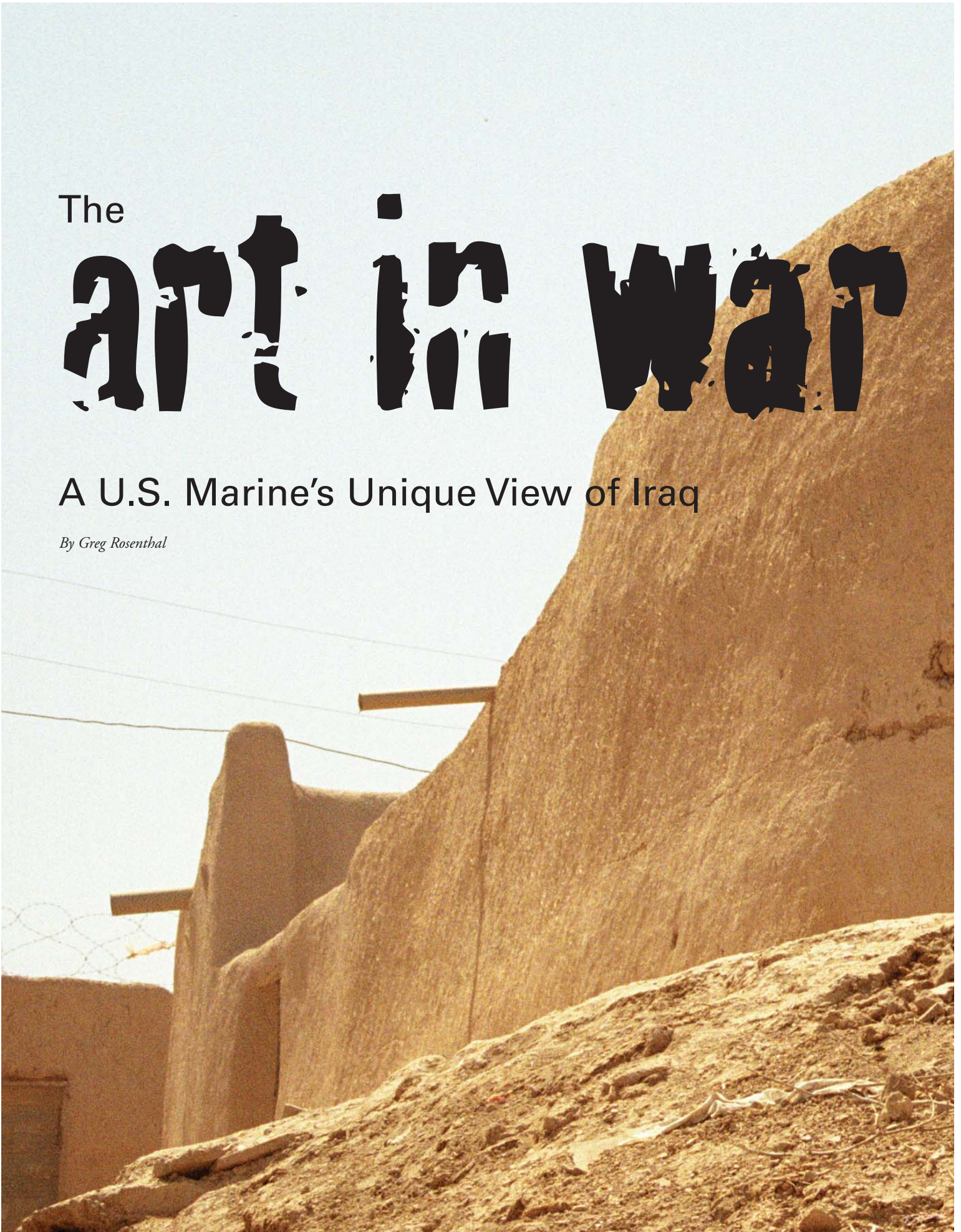


The

# art in war

A U.S. Marine's Unique View of Iraq

*By Greg Rosenthal*







**W**hen Major Benjamin Busch shipped out to Iraq in 2003, the 35-year-old Marine brought his camera and his artistic perspective to the war. Educated as a studio artist at Vassar College and trained as a soldier by the U.S. Marine Corps, Busch saw the conflict from a unique perspective.

As Iraqi insurgents threatened his safety, the desert heat, which regularly climbed above 120 degrees Fahrenheit, threatened his film, often ruining it in the canister or inside his camera. Busch commanded Delta Company of the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, initially securing a vast swath of eastern Iraq with only 150 troops and 25 light armored reconnaissance vehicles. He and his men slept in the desert and moved swiftly, seeking to convince friend and foe alike that the Marines were everywhere.

Photographing Iraqis offered a different sort of challenge. “People take on different relationships to their environment when they feel that they are being observed,” said Busch, “and they discard a certain honesty when they are aware of a camera.” Often he would tell village leaders that he needed photographs of something else—sewer pipes, for instance—while “accidentally” recording images of the people and architecture that caught his eye.

Busch’s artistic quest involved capturing “the abstraction and representation of man, by man,” he said. “I like a photograph to be visually compelling without requiring explanation of common experience before the viewer is told how to understand the image.” What strikes Busch as profound, others might miss in a blink.



After 13 years of service, Busch left the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve in March 2004 to pursue his civilian career as an actor. His acting credits include his current role as Officer Colicchio on HBO’s *The Wire*, as well as appearances on NBC’s *The West Wing*, NBC’s *Homicide*, *Life on the Street*, and several other television shows, along with film roles in *Rules of Engagement*, *Homicide: The Movie* (made for television), and *South of Hollywood*. Busch was recalled to active duty in 2005. When not in the field, he lives in College Park, Maryland, with his wife, Tracy, and their three-month-old daughter, Alexandra.

Busch’s photographs of the war in Iraq, entitled, “The Art in War,” have been exhibited nationwide. They went on display in UMUC’s West Building lobby in January 2005 and will remain on display through April 10, 2005.



(Photo, facing page)

## Representing Man

Busch arrived near the Iranian border in late April 2003 and soon became the responsible officer and provisional mayor of a number of border towns. His work began in the ancient town of Jassan, the walled city that appears behind the boy in the photograph.

"The slow erosion of mud construction at that site over hundreds and hundreds of years raised the ground level so much that the town now sits on a hill composed entirely of the remains of the towns before it," Busch said. To protect the mud brick homes within the walls, palm-frond and mud-plaster roofs channel rainwater to the many spouts protruding from the outer walls. An oasis lies outside of Jassan, nourishing a stand of date palm trees, while a salt plain, completely barren of plants and homes, stretches 40 miles to the south.

"I met with the few remaining town officials and men of tribal importance in the region and toured each town with them as their guest," Busch said. "It was my one chance to make the impression that they would hold of us throughout our occupation. In order to avoid acting intrusively, I asked for their invitation to conduct assessments and inspections of clinics, schools, and public works facilities that were now my responsibility to restore, renovate, and secure."

Busch quickly snapped this photograph as the boy watched a gathering of Marines and Iraqis pass below him. The town, Busch said, seemed monumental in relation to the boy's size, even though the walls themselves were quite human in scale. "His world is composed entirely of dirt," Busch said. "The land and town are an equal dry orange tan and the human impression on this environment felt temporary and negligible despite a long history of occupation."

As an "ancient place near the cradle of civilization," Busch said, the town "could simply dissolve back into the desert and the picture of this little boy would serve as the only true evidence of the presence of man. I enjoy this photograph for that feeling."



(Right)

## The Disappeared

The man at the back of the photograph, to the left of center, presses a roll of holy cloth to his side while standing near the same gravesite where Busch snapped the photograph entitled "Gathered in Holy Cloth." Several other men hold up pictures of missing loved ones, hoping to recover their remains and bury them in accordance with Islamic law.

"They gathered the bones in the clothes of the dead and laid them in rows for families to examine," Busch said. "There were no forensic teams or police, just men with shovels—and us." Lime powder mixed in the dirt left most of the clothing well preserved, offering the families some help in identifying the remains.

"I took this photograph of men looking for the brother of the man on the right," he said. "They presented these pictures of the missing man in the clothes that he had been wearing when he had been taken away."

While the picture portrays the emotion of the men as they carry out their grim duties, it omitted what lay at their feet: rows of skeletons wrapped in the clothes they had worn on execution day. This was an intentional omission on Busch's part.

"It is more powerful to know that [the skeletons] are there without the distraction of seeing them," Busch said. "All photographs end at their edges, but I feel that there has to be an intelligence in the selection of composition that inspires viewers to imagine beyond what they see. I have always believed that a photograph is not worth taking if it cannot encourage wonder in a viewer without an explanation."

Busch was drawn by the way this photograph reunited the men in a single image. "It is a photograph of photographs, and abstractly I enjoy the dialogue that one human representation has appearing within another," he said. "This picture serves the same purpose as the image that this man displays, in that it is now evidence and a tangible record of memory."





(Left)

## Gathered in Holy Cloth

This photograph may shock some viewers. But Busch saw more than the macabre.

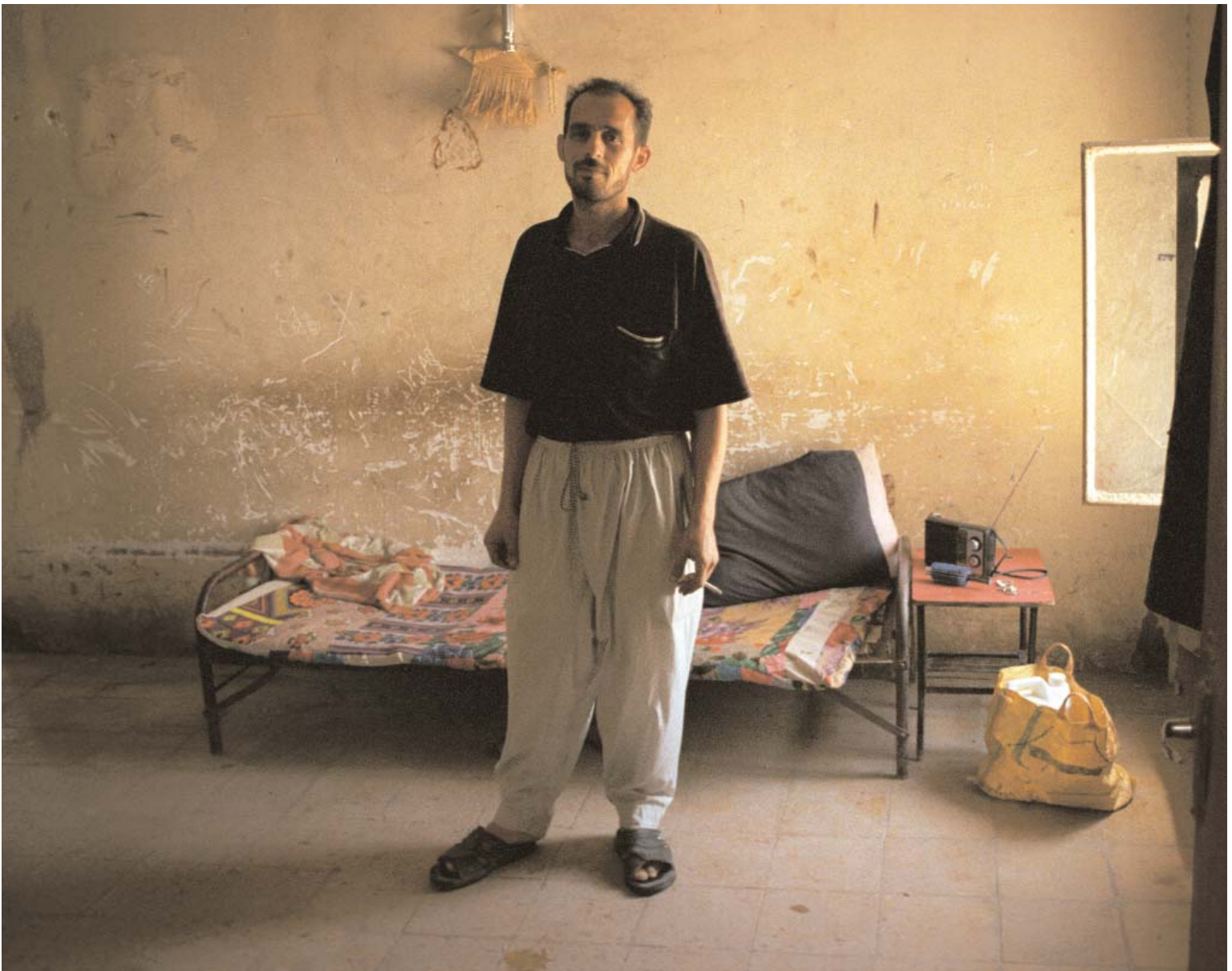
"In May 2003, near the town of Badrah, locals beckoned to us to follow them to a grave," he said. "They could have exhumed the grave without us, but there was still an underlying fear of retribution by Ba'athists that seemed to require our presence. It may also have been a simple desire for others to bear witness to what had happened there."

The gravesite was surrounded by a low, rectangular berm; it had been forbidden ground during Saddam Hussein's rule. "The people buried there had been executed in 1991 following the revolt against Saddam that the U.S. had encouraged during Desert Storm but had failed to completely support," Busch said. "Following the rapid U.S. withdrawal into Kuwait, Saddam identified and executed everyone associated with the revolt. [My troops and I] stood nearby as Iraqi men dug into the yellow-white lime powder in search of the remains of their relatives."

Busch spent hours traveling to a mosque and negotiating a price for the holy cloth that holds the bones. He watched family members collect the bones of their loved ones and place them in the cloth.

But peace is elusive even for the dead in Iraq. "Families hurried these bodies to Najaf to be interred in the ancient cemeteries that are now part of the battlefield," Busch said. "The story of these dead becomes more tragic once you imagine conflict following them to their final resting place."





(Above)

## Ice Man

This man ran a small ice factory near the Iranian border and was dubbed “Ice Man” by Busch’s Marines. He became an important part of Busch’s mission when the Marines took charge of restoring the function and security of the region’s infrastructure. To deter looting, Ice Man lived at the factory in this tiny room, furnished with a cot and a radio.

“We eventually restored fragile but adequate supplies of power and water,” said Busch, “and his plant was producing ice again when I took this picture during an inspection.”

Iraqis rely on ice to defy the 120-plus degree heat, using it to preserve food and maintain comfort. By late April 2003, power outages disabled pumping stations along the aqueduct from the distant Tigris River and much of the water left in the canals had evaporated, leaving small, stagnant pools.

“The water had stopped flowing to the peripheral towns outside of Al Kut, and crops and herds were beginning to fail in the harsh dry of the approaching summer,” Busch said. “With the senior Ba’ath Party civil servants abandoning their posts, there was no one to manage the support infrastructure, or—almost as important—to protect it. Pumps and power stations were looted, and both water and power became scarce.”

Busch’s responsibilities in the area ended when he received orders to move south of Baghdad, and Ukrainian units replaced the Marines. “We later heard a rumor that this man had been killed in a local dispute over the price of ice,” he said. “I feel a particular sadness about this photograph because it captures this man’s life at its best in the place where he died, and it may be the only lasting image of him. It gives me a feeling of futility when I consider that he died there in part because of our genuine efforts to improve his life.”



(Below)

## Iraqi Children Meet the Marines

Busch entered the town of Al Kut on a mission to negotiate with local merchants for the building supplies he needed to renovate Iraqi schools. In the middle of the market, curious children gathered around his Marines.

"It was 125 degrees, and I had just spent seven hours gathering supplies and renegotiating final prices as the dollar changed value throughout the day," he said. "As we loaded cans of paint, bags of plaster, and rolls of wire onto a truck, little children seeped out of alleys and crowds to meet us. This photograph captures the curiosity and hopeful innocence that makes children a worthy reason for positive change in any part of the world."

Busch attempted to catch a candid moment—and nearly succeeded. "I tried to take this picture unnoticed in order to avoid poses and a self-conscious group dynamic," he said. "One child noticed and [in the photograph] pretends to take a picture of me."

At the same time, Busch triggered the suspicion of some adolescents in the crowd. "They are nearing military age and are, no doubt, studying us with a much different curiosity than the younger children," he noted. "They are of an age likely to be lured into fighting us in Iraq today, and it is in their eyes."

At the heels of the girl on the right lies the open sewage typical of the back streets, and many children in town go barefoot. The boy on the right, shown grasping the pole, wears an Oakland Raiders shirt. Busch speculates that an aid organization delivered that piece of American culture.

"This was one of many blurred days in the hot market of Al Kut, but it was memorable for this moment caught in the expression of the boy with crutches looking up at a Marine," Bush said. "I try to capture people naturally relating to each other, but I enjoy the slight acknowledgement of my lens by a few in this image because it is not disruptive and shows the difference in concern and awareness in the older boys."

