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## **MOSUL BATTLE: REMEMBERING IRAQI SPECIAL FORCES SOLDIER 'SPONGEBOB'**

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Photojournalist Ayman Oghanna has been embedded for weeks with an Iraqi special forces unit seeking to retake the city of Mosul from so-called Islamic State. Here, he recalls his time with a member of the unit who died in a bomb attack.

Ahmed "Talqa" was killed on Friday.

He hated that name. Talqa means "bullet" in Arabic and Ahmed preferred "SpongeBob" - the nickname given to him by his son because of his goofy, gap-toothed smile.

Ahmed's name cannot be printed in full because he is - sorry, was - a member of Iraq's elite Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), more commonly known as the Golden Division, and it may endanger the rest of his family to do so.

That in itself is a telling fact about the state of Iraq more than 13 years after the US-led invasion.

Ahmed was involved in all of the wars of his generation and he was one of the bravest, kindest, funniest men I have known.

Ahmed with his son, who gave him the nickname "SpongeBob"

Ahmed's nom de guerre, Talqa, came from the slugs pulled out of him nearly a decade ago.

A Shia Muslim from Baghdad, Ahmed had been driving home one night when he was pulled over at a police checkpoint.

The federal police force had been so infiltrated by Shia militias at the time that it effectively was one - some say it still is.

The policemen at that checkpoint pulled Ahmed out of his car after checking his ID. Other men were waiting for him.

At the time, Shia militias had been targeting Iraqi special forces personnel in retaliation for carrying out raids against them throughout the capital and somehow they had got hold of Ahmed's name.

Media caption "We received a lot more fire from IS and their positions" - video journalist Ayman Oghanna

He was bundled into the boot of a car and driven to an abandoned warehouse where he was

tortured. His ordeal began with both of his hands being nailed to a wooden board.

"I kept telling them that I didn't work with the Americans," Ahmed told me.

But they did not stop, pulling out each of his fingernails with a set of pliers and resuscitating him each time he passed out from the pain.

They then put a circular saw to his forehead. "They were trying to cut my face off - what's wrong with these people?"

Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service was set up by the US military after the 2003 invasion

Ahmed never confessed to being in the special forces.

A hood was placed over his head and he was shot five times. One bullet grazed his skull, causing blood to seep through the hood. The militiamen were convinced that he was dead.

They dumped his body on a rubbish dump in a Sunni Muslim area - a common practice during the sectarian war that peaked from 2006 to 2007 - as they sought to lay blame at the door of another community for murder and make it less likely the victim would get a decent burial.

Counter to the narrative of hatred, however, an elderly Sunni man carried Ahmed's body to the hospital.

Ahmed recovered. He tried to find and thank this kind stranger but he could not be found.

Hospital staff told him that after bringing in Ahmed the man had been grabbed by another set of Iraqi policemen, who blamed him for Ahmed's wounds.

There was no record of the man's arrest and he joins the untold thousands of Iraqis who have disappeared in the country's cycles of violence and revenge.

Mobile phone coverage in warzones can be notoriously patchy

Ahmed, the great survivor, was killed in Mosul when an IS militant blew up a car bomb beside the Humvee in which he was manning the gun turret.

Ahmed was an outstanding gunner. Earlier this year, he had saved my life when a suspected car bomb came screeching towards us in the badlands of Iraq's western province of Anbar.

Mosul is not Anbar. It is a massive city with narrow streets and a population of more than a million, with IS fighters and car bombs lying in wait.

In a matter of seconds, a car bomb can appear and devastate Iraqi forces.

It's the jihadists' version of an air strike and the main reason why Iraqi special forces casualties are mounting. Nothing was left of Ahmed's to bury - no body, no clothes.

Many Iraqis see CTS personnel as their country's most professional and least sectarian fighters

Ahmed was one of the many CTS personnel to have been at the centre of Iraq's wars since 2003.

Originally set up by the US military as the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Force (ICTF), recruits were expected to meet similar standards expected of US special forces personnel.

After 10 days of basic training in Baghdad, candidates were sent to Jordan to undertake a three-month selection process.

Out of an initial pool of some 1,200 men, only 80 made it through.

Throughout selection, candidates were not allowed to call each other by their names, using only assigned numbers.

Iraqi special forces are being targeted repeatedly with car bombs as they push into Mosul

In a country that would eventually be torn apart by sectarian tensions, the system had the unexpected advantage of creating an esprit de corps among Shia Arab, Sunni Arab and Kurdish recruits.

The intensive training and meritocratic command structure - a novelty - helped create perhaps the only success story of the US military's efforts to rebuild the Iraqi security forces.

As the Americans left in 2011, standards slipped and selection changed.

But the CTS remained the most professional and least sectarian fighting force in the country.

And when the Iraqi army collapsed after marauding Sunni supremacists tore through the country in 2014, they were the last soldiers standing - folk heroes to the point that even Shia militiamen began donning ICTF patches.

Media caption Journalist Ayman Oghanna travelled with Iraqi forces, who met with heavy resistance from IS fighters

In nearly every battle against IS, Iraq's special forces have been the tip of the spear.

Ahmed was there in Ramadi, in Hit, in Falluja and, finally, in Mosul - just as he was there in earlier battles against al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Shia militias.

Despite his war record, Ahmed was not, as one colleague likes to say, your typical "double-hard war bastard".

He was perhaps the silliest war hero you will ever get to meet, cracking corny jokes with that same "SpongeBob" smile, no matter how miserable the situation was.

"What's there to eat?" Ahmed would always ask me before licking his lips, grabbing my gut and shouting: "Ayman! Ayman is delicious."

Just on Thursday, I needed a cigarette lighter and went to Ahmed.

He pulled out a stack of 10 held together by a rubber band. "Now I don't have so many, so the price is high," he said. "I'll give you the blue one for 1,000 dollars."

"Sure, Ahmed," I told him. "I'll bring the money tomorrow."

"For tomorrow, the price is 2,000 dollars," he responded. I agreed.

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