



**TATTOOED SOLDIERS.** Marines from Alpha Company 1st Battalion 5th Marines, arriving in the Helman Province in the Nawa District of Afghanistan during Operation River Liberty, set up their forward operating base in July 2009. Photographs by Lucian Read

# LUCIAN READ

FROM HAITI TO IRAQ TO  
AFGHANISTAN, FROM  
STILLS TO HD VIDEO, HE'S  
IN IT FOR THE LONG RUN

By Bruce Young



Even though he's been on some 30 embeds and spent at least two years covering conflict, Read doesn't consider himself a war photographer.



IN NOVEMBER OF 2004, THE STORY IN IRAQ WAS ALL ABOUT FALLUJAH. FOUR CONTRACT SECURITY GUARDS FROM THE BLACKWATER COMPANY HAD BEEN DRAGGED FROM THEIR CAR THERE, BEATEN TO DEATH, AND BURNED. THEN THE BODIES WERE HUNG FROM A BRIDGE AS CROWDS CELEBRATED. AFTER A PUBLIC OUTCRY IN THE STATES, THE MARINES WERE SENT IN TO RETAKE THE CITY. >>>

On the fifth day of fighting, though American officials said they controlled the city, house-to-house combat continued. First Sgt. Bradley Kasal found himself at a place the Marines called "Hell House" where Iraqi insurgents fought stubbornly from within, already having wounded several Americans before Kasal arrived.

He killed one insurgent immediately on entering and moved toward an injured Marine he saw in the next room, only to be wounded himself by AK-47 fire. The shooter then threw a hand grenade to finish the job, hitting Kasal again as he shielded a comrade with his body. Though now bleeding from about 50 places, Kasal continued to fight, shouting encouragement and insisting that the other hurt Marines receive treatment before he

did. For his actions, he received the Navy Cross.

"I took the photo that helped to bring him the recognition," says Lucian Read. It shows Kasal being carried from Hell House on the shoulders of two comrades, blood coloring his fatigues bright red. In one hand he still holds his pistol, and in the other, barely visible, his K-Bar combat knife (see cover). "To the Marines, I am that guy who took that picture," Read wrote for *The Digital Journalist*. "A year and a half later, my pictures of these same Marines run under the words 'shame, massacre, bloodbath.'"

The later pictures Read's talking about were shot in Haditha, as he accompanied Marines on a routine patrol. Iraqi civilians called him aside and showed him

**INSIDE "HELL HOUSE."** Soaked in the blood of a dead insurgent, First Lt. Jesse Grapes, Kilo Company's commander (at left), fought for his life during the fierce battle for Fallujah. Photographs by Lucian Read

**EMBEDDED.** *At an outpost in  
Afghanistan's Korengal Valley,  
Read with a Sony PMW EX-3  
and a Canon EOS 5D MKII.*  
Photograph by Eros Hoagland





**WAR'S FACES.** On the days when not much is happening, Read finds some nice light and makes portraits. While it may look like he's hauling around a portrait kit and a large-format camera, he's not. Read finds some bunker-covering cloth, "which is everywhere," for a backdrop and some protected, covered, natural light, shooting on a 35mm DSLR. Photographs by Lucian Read

several bodies, including those of women and children who they said had been massacred by the Marines some days earlier. Comparisons were made to the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, but investigations and legal hearings have generally ruled in favor of the Marines.

Read spent some nine months on his first embed with those Marines in Iraq. He figures he's been on some 30 embeds by now, spending roughly two years covering America's wars. As things have calmed in Iraq, he's been in Afghanistan recently, photographing the fighting there. But he doesn't seem to consider himself a "war photographer."

He's done work on commercial fishermen and the Inuit. He was in Alaska in 2007 and spent "a couple of months in Greenland" last spring. "Those were guys with guns," he admits, laughing. "Except they're hunters instead of soldiers." But those stories are time consuming and expensive for a freelancer – he's never been a staffer for anyone, though he's had a continual stream of work for magazines like *GQ*, *Stern*, and *Newsweek*.

In conversation, he's humble about his adventures. He describes his detention by Bolivian authorities early in his career as overly dramatized in a press release by a group he was working with. "I never really felt I was in mortal peril," he says now. Upon his return from the jungle area known for cocoa production, his greatest problem was catching up with his family and explaining that everything was fine.

He first saw shots fired in anger in Haiti in 2004, when

President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forced out in a chaotic situation populated with ineffective United Nations peacekeepers and heavily armed street gangs. Read's introduction to formal combat came on his first trip to Iraq. His father, a judge in Southern California, described him as "brave but not stupid" in a college alumni magazine article. A professor in the same piece said, "That's where he always wants to be – where the action is."

The college is San Francisco State University, where he went after following a friend to the West Coast from his native Texas. He was always interested in photography, but his early work was more artistic and conceptual and he found people were more interested in the "journalistic stuff." He funded his education with work on commercial fishing boats, and at one point thought about alternating between the two careers but found that it didn't work financially. However, it did give him the background for that photography project.

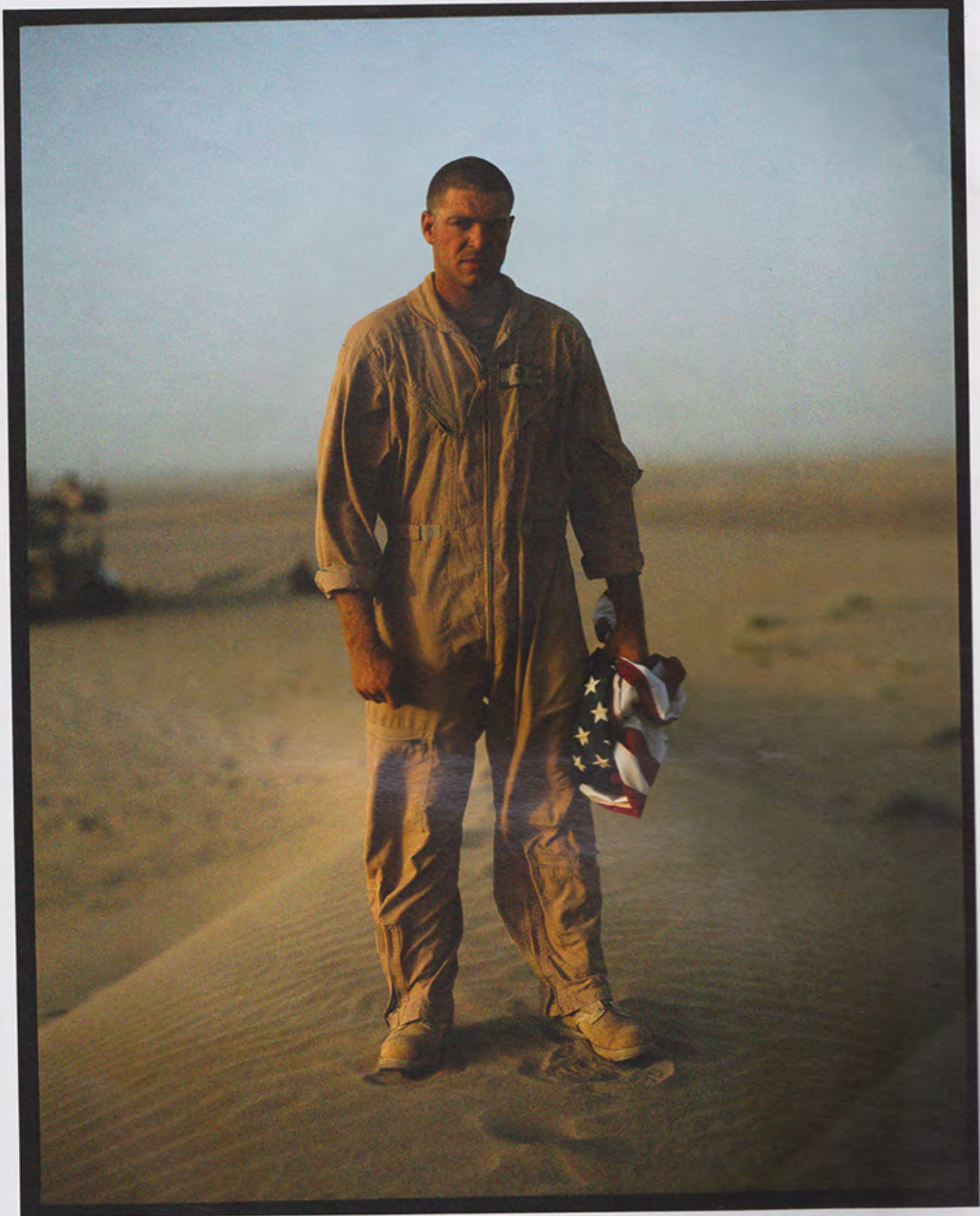
"I think Lucian is more: What's the Big Story," says Elliot Kirschner, meaning Read seeks the deeper story, rather than just a shallow, short-term treatment. Kirschner is the senior producer of "Dan Rather Reports" on the HD Network. Read spent eight of the last 14 months, including one long run throughout this past summer, in Afghanistan for the Rather show, shooting high definition video as well as still photographs. "He has a lot of different interests," Kirschner says, although Read has spent much of his time



**PAUSE TO PRAY.** In Charlie Medical Company's trauma room at Camp Ramadi, Iraq, a Navy chaplain prays over a soldier wounded by a roadside bomb.



**LOST BOTH LEGS.** In Ramadi, the aftermath of a double amputation operation on a Marine whose legs were shattered by an IED attack in Iraq.



**"HOLDING GARMSIR."** Sgt. Dennis "RayRay" Ray, 27, who grew up near Fort Worth, TX, was photographed by Read for a feature article in Texas Monthly about Ray's Marine platoon. They had captured and were holding Garmisir in Helmand, Afghanistan. Photographs by Lucian Read



**A MIXED BLESSING.** Shooting portraits of his subjects, even if they're soldiers in the battlefield, is something Read started doing in 2005, the year he won a World Press Photo award for his Iraq images. The photographer got a company roster and shot a portrait of every soldier in Kilo Company, he said, so that each Marine could give a picture to their family. Later, when a few of those Marines got in trouble for Haditha, he felt like the pictures became "kind of like mug shots." **Photographs by Lucian Read**

lately covering wars. That's because those are the stories that Kirschner thinks are underreported, inadequately covered. Rather began to focus his show on Afghanistan as more mainstream media coverage dropped off, he explains. Using Read, whom Kirschner met and interviewed while doing a piece on Haditha for CBS, seemed a natural thing for that story.

The transition from still photography to video was, Read says half in jest, "fraught with anxiety and expense." He felt as if he had to "start at step one," learning to account for elements such as audio and gathering interviews. "You spend years and years trying to be the best photographer you can be, and now all of a sudden I have to shoot video." But Kirschner is complimentary of his work, explaining that he thinks Read's background in still photography adds a special element to his footage. "It's almost like a moving photograph." And in high definition, Kirschner thinks, you can do more with traditional still photography as well, as you can appreciate a picture's

detail. "We often prefer a very evocative still to SD [standard definition television]," he says.

After 20 months, Read says, "I've gotten to a point where I think, 'Yeah, I've got this.'" The people at Rather's program now trust him in the field as a one-man band, and he's more often than not pitching them story ideas rather than getting assignments from their New York office. Kirschner says that Read's journalistic approach — the way his reporting and interviewing skills complement the camerawork — is what makes him so valuable. "He's a guy that takes journalism very seriously," Kirschner explains, saying though it may sound trite and clichéd, Read is "really thorough in a way that isn't self-indulgent."

Getting interviews — as well as learning to pay attention to audio — was one of the areas where Read found he had to learn the most. For television, he says, "you need voices that are not photogenic voices," those static, technical interviews that explain and connect the story together. "As a photographer, you sort of know a lot of things that you



**RETRO PATCH.** *A reproduction of the old War Correspondent insignia used by the press during World War II, Read found and bought the novelty from a man on eBay and put it on a shirt in order to "shorten the conversation" about who he was and what he was doing each time he arrived at a new place. He traded the patch to the tail gunner of the helicopter that flew him out of the war zone in return for that soldier's squadron patch, at the gunner's instigation.*  
Photograph by U.S. Marine  
SSgt. William Greeson



**UNDER ATTACK.** A suicide bomber detonated his vest at the entrance to Alpha Battery's outpost, wounding two Afghan guards. Photographs by Lucian Read

don't need to transmit," he says, but for television that information has to be included.

He started with a handicap – he bought his own Sony PMWEX3 – but has been using Canon 5D Mark IIs lately, though he says they're not as steady. He finds that less of a consideration in combat and says that "climbing down a mountainside is a much easier and congenial experience" with the smaller Canons. "I'm actually pretty happy with them now."

Read has used an assortment of cameras, a fact quickly demonstrated by a look at his portfolio from Iraq. It displays everything from conventional digital stills to panoramic shots to artful, studio-like, black-and-white portraits of individual Marines. That alumni magazine showed a pile of his gear on the cover, including a Canon D5 and a Hasselblad XPan. With the addition of video, the range of gear caused him "no end of trouble," he jokes. But then in the summer he "hit a rhythm of knowing what to use and when to use it."

He tends to work in long-term efforts, as shown by the nine months of that first embed. "One of the first questions I was asked when I joined up with them was – by all the guys – was, 'Well, how long are you going to be with us? When are you leaving?'" he says in a Web interview. "And my response always was, 'Well, I'm not going home until you're going home.' That made them a lot more

comfortable to know that, to know that I wasn't just dropping in. I was going to miss Christmas, I was going to miss New Year's, I was going to miss everything just the way they were." That kind of commitment to a story not only gives him the sort of depth that Kirschner so admires, but also pays off in terms of access. "They trusted me. I trusted them."

Of course, the commitment also has an effect on his life. "I do certainly feel like, when I come and go, I'm sort of shedding a personality," he says. Few of his regular stateside friends are connected with journalism or the military, and so the relationship with them is different. However, he doesn't feel the change is forced. "I'm sure I'd like them," he says of the friends he's made on assignment, "embed or no embed."

And despite the Haditha pictures, Read remains popular with the Marines. He has spoken to a family group and is still in contact with a few. He testified on behalf of one of the Haditha Marines at a military legal hearing. And "the picture [of First Sgt. Kasal in Fallujah] is now on posters wherever two or three Marines gather together," he wrote. "An example for generations of Marines to come."

"I've never had anyone tell me not to take pictures really," he said in a radio interview in 2006. "And a lot of it has to do with how you handle yourself at the scene." For Read, the controversy over photographing the wounded or



**DOWN TIME.** Marines at Camp Leatherneck kill time last summer while waiting to enter Afghanistan's Helmand Province during Operation Khanjari.

the dead, he thinks, has affected him less because his first priority is helping. "You show up at a scene and help the people right off the bat, they're going to allow you to do what you need to do. It has a lot to do with what happens at that particular moment.

"My experience when I've photographed guys who are wounded over there, by and large, they seem to really get it and feel like those pictures need to be taken and those pictures need to be published so that people understand what it is they're going through and the sacrifice that we are asking of them," Read said. "They look it as: Well, if we don't see pictures of us then we don't exist. And if we don't exist, then what the hell are we doing here?"

I asked him if he worried about bias. "In the beginning I have to admit that I probably went through a period where I put aside my journalistic detachment because of my friendships with the service people I was covering," he wrote in an eMail, "but nearly six years on I have moved past that stage." He still has "a deep fondness" for the common grunt, but "it's the generals and secretaries and presidents who drive these things and they don't get a pass from me.

"I always keep in mind the impact these conflicts have had on the Iraqi and Afghan civilians who are caught up in them," he continued, "and really one of the best things about moving into video and film work is that I have had

many more opportunities to include their actual voices in my work." One of his recent pieces for Rather's program focused on civilian casualties in Afghanistan, "a rare and shocking look at the war," a press release from the show explains, "from the point of view of the Afghan citizens." His approach was typically long term: "Reporter/Producer Lucian Read spent weeks driving across Afghanistan," the release says, "talking to people who never get to tell their stories on American television."

He says he'd be interested in trying full-length documentary film work if he went into video full time – "If you're going to shoot a film, then make a film" – but he sees himself, and always will see himself, as essentially a still photographer.

"I have no personal desire to get out of [still] photography," Read says, while explaining that he's grateful for the opportunity the Rather show has presented. "I could do far worse."

And he doesn't foresee the end of still news photography anytime soon. "I hope not," he answered when asked about it. "I don't see why we should have to give it up after 170 years." As if to prove it, after a short break, he's going back out to do still photography for *Stern*. ■

See more of Read's work online at [www.lucianread.com](http://www.lucianread.com).