me. My parents and doctors tried to explain what happened. The U.S. military had launched a missile over my village; they then admitted to American newspapers that this was an error. Buildings were destroyed. 7 people died, and 14 others were hurt. I wondered, Why would anyone bomb my peaceful village? I had to stay in the hospital for five months, and my parents sold most of our possessions just to pay my medical costs. The U.S. government offered no support—at the time, they didn’t have a policy that said they had to. Then, just when I thought things couldn’t get worse, doctors broke the news that my reproductive organs were damaged too—I’d never be able to have kids. In our culture, women are traditionally revered for their ability to give life. Because I can’t, I’ll forever be seen as damaged goods.” At only 8 years old, my life as I’d envisioned it was over.

GIFT OF A LIFETIME

In 2003, when I was 11, my family was boarding a bus in Basra, and I saw a man who was coming off the bus look at what was left of my arm. He had a sad look in his eyes, and he took two pictures of me as our bus pulled away. I never thought I’d see him again. But a year later, some boys from my town showed up at my house with the same man and a translator. His name was Alan Pogue and he explained that he was an American photographer and was a veteran who had been in Iraq the previous year with a group called Veterans for Peace. He showed my family the picture he’d taken of me—it was on a poster with an anti-war message that he and a fellow activist, Cole Miller, had made. Once I assured him that he was searching for me so he could help me get a prosthetic arm, we listened to what he had to say. He explained that poster of me has by now been seen all over the world. It was used this year at peace rallies in America and plastered on telephone poles on Sunset Boulevard. I’m speaking out in hopes of my family and me, but they need help too. That poster of me has by now been all over the world. It was used this year at peace rallies in America and plastered on telephone poles on Sunset Boulevard. I’m speaking out in hopes of

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