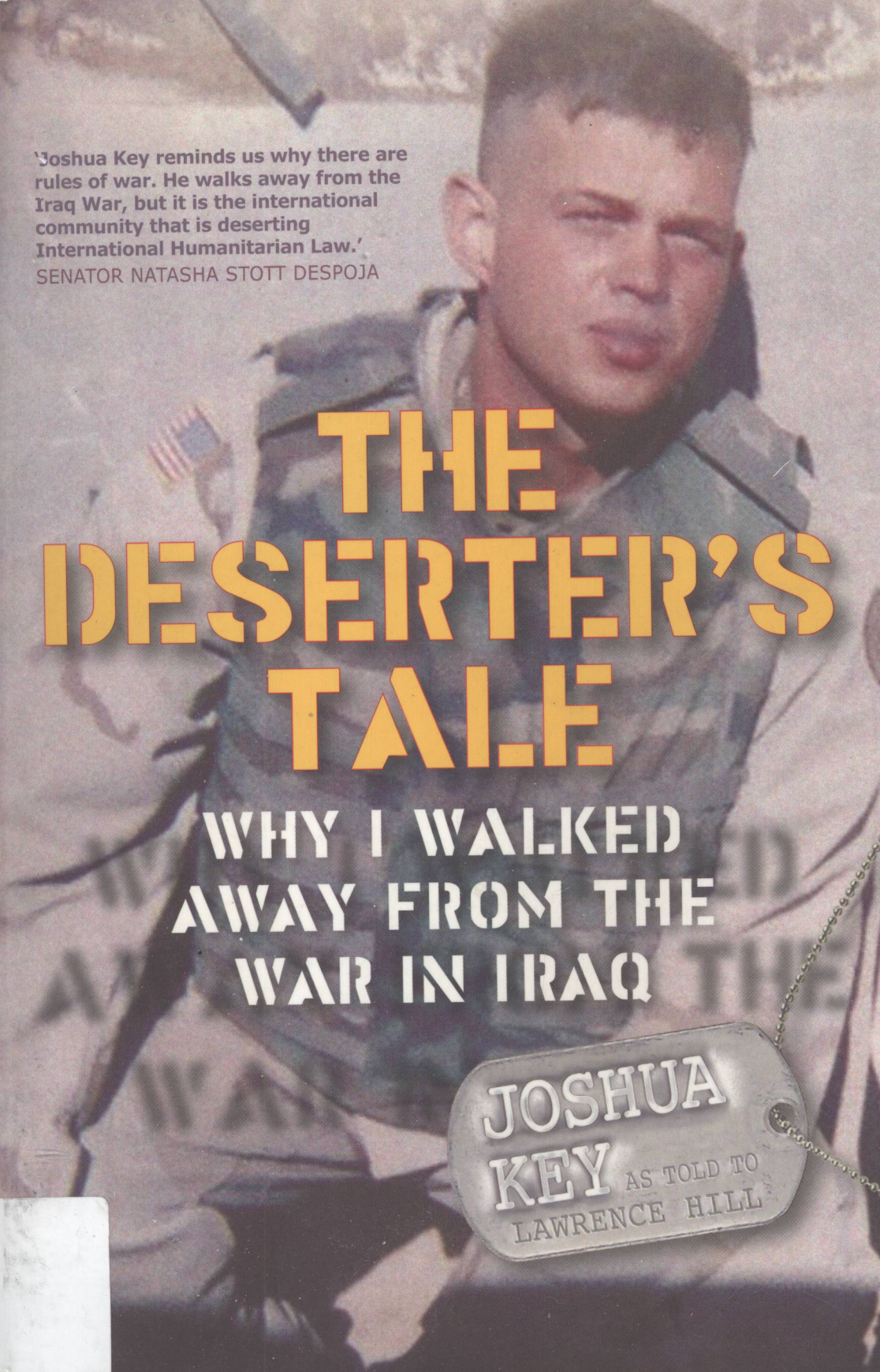
'Joshua Key reminds us why there are rules of war. He walks away from the Iraq War, but it is the international community that is deserting International Humanitarian Law.'
SENATOR NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA
THE DESERTER'S TALE
WHY I WALKED AWAY FROM THE WAR IN IRAQ
JOSHUA KEY
AS TOLD TO LAWRENCE HILL

THE DESERTER'S TALE

WHY I WALKED AWAY FROM THE WAR IN IRAQ

JOSHUA KEY

as told to Lawrence Hill

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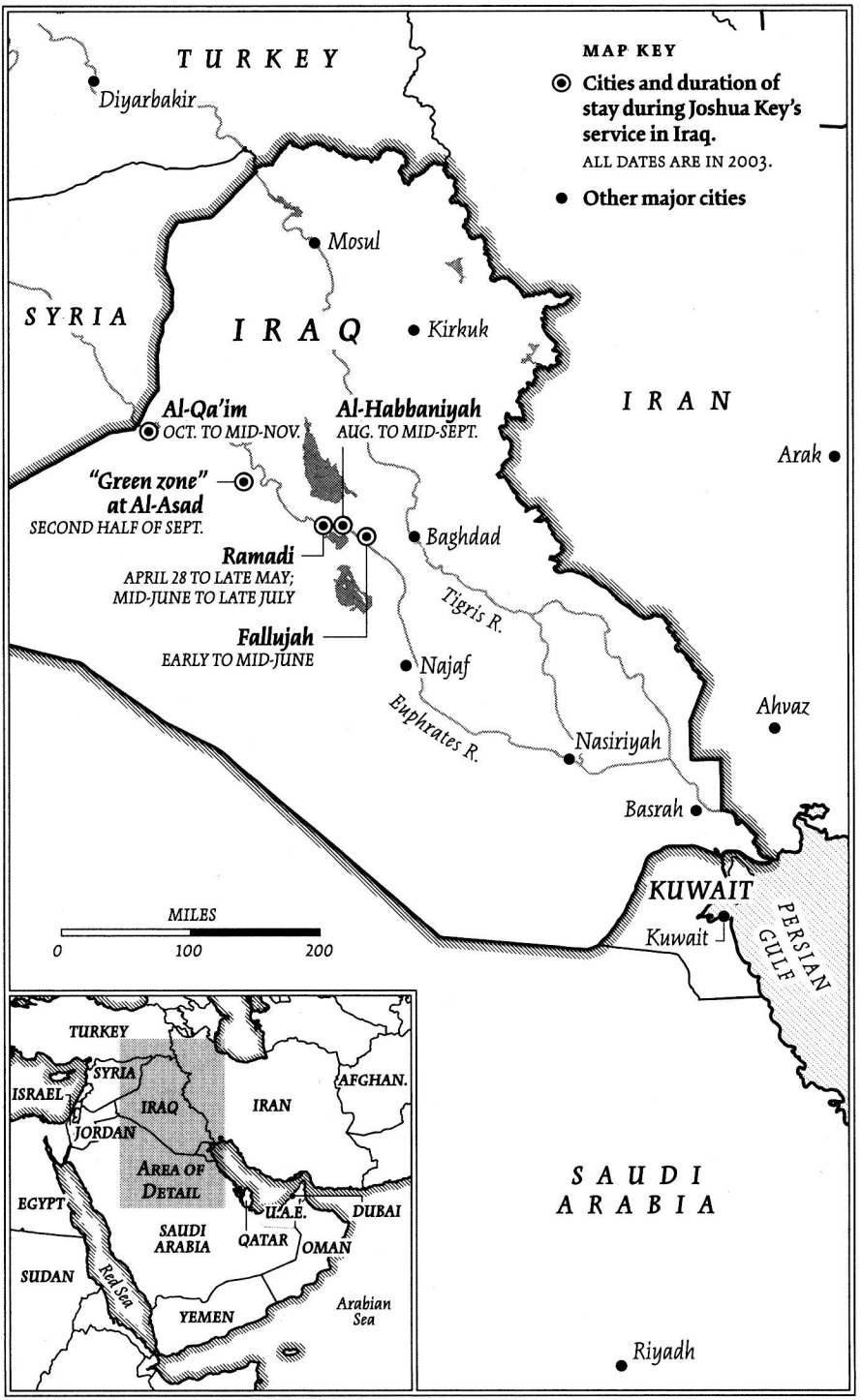
THE DESERTER'S TALE

Joshua Key enlisted in the US Armed Forces in 2002 to lift his family out of poverty. In early 2003, Key was sent to Iraq. This is his story.

Lawrence Hill is an award-winning Canadian novelist and journalist.

I dedicate this book to my wife, Brandi Key, and to our children, Zackary, Adam, Philip and Anna. I wouldn't have made it this far without them.

JOSHUA KEY


TURKEY
Diyarbakir
MAP KEY
Cities and duration of stay during Joshua Key's service in Iraq.
ALL DATES ARE IN 2003.
Other major cities
Mosul
SYRIA
IRAQ
Kirkuk
IRAN
Al-Qa'im
OCT. TO MID-NOV.
Al-Habbaniyah
AUG. TO MID-SEPT.
Arak
"Green zone" at Al-Asad
SECOND HALF OF SEPT.
Baghdad
Ramadi
APRIL 28 TO LATE MAY;
MID-JUNE TO LATE JULY
Tigris R.
Fallujah
EARLY TO MID-JUNE
Najaf
Ahvaz
Euphrates R.
Nasiriyah
Basrah
KUWAIT
Kuwait
PERSIAN GULF
MILES
0
100
200
TURKEY
SYRIA
ISRAEL
IRAQ
IRAN
AFGHAN.
JORDAN
AREA OF DETAIL
EGYPT
U.A.E.
DUBAI
SAUDI ARABIA
QATAR
OMAN
SUDAN
Red Sea
YEMEN
Arabian Sea
SAUDI ARABIA
Riyadh

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PROLOGUE

I never thought I would lose my country, and never dreamed that it would lose me. I was raised as a patriotic American, taught to respect my government and to believe in my president.

Just a decade ago, I was playing high school football, living in a trailer with my mom and stepdad, working at Kentucky Fried Chicken and hoping to raise a family one day in the only town I knew: Guthrie, Oklahoma, population 10,000. Back then, I would have laughed out loud if somebody had predicted that I would become a wanted criminal, live as a

fugitive in my own country and turn my own wife and children into refugees as I fled with them across the border.

Before I could survive and escape the war in Iraq, I had to survive my own childhood. I shot a .357 magnum on my ninth birthday, brought down my first deer by the age of twelve, and could clean, load and shoot any of dozens of firearms that my stepfather kept in our trailer. I was an excellent shot before I was old enough to shave. I drank alcohol of every kind, trashed two cars on country roads and fought anybody who was willing.

But even in my earliest years, I knew right from wrong. It wasn't right to kill puppies with a hammer, which is why I shot and buried a litter of pups before my grandfather could get at them in his old-fashioned way. Iraq took all of the fun out of guns, for me, but even in the days that I still loved shooting, I stopped hunting after dropping a deer with a four-inch bullet through the neck.

Even though I was taught that it was shameful to get licked in a fight and come home beaten, I knew that it wasn't right to gang up on someone, pick on a smaller person or to keep on punching after your opponent had fallen. I knew it was wrong to attack any person who was weak or defenceless, and everything about my early years at home reinforced that belief.

I was born in 1978, and we didn't have books or newspapers at home. I had heard of the Vietnam War, but didn't know when or why Americans had fought in it. But I can guarantee you this: if any man had told me that he had

deserted our army in wartime, I would have called him a coward right to his face. There were just some things you didn't do. By the time I was in high school, I felt that it would be an honour to serve my country at war, and even to die for it. I couldn't imagine any circumstances in which an American soldier would walk away from his own armed forces and thus betray his country.

Looking back, I would say that many parts of my life in Oklahoma prepared me for the war in Iraq. Our two-bedroom trailer baked in the Oklahoma sun and froze in the winter, so I was as ready for extreme weather as any American. Growing up on my grandfather's forty-acre farm, I learned to fix just about anything that was broken and make pretty well anything run. I was only a private first class when I went to war, but at least I had farmboy skills, and my officers came to count on them. I was the one they came to, over and over again, to connect air-conditioners to generators, hot-wire trucks, run our own wires to Iraqi electricity lines and assemble plastic explosives.

As a child, I watched many times as J. W. Barker—my third and final stepfather—drank himself into a stupor and beat up my mother. I grew up learning to expect abuse. J. W. loved to bring over his drinking buddies and have them watch while I worked with his guns. I used to bet them about whether I could hit a small target with a .22 rifle. While they tipped back beer, I would hang a string from a tree, pull it taut by tying it to an old fire extinguisher on the ground, stand back fifty paces and blast through the target nearly

every time. At $10 a pop, it was the fastest pocket money I ever earned. I earned a good bit of it. Growing up, I shot beer bottles, Coke cans, hanging string and snakes; I was a fine marksman before joining the army.

But the preparation for Iraq was more than physical. Growing up poor in Oklahoma also prepared me mentally. It was as if my mind was a little garden, with the days of my young life planting seeds of war.

I lived with my mother, brother, father and then a variety of stepdads on the farm of my grandfather, Elmer Porter. I often ate at his table when there was no food at home, or when my mother was too depressed to get out of bed. Elmer had fought in the Korean War and then worked for years at the Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City. Five other living relatives had served in the US military or gone to war. I didn't think much about war, but I had no objection to it.

One time a teacher in Guthrie got a worried look in her eye, put her hand on my arm and asked, 'Is everything all right at home?'

'Yes ma'am,' I told her, 'it's just fine thank you.' And I thought it was true. I knew plenty of people who lived harder lives than me. One friend had parents who both ran away from home, leaving him behind to fend for himself.

School was not exactly my strong point. Nobody in my immediate family had gone beyond high school, and I didn't see the point of further studies. I had one cousin who went to college four years, and the only job he could get in Oklahoma City was managing a waffle house. Seemed like a waste of

time and money to me. I didn't read in school and hated to write, but I did enjoy math.

I didn't yet know what lay in my future, but one set of strangers already did. Before I had even graduated from high school, a string of army recruiters started showing up at our trailer, banging on the flimsy door that blew open on windy nights, promising health insurance and higher education in exchange for military service. They were smart men, those recruiters. They didn't waste time at the doors of doctors and lawyers, but came straight for me. The recruiters said I could even join the army at the age of seventeen, with my mother's signature. She chased them off the property, but the damage was already done. The recruiters had planted the seed. They didn't get me for another few years, but they had made me aware that if I ever got tired of the minimum wage, there was always the adventure of life in the army.

But back in high school, I didn't think about joining the army, and I didn't plan on going to war. Guthrie was all that I knew and all I imagined, and the things I wanted then are the things I want now: a few acres of land for the kids to play on, with maybe a horse or two, a few pigs and a mess of chickens in a coop.

Since I was a boy, I have known that I wanted to make my living as a welder. There's something about welding that I loved from the first time that J. W. showed me how to turn on a torch. Under your flame, the metal flows like lava. You follow its movement and work with its nature. Sometimes you mess up, but that's okay. When things go wrong, all you have

to do is melt down the metal and start all over again. Nobody minds. Nobody's hurt. You fix your mistakes and get it right the next time, working the lava so that things stay together. The freedom to say 'No that's not good enough, let me try again' is what I love about welding.

To this day, there is no work I'd rather do than hold a welding torch. If I had my druthers, I'd move away with Brandi and our four children and get myself enrolled in the welding program at the College of the North Atlantic in Newfoundland. I've been hearing about the school for years. They say it's one of the best on the continent. But I wouldn't be ready for welding, quite yet.

I still get blackouts. I still wake up screaming in the middle of the night. I take pills to keep the nightmares at bay. The dreams are like sleeping dogs, and sometimes they haunt me during the day. Recently, I was driving on a country road and saw a cardboard box on the shoulder. Only I didn't think *cardboard box*. I thought it was a bomb, planted just for me, like all the explosives I set off in Iraq and that it had been placed there for me and my fellow soldiers. I swerved wildly onto the grass by the side of the road, to get out of its kill zone, to escape the shrapnel. When I came to, I was sweating and shaking behind the steering wheel.

I have never hit my wife or my children or anyone else during my blackouts, but I have been known to throw things and to rip light fixtures from ceilings. I have been known to shout words of mayhem and war, but I never remember these things when I finally come to in Brandi's arms.

The doctors call it Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. They say I'll have it for life, and just have to learn to deal with it.

I can only imagine what would have happened if I had not deserted the American army in Iraq. I guess it's not that hard to tell. There are only a few options. If I had gone back to war, I could have been taken out by a bullet, or mortars, or a rocket-propelled grenade. I could have been forced to kill an innocent person, or more than one.

I can say with relief and gratitude that I have never killed anybody, Iraqi or American. I have enough troubles as it is living with my own demons, and I'm not sure how I would have kept going with innocent blood on my hands. But I know there is a chance that if I had killed someone else, I would have gone on later to kill myself.

If I had returned to duty after a two-week vacation with my family, I would have had to go on raiding, arresting and intimidating people who were like me in the most surprising ways. They were poor, with almost no way to escape their miserable situations. They were hungry, but they were amazingly resourceful. I'll never forget the image of an Iraqi man driving up to a traffic checkpoint where I stood with my weapon at the ready. The gas line in his car had been ruptured. Outside the window, he was holding up a gallon of gas, so it could flow down through a rubber hose to the engine as he inched forward in the car. He was an ordinary man, using all of his ingenuity to survive in extraordinary circumstances.

I was stationed in Fort Carson, Colorado, when President George W. Bush declared war on Iraq, and within two weeks

I was flying into a war zone. I wasn't happy about it, but I went willingly. I believed what my president and my commanders had told me. Somebody had to rid the world of weapons of mass destruction. Somebody had to depose the evil tyrant Saddam Hussein. Somebody had to make the world safe from terrorists, who had overtaken Iraq and were threatening our lives. I felt it was better for me to help do the job now, than leave it to my own children. Even Brandi, who was left alone at home with Zachary, Adam and Philip, said to me: 'You get 'em, Josh, before they get you. Even if it's a kid. They're terrorists too.' I believed her. I felt the same way.

In all the military training I had received in Missouri and Colorado, Iraqis were never called people, or citizens, or men, women and children. They were called *'sand niggers'*, *'rag heads'*, *'habbibs'*, *'hajjis'* and, most of all, *'terrorists'*. In the army of the United States of America, those were our only words for them. My superiors made no distinction between civilians and combatants. As far as they were concerned—and I came to believe them entirely on this point—there were only enemies in Iraq, and all Iraqis were enemies.

I know that many Americans have their minds made up about people like me. They think we are cowards who just couldn't take it. I don't blame them. I had my own mind made up about war deserters, long before I set foot in Iraq. But I know right from wrong. I had a conscience by the age of six. I had to suspend it for a while, in Iraq. Soldiers are taught: Army First, God Second, Family Third. I am not a coward, and I never flinched from danger. The easiest thing would

have been to keep on doing what they were telling me to do. Ever so slowly, as the jets raced and the illumination rounds burned and the houses fell during the long Iraqi nights, my conscience returned. It could no longer be Army First, God Second and Family Third. It had to be the tiny voice inside me that would not sleep any longer. *I am not this man*, I told myself. *I cannot do these things any longer.*

This is the story of how that voice finally grew louder than the rumbling of tanks and the blaze of gunfire and the hollering of commanders. This is the story of how it came to be that I went to Iraq as a private first class in the United States army. This is the story of what I did to the Iraqi people and what I saw other Americans do to them, and why I deserted the war and became an outlaw in my own country. I was made to be a criminal in Iraq, but I am a criminal no longer, and I am never going back.