

THE EFFECTS OF WAR

Adam Dobby is a soldier-turned-photographer who has fought in and documented numerous wars around the world. He talks to Graeme Green about catharsis, trust and what keeps drawing him back to conflict.

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Humans don't learn from history, says Adam Dobby, a former soldier who put down his rifle and picked up a camera. 'If they did, we wouldn't keep repeating the same mistakes with conflicts.'

Dobby has seen first-hand the human consequences of conflict across the last three decades. Born in Oxford, he joined the army, aged 16, as an apprentice, and subsequently spent five years with the

Royal Engineers and seven years with the 22nd Special Air Service (SAS), serving in the First Gulf War and in wars around the world, including the Balkans, Africa, Europe and the Middle East – 'a witness to so many historical moments,' as he describes it.

After leaving the SAS, he put his training to use as a field producer and security specialist helping journalists access conflict zones in places such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, Palestine and, since 2014, Ukraine.

He started taking pictures seriously in 2016 and has been back to Ukraine many times over the past decade to cover the conflict.

Now based in Cheltenham, Dobby has exhibited his black & white photographic work showing moments in the lives of soldiers and civilians impacted by war, and uses his photos to engage and educate people on conflicts such as Ukraine. He's also currently considering producing a book of his images.



Above **THERE IS NO DUST IN HEAVEN**
Syrian Desert, Syria
One of the many toddlers found without any parents that had escaped the grasp of Isis after the SDF took the last Isis territory in Syria in the Battle of Baghuz Fawqani.

telling me, 'You should start printing these'.

It's not a journalistic outlook – it's much more personalised. That's nothing against the world-renowned photojournalists I know, but the way they capture images is much more dramatic – they've got to sell it to the newspapers.

Graeme Green: How does your experience as a soldier feed into your photography?
Adam Dobby: Having been on the sharp end of the spear in my time in the Forces, you see things, because you're so close to the motion of war. When you step back as a civilian, you appreciate a lot more what the soldiers who are fighting the wars are going through and, more importantly, the way the destructive power of war impacts on civilians, because you've seen it as a soldier.

It helps me to analyse situations I'm in. It allows me to compartmentalise both the

soldier perspective and also the photographer or journalist perspective of what people in the fight have to deal with.

GG: Do you think you see and photograph war in a different way to a photojournalist or war reporter?

AD: Yes, for sure. I know some of the best photojournalists in the world – they're good friends of mine. The way they photograph from a journalistic perspective isn't at all what I wanted to do. My photographs were just a record for myself, and then journalists started

GG: How did you make the transition from soldier to photographer?

AD: I was very fortunate to serve in the SAS from a young age – I was one of the youngest guys to get in there. I served my country and lost some great friends who I served with. I did feel it was time to move on, whether or not I felt a bit like a political pawn. I wanted to document history instead of being part of it.

My first job was to train journalists and government agencies how to look after themselves in conflict areas. I started carrying a camera in 2016, but that was only to stop people asking me what I was doing in a place.

GG: Had photography been a part of your life before?

AD: I was introduced to photos as a kid – my dad was a good photographer, though not professional. I also did courses in the military – very basic photography, more surveillance than portraiture.

GG: Why do you work in black & white?

AD: There are a couple of images I've put out in colour, but the majority is black & white. That's primarily because I don't think war is a kaleidoscope – war is black and white; it's good against bad.

Black & white is not to try to make it more dramatic – it's to be more sensitive to war.

GG: Which photographers have been an influence on you?

AD: I'm a big fan of Don McCullin – most photographers are. The access he got from embedding himself with the Americans in Vietnam was remarkable. A lot of my personal friends are fantastic photographers. I get a lot of inspiration from them – they're exceptionally courageous.

GG: What do you hope people get from your photos?

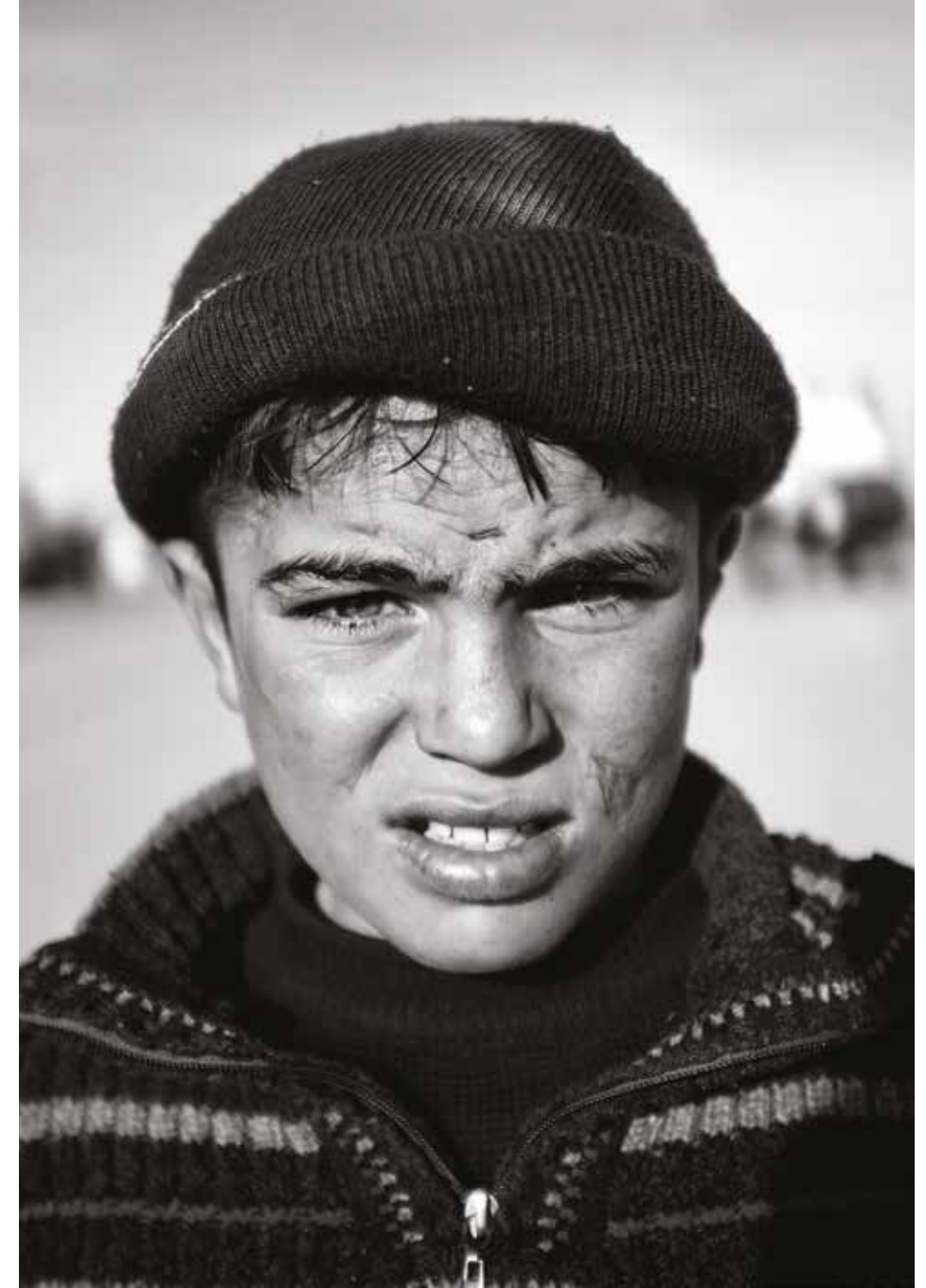
AD: I got quite frustrated with news and broadcasters' agendas behind the news. We should be able to stand back and look at an image without the rhetoric or political agenda of a news network. We should look >

Right (top) **SCARS FROM ALEPPO**
Idlib Governorate, Syria

This young man had lost his parents during the battle for Aleppo where an estimated 31,000 people were killed. He was alone, scared and scarred.

Right (below) **WHERE IS DAD?**
Львів – Lviv, Ukraine

Women with children wept with the stress, clutching their passports and family birth certificates in one hand and their children in the other. Ukraine banned men aged 16-60 from leaving the country, unless they have a disability or three children under 18.





that's down to the situation with my ex-wife. I don't think war shaped that side of my life. I feel very privileged to have experienced what I've experienced. I don't think those experiences have traumatised me too much, because I talk about it a lot – I verbalise what I've seen – and the photographs are quite cathartic. It helps me to express my journey through my images. It also makes me feel very honoured that a lot of people have seen my images, whether it's in galleries or education institutions. There's a huge education from the photographs. It helps me to internalise my journey because it's spreading that education.

GG: As a soldier, you worked in highly dangerous situations – what made you choose to return to conflict zones as a photographer, rather than a more peaceful and safer life?
 AD: The training I got in the Forces was so good. For me to leave the Forces and go into a nine-to-five job, where I'm not giving much back, wasn't going to happen. My training has allowed me, as a producer, to get people into high-risk places safely and get them out, introduce them to people – that has been a great success for me and for the news networks I work for. If not, I probably wouldn't have kept on doing it. On my watch, I've had

Left (top) **TEENAGE TRAUMA**
 Borno State, Nigeria
A teenage soldier of 16, exhausted and battle shocked following weeks of fighting and patrolling against Boko Haram in the area of the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping.

Left (below) **EXHAUSTED TEARS**
 Mosul, Iraq
An Iraqi Special Operations Forces officer drained and emotional after clashes with a final pocket of Isis resistance in the Old City.

Opposite (top)
YESTERDAY'S DREAM, TODAY'S RUIN
 Mosul, Iraq
This young girl returned to her destroyed home to look for her favourite toy. She finally found it after hours of digging through the rubble and walking over the dead.

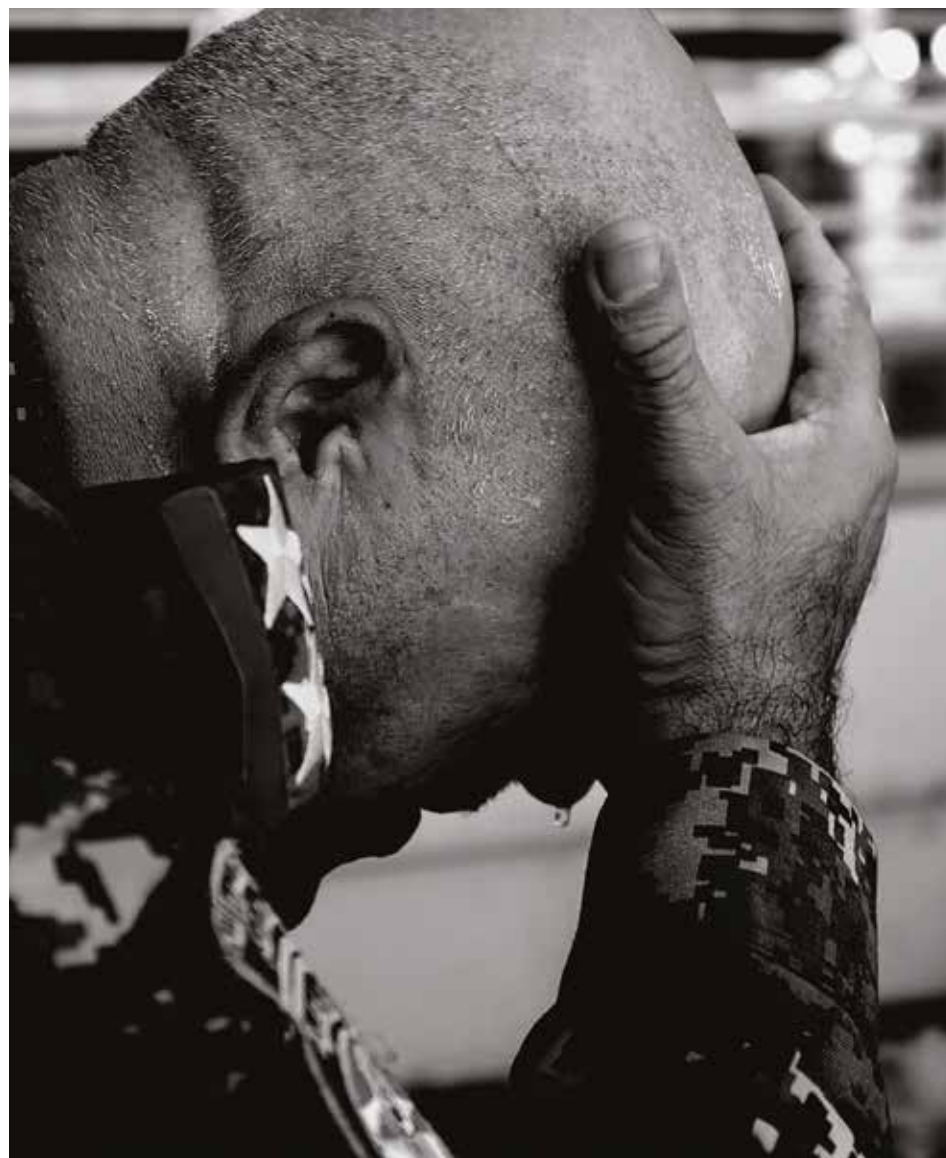
Opposite (below)
BEHIND THE MASK
 Baghdad, Iraq
More than four million children have been impacted by extreme violence. In 2017 alone, 270 children were killed. Many were robbed of their childhood, forced to fight on the frontlines. Some bear physical and psychological scars due to exposure to unprecedented brutality. More than one million children were forced to leave their homes. At least one in four children in Iraq have been impacted by conflict and poverty.

at an image and a short synopsis and use our own emotions to take from that image what we want, whether it's concern, hope, sadness...

GG: You've talked of being a 'witness to so many historical moments' – where did you spend time as a soldier?
 AD: I served in the Balkans, Africa, all over Europe and in the Middle East. I joined the

Forces when I was 16. My first war was the First Gulf War. Every war that's happened since, I've either been part of as a soldier or covered as a journalist.

GG: What impact has seeing what you've seen had on you?
 AD: I'm divorced. I have two kids. Unfortunately, I don't get to see my children that often, but





◀ some very close shaves, but I've never got people into situations I couldn't get them out of. We've got out with incredible footage.

GG: Do you also feel a personal connection or responsibility that draws you back to conflicts?

AD: Yes, I feel a big responsibility. Humans don't learn from history. If they did, we wouldn't keep repeating the same mistakes with conflicts. Getting crews into places and getting some of the images that I take up on to walls drives me to do more.

I'm currently looking for a different angle, as I was before the Ukraine conflict started. That's likely to be much more along the lines of environmental issues, because the main war the world is suffering is environmental.

GG: Which has been the most difficult country to work in?

AD: Syria was tricky to start with because

of its remoteness – we didn't have much support over there.

The hardest thing is building up trust with locals to make sure you feel they're on your side and are going to help you.

It can be difficult in some parts of Syria, such as Idlib, where there are multiple factions and terrorist organisations. You have to have fantastic trust. It's about trusting your instincts to build that trust. Without trust, you're going nowhere.

GG: You've been going to Ukraine since 2014 – what have your experiences been there?

AD: Back in 2014, with Crimea, it was hugely confusing. No one knew what the hell was going on. We knew the little green men, the Russians, were popping out of their barracks, and they took over Crimea. And that spread over to the east of Ukraine. There were separatists, local militia, different communities... so many different fighting

Above **ALL THAT I HAVE**

Komišuvasi – Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine
Catherine, an 83 year old, was visiting her daughter, down the road. While she was out, her home was destroyed. There were no military targets nearby, but about 50 private houses were destroyed and damaged. The shockwave hit a brick wall inside the house (it miraculously didn't collapse), blew roofs, knocked out windows, took down pipelines and power lines. Granny Catherine remembers the Second World War and says that even the Nazis didn't do this.

factions. Even the logistics of getting around was a nightmare. You didn't know who the hell was rolling you into these checkpoints. There was so much unknown. You could easily find yourself in the middle of a huge barrage and not know where it was coming from.

Now, the Ukrainians have been supported and trained. Since the Russian land invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, there

seems a much more patriotic stand that Ukrainians are taking.

GG: Ukraine is always in the headlines but in some ways it's a 'forgotten war' – life for most people goes on, even though there's a major war in Europe. Is photography able to bring the war home to people?

AD: Yes, it is. The access is hard. Two of my friends who are big AP photographers, Ukrainians, were the last photographers in Mariupol – some of the images they brought out were amazing. They risked their lives to get those images. Journalists were getting killed and the access to harrowing imagery has been reduced. You still see very strong images coming out of Ukraine portraying a lot of the factual information of what is going on.

GG: Do you have any hope that the war in Ukraine will be over soon?

AD: We can always hope – everybody's hoping



Above **HOPE**

Anbar Province, Iraq
In the middle of a desert storm at a refugee processing station, families were given their first taste of safety and food after weeks of hiding during the battle to rid Isis from their homes.

perspectives, not in a dramatic way but in a sensitive way, who knows what they're going to be when they grow up.

There is an engagement with the younger generation with these images. It's good to be able to talk about things openly, trying to break down this stigma of what we see on television or in newspapers. Ukraine and other conflicts are impacting us. It's far away, so people think, 'Why worry about it too much?' But it is affecting everybody.

▶ For more on Adam Dobby's work, visit adambobbyphotographer.com and Instagram @adam_dobby_photographer.