

# Mass Graves

by Patrick Jennings

**T**HE tragic events of 9/11 swirled around many of us, but for U.S. Army Reserve Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Edward Burley the attack was on his hometown of Washington DC. Looking out from his office, Burley watched the smoke rise from the Pentagon and knew his life, like many others, was about to change. What he did not know on that day was that his role in the Global War on Terrorism would require not only his strengths as a citizen soldier, but his unique civilian experience as well.<sup>1</sup>

Burley's civilian work as a United States Prosecuting Attorney gave him a strong background in murder investigations and forensic science. In the days following major combat activity in Iraq, Burley and his team began the tragic process of identifying the dead in the mass graves left by Saddam Hussein's terrible regime.

Attached to the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, Burley coordinated the efforts of a civilian team of British and Australian anthropologists specially trained in the excavation and evaluation of mass graves. Known as the Institute for Forensic Excellence and Investigation of Genocide, this team worked under the control of the Office of Human Rights. This organization went well beyond the basics of exhuming graves and became heavily involved in researching lists compiled by local citizens that identified potential victims of assassination. The scope of the work was staggering. In Bosnia the estimated number of people buried in mass graves is 30,000, and after nine years only some 9,000 have been located.<sup>2</sup> In Iraq, the lowest estimate is 290,000, and the highest estimate runs close to 3 million victims of the regime buried in mass graves. The team of anthropologists primarily focused on identifying bodies and gathering evidence for possible criminal prosecution of the perpetrators for war crimes or international crimes against humanity.

Burley and his team had to work with a complex set of cultural and religious rules. Despite the age of many of the sites, Burley's team made sure that any body exhumed during the day was reburied by nightfall in accordance with the Islamic faith. Women, even British technicians, were careful to keep their heads covered while working on the various sites. Grieving



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*LTC Edward Burley coordinated a team of British and Australian anthropologists tasked with finding, exhuming, and documenting mass graves in Iraq. Sites like this one near Al-Hillah have been found all over the country.*

survivors were allowed access to the sites in order to mourn for the missing. Clerics and religious leaders were continuously consulted to ensure every aspect of cultural and religious respect was followed, all while the team continued its grim investigation.

Burley and the team of investigators also confronted civil-military issues. Despite their strong relationship with U.S. military commanders in areas they covered, some higher command and national-level military and civilian leaders were uncomfortable with the mass graves mission and just who should be directing its efforts. Tensions eased when the mandate of the British/Australian forensic team came to an end, and LTC Burley passed control of the mass graves investigation to a civilian office in the newly formed Coalition Provisional Authority. The team had made a good start to the investigation, but much more remained to be done, and it would be carried out by Iraqis seeking justice for their own nation. It was a role that United States Prosecuting Attorney Edward Burley knew well. 🔴

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## Endnotes

- 1 Lieutenant Colonel Edward Burley, 352nd Civil Affairs Command, interview by Staff Sergeant Patrick Jennings, 26 July 2003, Baghdad, Iraq, digital recording, Oral History Interview, 126-OIF-I-0150, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Nick Hawton, "Bosnia's largest mass grave," BBC News, 30 July 2003, <http://news.bbc.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/3111189.stm>.