

Sam Kiley TLOF transcript

Sam Kiley: They dragged us out and put us on our knees in a line. At this point, I knew what was going on. And I just kind of went into a very kind of quiet place.

Ramita Navai: What was that place, what's going through your head?

Sam Kiley: Well, I knew I was gonna die that was a certainty. It wasn't a question of talking your way out.

It was all over. It was just waiting for the bullet

Ramita Navai: From *Aurra Studios*, this is **The Line of Fire** with me, Ramita Navai. I've been working in conflict zones around the world for nearly two decades. And in this series, I talked to fellow journalists about covering war and the life-changing moments of confronting death. Welcome to **The Line of Fire**.

My guest today is one of Britain's most experienced and prolific war reporters. Sam Kiley, CNN senior international correspondent, has covered nearly every single conflict in the world since 1991. It's easier to name the wars he hasn't covered than the ones he has. He's also the only journalist who's completed a full combat tour with NATO in Afghanistan, spending six months in Helmand in 2008. Sam, hello.

Sam Kiley: Hiya.

Ramita Navai: We've known each other for quite a long time, haven't we? The beginning of my career, the very start of my television career, I think we met on the international current affairs series *Unreported World*. In, was it 2006, 2007?

Sam Kiley: No idea.

Ramita Navai: Well, what I do know is by then you'd been working about 55 years.

[Both Laugh]

How did you end up being a foreign correspondent?

Sam Kiley: Well, I ended up in journalism, I was lucky because I joined *The Times* directly from university as a graduate trainee, alongside one Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson who was fired for lying, which was handy for me because it meant that I was able to stay on and continue my career.

And I did a couple of years on *The Times*, and then I became a foreign correspondent for *The Sunday Times* in LA, which was a bit of a round peg square hole situation. I survived a year there and then luckily for me, *The Times* hired me back to become the Africa correspondent based out of Nairobi. And that's really when things really kicked off.

Ramita Navai: And did you want to become a foreign correspondent or did you end up being one?

Sam Kiley: My dad was a journalist. He was an exile from South Africa. He was a foreign correspondent. When he went into exile, he was a stringer for a lot of American networks in what was then the Congo then became Zaire and is now the Congo again.

Oddly enough, I ended up covering rather similar stories as he did 30 years prior. So I suppose it was always in the blood. I mean, Africa is very much part - I was born in Africa, my father's born in Africa, in fact, my daughter's born in Africa, met my wife in Africa, my mother grew up in Africa, my grandfather on my mother's side was a very important scientist in Africa.

So I suppose the natural trajectory for me as a journalist was to want to go to Africa. And that's what I did.

Ramita Navai: Did you want to cover war?

Sam Kiley: When I was young, I wanted to cover - yeah. I mean, you know, I wanted to have a look into the abyss and see what was there, you know, grab the tiger by the tail type thing. You grow out of that pretty rapidly. I mean, on the first conflict I covered a colleague was killed, another one lost his arm. You know, it goes from being or should, unless you're a fool, go from being an abstract kind of fantasy into this is a really whole cold reality. And it's not about you and it is about people, real people really dying. It's not a spectator sport.

Ramita Navai: Was war as you imagined?

Sam Kiley: I honestly can't remember how I imagined war to be. That was more than 30 years ago. I mean, there are certain things from that period ever since. I can't eat or be anywhere near roasting pork because it smells the same as burnt human.

So that has stuck with me. I can't really remember what life, how I imagine war before. But it's a really, really, really ugly, disgusting, viciously - you know, these are truisms, but I think people because we live in an age or have always lived in an age in which war and warriors are celebrated, what never gets sufficient focus or understanding in most fiction representations of war is just how gory and grim and humiliating it is.

Oh, the other thing that I noticed in that time, I mean, these are really disgusting gory things, but that when people die they often kick a shoe off. And that really has always stuck with me.

Ramita Navai: How'd you learn to cover war ?

Sam Kiley: [Laughs] Well, I mean, by accident. In Somalia during the campaigns there after the American led invasion there to put an end to the starvation racket that caused a famine there.

Ramita Navai: The American led invasion that Sam's talking about started with an aid mission in 1992. George H.W. Bush sent American forces into Somalia to stop the famine and the mission was a success. But nation building proved to be a lot harder.

Less than a year later, elite American troops launched a raid in the Somali capital Mogadishu to arrest top lieutenants of a powerful warlord and restore a government. But it was a disaster. Two us Blackhawk helicopters were shot down, hundreds of Somalis were killed, as well as 18 Americans and two UN soldiers. Within six months the US had pulled out of Somalia.

The battle of Mogadishu had been America's deadliest firefight since Vietnam. And was later given the Hollywood treatment by director Ridley Scott in the film *Black Hawk Down*.

Sam Kiley: I think I'd been standing on a roof amid the clattering. Bullets when they pass close to your ears, within about three foot of your ear, make sound a bit like a football rattle, a sort of clattering noise.

It's a very - it doesn't sound like a bullet does in the movies. Further away, they make a kind of whizzing noise and it makes it, that's easier. And I'd been standing on this roof every day, watching battles, drinking tea, smoking cigarettes, scratching my bum, taking notes. And a veteran of the French Foreign Legion came up and spent about four seconds on the roof with me and then dived down the stairs and actually bashed his head on the wall trying to get off the roof.

And I thought he'd rather overreacted and wandered down and said, "what's the matter with you?" And he said, "Those are incoming rounds within three foot of your head." And I'd been wandering around like some impervious God completely ignorant of the fact that people were trying to shoot me. So, you know, that's quite an interesting lesson to have learnt and survived it.

I mean, it's not all about crawling around in fox holes while the bullets whizz over your head. I mean, covering a war is much more important to understand why it's happening, how it's happening, how it's being funded, whom it's affecting, and to whose benefit is this? What are the causes behind it?

Those are the questions that really interest me. And very often the kind of front liney stuff is just sort of window dressing.

Ramita Navai: Yeah. And in these years that I've known you I've never heard you describe yourself as a war correspondent, a war journalist.

Sam Kiley: Yeah, it makes my flesh creep. I hate that term.

Ramita Navai: Yeah, so do I. Why?

Sam Kiley: It always reminds me of a kind of caricature of a French photographer, you know, with his neckerchief leaning into a young woman at a bar and saying, "You don't know what I've seen."

[Ramita laughs]

I think it's sort of, I mean, you know, I never intended to specialize in conflicts. I don't see myself as a specialist in, of or on conflicts. I happen to have covered a lot of conflicts. I think there's a lot more to my work than walking around with my mouth hanging open taking notes or being shot at on camera. I think that's

sort of frippery in many ways. But I just think it's a bit wanky, war correspondent. I mean, it's sort of, yeah, it's something out of *Tin Tin*.

And anybody who does sit around telling war stories is a complete fool and a burke. I mean, you know, the only good stories to tell from these places are ones that are against yourself and then mostly involve, you know, sitting on a loo and having to crawl for your life or, you know, they're funny stories. They're, you know, those are the only ones one would hear any of us tell, I would hope. I mean, they're not, you know, that kind of, you know, pull up a sandbag and let's swing the lantern and I'll tell you a few tales.

It's odd actually because I recently told quite a long and involved story to my son who's an adult and it was a descriptive story and it certainly wasn't a kind of "you don't know what I've seen" type story, but it was just a long story that started in Rwanda and ended in Bosnia. And he, you know, he was goggle-eyed because I don't talk about it.

Ramita Navai: You don't.

Sam Kiley: people don't know what kind of, what you've been up to. I mean, it's quite kind of in a way to those who are very, who are close to you, it's a bit insulting that you don't talk, one doesn't talk about it. But I mean, the only reason I'm here is because you are my friend. Anybody else? I mean, I don't like talking about this stuff.

Ramita Navai: No, I know you don't and you're extremely modest actually about what you've achieved and the work you've done. And I know that you don't like talking about the things that have happened to you and I do appreciate you being here.

What's the conflict that's most affected you?

Sam Kiley: Rwanda. The Rwandan genocide. I mean, and for anybody who covered it that should be the right answer.

Ramita Navai: The Rwandan genocide happened between April and July 1994 when Hutus who formed the majority in Rwanda murdered a million Tutsis and Hutu moderates. The ethnic rivalry has its roots in an artificial friction between the two communities dating back to the German colonial period of the early 20 century.

The genocide started after the shooting down of a plane that was carrying the then presidents of Rwanda and neighboring Burundi, both Hutus, which was blamed on Tutsi rebels. That incident signaled the beginning of the pre-planned systematic mass murder of Tutsis by Hutu extremists who harnessed the state structures to orchestrate the killings. School teachers, mayors, doctors, nurses, they were all instructed to kill.

Sam Kiley: You know, and you've seen me react. I get very, very irritated when people don't seem to know what happened in Rwanda. People know about the Holocaust as they jolly well should do. Well, this was - the kill rate of human beings in the Rwandan genocide was as high as the height of the atrocious Nazi murder of Jews and others during the holocaust. 37,500 a day crudely put and they're by hand with machetes, with the roots of trees. The Kagera river, the Rusumo Falls on the Kagera river looked like somebody was emptying a pot of Tuscan bean soup with the bodies. I mean, there was more than a body per second going over the falls. And that was weeks after the genocide had supposedly ended. There was a million people killed in 90 days. Yeah, it was the single biggest horror story since the second world war.

I mean, there were other similar numbers were killed by Pol Pot but over three years not three months. There were very, very few journalists actually covering it on the ground. And to start using the term genocide - genocide is a term that applied there that we were reluctant to use.

Now, people chuck it around like confetti, it makes me sick. Same with the word famine. You know, these are real things that shouldn't be used lightly. You know? Otherwise you are simply not doing justice to the scale of the horror. I mean, I remember there was a little girl of about nine, the top of her head had been sliced off like an egg and she had a plastic bag covering the hole, through which you could see her brain, walking around. You know, there were kids with, you know, machete wounds, you know, as long as your arm, across their back, there were women who'd been raped and who'd been, you know, I mean, they were in a real mess and there were lots and lots and lots of dead bodies lying around because it was happening every day. They were fresh bodies, old bodies, I mean, decayed bodies. Yeah, so that was 94, yeah.

Ramita Navai: Psychologically, mentally, how did you get through that day by day?

Sam Kiley: Easy. It's not my problem. I mean, it is not my problem to fall apart. This is not boo hoo. You know, I'm pretty experienced by then. And, [00:14:00]

you know, if you don't get damaged and scarred by what we do then you're a psychopath. But I'm not interested and rarely reflect upon, at least at that stage, you know, what does it do to you?

I'm just not interested.

Ramita Navai: Did covering that genocide, the Rwandan genocide, did it leave a particular mark?

Sam Kiley: Well, I used to have jolly weird dreams. I mean, it was two years after that I had my first child. So, I mean, I used to have dreams about being chased through the banana groves with my daughter Ella under an arm and I always had a gun with a bent barrel because I couldn't defend myself. You know, those sorts of things.

Ramita Navai: Four years later, you survived being shot at, at a checkpoint in Lesotho.

Sam Kiley: No, I didn't survive being shot at, I survived being shot.

[Both laugh]

Ramita Navai: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sam Kiley: I've been shot at a lot.

Ramita Navai: Yes.

Sam Kiley: This one hit.

Ramita Navai: Good point. Yeah.

When Sam got shot, he'd been reporting from the small kingdom of Lesotho. It's a mountainous landlock country in the middle of South Africa. [00:15:00] President Mandela had deployed South African troops to put down a military coup and the attempted seizure of a strategically important dam by the local military.

What happened?

Sam Kiley: Oh, I pushed my luck too far. I misjudged a roadblock and got shot in the arm. And then luckily I still kept my wits about me so I was able to spin the car around and escape. It didn't, you know, I mean, another millimeter closer and it would've taken my arm off, so I still had a functioning arm so I could get away.

Yeah,

Ramita Navai: I mean, Sam, we could talk for hours

Sam Kiley: Oh, let's not.

[Both laugh]

Ramita Navai: about you surviving these bad situations and you've been in many bad situations, but I want to ask you about that one moment doing your job when you faced death. And it was in Iraq, 2003, you'd been covering the invasion. [00:16:00] Talk me through the start of your day.

Sam Kiley: Yeah, very bad day at work that was.

So myself, Nick Hughes and our two Kurdish friends, we were in Baghdad. The Americans were still consolidating their conquest. Very early days. I can't remember the exact date but they'd kind of taken over a week or 10 days prior. So we'd come in from the north, which in itself was quite a hairy journey all the way down through Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown. We were making a documentary for *Channel 4's Dispatches*, and then we had to get out. You know, we'd been there for weeks, months by then. And so we drove out, we missed our convoy to drive out with, out to Jordan. It's about a 15 hour drive to the border. And our car was a rather battered [00:17:00] Jeep Cherokee and the exhaust had fallen off. It was black, had yellow TV signs on. Which was probably a mistake in hindsight. And we went pattering off with me at the wheel, down the road to Amman. And somewhere between Fallujah and Ramadi in the sort of badlands. And they were the badlands even under Saddam Hussein. It was all very, you know, thieves, scoundrels being around there, but this was before the insurgency had even been the thought of really and we were pattering along.

Ramita Navai: How come you were driving?

Sam Kiley: Oh, because I always insist on driving because I've survived so much whilst I've been at the wheel, I pretty much don't want to put my survival

in somebody else's hands. I know I won't lose my marbles if things go weird. I mean, we also probably took it in turns, but anyway, I was driving out because I knew the way. Luckily our two Kurdish friends had been educated in Baghdad, so they had in Arabic, they had Baghdadi accents. Otherwise [00:18:00] they would've been in real trouble. Mind you, we were all in deep doo-doo in the end. So we were driving along a very busy highway. It's about four lanes wide in both directions. It's a proper, proper highway and very busy with trucks and cars going in both directions. And I noticed this purple sedan following us. So I sort of slowed down and it sort of slowed down. I sped up, it sped up. So I thought, oh, here we go. This is gonna be tricky. And sure enough, they kind of pulled alongside and then they drove in front and then they kind of tried to stop us by kind of pulling across the freeway.

And I spun the car into a U-turn and drove it straight back into the oncoming traffic. So I was playing dodgems with the oncoming trucks and cars, hoping basically to create a car crash for the people who were then chasing us. And this went on for about 20 or 30 kilometers. It was a proper dodgem trail until they managed to get up alongside and poke their guns out and [00:19:00] pull us over to the side of the road.

Ramita Navai: What were you thinking in those 20, 30 minutes? That's a long time.

Sam Kiley: Well, I was trying to think - I was trying to get them killed by a great big truck. That's all I was thinking.

Ramita Navai: It was survival?

Sam Kiley: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, no, these guys were trying to get us and I was trying to get away and I didn't, we didn't have any - turns out actually one of the guys with us had actually hidden an AK under the floor. I'd forbidden guns in the vehicle and he had actually hidden it. I mean, with hindsight would I liked to have had a rocket propel grenade or a large aircraft carrier at my disposal? Yes. But at the time I was just trying to get them hit by a truck so that they wouldn't kill us.

And that didn't work. So they pulled us over and well, they came storming up to me. One of them headbutted me. They pulled...

Ramita Navai: Wait, wait, wait. So talk me through this. They pulled you over, they made you get out the car? What happened?

Sam Kiley: Yeah, yeah. Well, they came running up to the car and pulled us out of the car.

And one of headbutted me. And... [00:20:00]

Ramita Navai: How did they manage to pull you over? They just...

Sam Kiley: They stuck their guns out and pointed them at my face and waved to the side of the road, made it kind of pretty clear. But I thought they were going to kill us there. But they didn't. And then one of them spotted I'd had \$20,000 in cash hidden down the back of my trousers in a money belt and it must have been poking out. One of them spotted it and grabbed it immediately. Not that I kind of cared or noticed. And then they put us, they separated us, the two Kurds in one car and me and Nick in another, and took us off into the desert.

Nick Hughes, who was with me in the car was the producer/director/cameraman on the *Dispatches* shoot. So very, very experienced and tough as nails. And Nick was going, what's happening? What's happening? What do you think's happening? And Nick is a martial arts expert and one of them kept slashing, every time Nick said anything, he slashed at me or Nick with a bayonet to try and shut us up. And Nick could've jumped them but [00:21:00] that would've meant that the two Kurds would've been killed in the other car.

So we kind of didn't jump them.

Ramita Navai: Did you discuss that?

Sam Kiley: No, we couldn't, but we could kind of do it with eye contact. Nick and I are old friends from Kenya so, you know, a lot of nonverbal communications, pretty obvious. You know, but both of us knew what we were capable of. Had we been alone we would've just attacked them. But we couldn't.

So we were driven off behind a kind of big soil berm they call them. You know, these military piles of dirt that people hide tanks behind or whatever. And they drove behind - I thought they were taking us to a village and then they drove off into the desert and I thought this is bad.

I thought fine if we get kidnapped, you know, we've got a bit of longevity, but being driven behind a big pile of dirt means only one thing and sure enough they dragged us out and put us on our knees in a line. And they kept hitting me, especially. I'd really annoyed - I'd obviously [00:22:00] frightened them with my dodgem driving. And they put us on our knees, right to left; me, Nick, and then our two Iraqi friends. And then - you know, at this point I knew what was going on and I just kind of went into a very kind of quiet place.

Ramita Navai: What was that place? What's going through your head?

Sam Kiley: Well I knew I was gonna die. That was a certainty. It wasn't a question of talking your way out. It was all over. It was just waiting for the bullet. And I knew I'd be first and I just went into - I gave - I kind of let go. Completely let go.

Ramita Navai: What do you mean?

Sam Kiley: I stopped fighting. I wasn't reconciled with it. I focused on, you know, I just thought about my family and my kids and yeah, I [00:23:00] just, kneeling in the dirt, kind of like a creature waiting for the bolt in an abattoir. And Nick looked across and saw the guy's finger closing on the trigger that was on the nine millimeter pistol that was in the back of my head. I mean, I wasn't guessing at what was going on. It was happening. You know, I expected it all to go black any second. And Nick saw the guy pulling the trigger.

So he stood up and ran, which meant that they shot at him and they didn't shoot me in the back of the head because they now had a runner and they shot at Nick. And I saw the bullet strikes going between his [00:24:00] legs, one of them went through his shirt, but didn't hit his body, and he got about 20 yards and then everybody started shouting "Nick! Nick!" As though what he'd done was really unreasonable.

And he turned around, put his hands up and smiled. And our abductors were completely freaked out and they'd made a lot of noise. They'd fired the AK on automatic at him, and then they'd all shot him, you know?

Ramita Navai: How could they have missed?

Sam Kiley: Oh, because they didn't know what they're doing with their guns. Luckily. Unaimed shots. You know, people watch too many movies, luckily for

Nick and us. Because if they killed him, then they would've killed us, obviously. Continued to kill us.

Ramita Navai: And why did he turn around?

Sam Kiley: He has no explanation. He doesn't know.

Ramita Navai: I mean, that's extraordinary.

Sam Kiley: Why were we all going, "Nick! Nick!?" You know, I don't know. But it was the Kurds who first started shouting. I don't know what, I don't know. I have no idea what happened.

After the incident, he described [00:25:00] himself as my stool pigeon because it was him fluttering away that kind of saved us. But he didn't expect to survive either he just didn't wanna die on his knees. He was adamant about that. But whatever it did it created some kind of - this is hindsight, so what happened at the time was they then were, these guys were very shaken. These were obviously, you know, baddies, but pretty amateur baddies, but murderous ones. Because they were going to murder us. And so they turn around, they start screaming and we were getting translation from our Kurdish friends and they we're going, "Where's the money? Where's the money?"

And I said, "You've already got it." And they said, "What do you mean?" And they said, how much is it? And I said, "\$20,000." Which is a shit load of money, I mean, by anybody standards any time in their life, but in Iraq in 2003 it was enough to buy, you know, a medium sized county.

Ramita Navai: And where are you at this point?

Sam Kiley: Somewhere in the desert near Fallujah or Ramadi

Ramita Navai: No, no, actually physically are you still kneeling [00:26:00] down?

Sam Kiley: Yeah. Yeah. I'm still kneeling in the dirt.

Ramita Navai: So you didn't get up? You didn't start running?

Sam Kiley: No, no, no. I mean, I just, you know, I was kind of watching with a kind of distracted, you know, oh well, you know, we'll do some shouting then they'll shoot us.

So I said there's £20,000 and that kind of stunned them. And they were going, "Where is it? Where is it?" And I said, "That guy's already got it." I pointed at the guy who'd taken it. And they didn't know that he had it. So that turned their energies onto him. And then they just, and they basically then turned on us and said, "Get lost. Get lost. Go, go, go."

But they grabbed me and they put me in the back of the car and they said [Sam laughing] , "You can't drive." They were very pissed off at my driving. And so one of the Kurds drove and we got back into our thunder wagon and I mean, they nicked our mobile phones, I mean, you know, satellite phone.

But they kind of panicked. They went into kind of panic mode and told us to get lost. And we drove about a kilometer and a half and [00:27:00] then we ran into American special forces patrol. And they may have known that the Americans were in the area and that they'd made a load of noise and that they'd blown their chances.

Maybe. I don't know. We don't really know why we survived. We still don't know.

Ramita Navai: That's the only possible explanation.

Sam Kiley: Yeah. I don't know. But they were going, they definitely were going to kill us and then they didn't. And then we didn't have any money.

So then we hobbled all the way to the border. And then I borrowed \$50 off Michael Holmes from CNN, dear colleague, who was on his way out or on his way in at the time. He kindly bought me a visa into Jordan and then Nick and I went and spent £1700 on tequila at the Intercontinental in [00:28:00] Amman.

Ramita Navai: **[PROMO BREAK]** Hello, it's Ramita Navai here. And thank you for listening to my show. I hope you agree that these stories are not only powerful but important. As I speak to some incredible journalists from around the world about what they've learned from working in dangerous places and how it's changed their perspective it would be great to get your help in sharing their personal stories.

So please do spread the word and subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you get your podcasts. I hope you continue to be inspired by the series. And I look forward to you joining me for more episodes.

Ramita Navai: And what was going through your mind in that moment where you thought you were gonna die, and then you realized you are not gonna be killed, you're not gonna be executed?

Sam Kiley: That was a kind of permanent condition. So the moment of realization that this is it, that I'm going to get a bullet in the head - not that I might, but that I was definitely I was going to die. It wasn't a supposition. It was a certainty. So then to be undead was very, very confusing and left me feeling terrible for many years because I had let go. You know, people fight for their lives. You know, a drowning person will fight every second of the way to get to the surface or whatever. But there was nothing that could be done. You know, like somebody who's tied to - like the Brothers Karamazov, you know, I mean, you know, you get tied to a pole, blindfolded, "Take aim" and then the last sound you're gonna hear is "Fire!"

And then you don't hear it.

Ramita Navai: No ecstasy, no jubilation in that?

Sam Kiley: No. No, no. Just, just...

Ramita Navai: But how? I mean, look, I've got a - you've written about this once.

Sam Kiley: Yeah.

Ramita Navai: And I know you never talk about this.

Sam Kiley: Well, I wrote about it so I wouldn't have to. **[Sam laughs]** Thanks Ramita. **[Ramita laughs]**

Ramita Navai: And you said, I'm going to quote, it's a rather beautiful but just mysterious quote for me: "Cheating death is fun, but once you've accepted its cold embrace being cheated of it leaves you feeling a little flat."

And I guess that's what you are explaining to me [00:30:00] now, but still I find it hard to comprehend that it can leave you feeling flat when you've got a wife and children and a life ahead of you.

I can't imagine feeling anything but ecstatic.

Sam Kiley: No, I don't know. Maybe it's - guilt is not the right word at all. It just, what I mean, it just makes you feel - you're left feeling fucking awful. Not jubilant at all. Rotten kind of, and then longer term, and this is a condition of what people call PTSD or whatever, it's like having no skin.

And you become - so for about five years, I mean, you know, I was an appalling person to be around even more monomaniacal. I had a catchphrase: you're not listening to me. You're not listening. Being seen, being heard, being told that you had a right to exist at all was like, it was like being in a state of [00:31:30] permanent scream for five years and having no skin. So incredibly over sensitive, bereft of any kind of existential belief.

Ramita Navai: How did you get over it? Did you acknowledge you had PTSD? How did it affect your relationship with your wife and your children?

Sam Kiley: Well, I mean, they're very - you know, I'm a bit of a shit anyway, so I mean...

Ramita Navai: Yes!

[Both laugh]

Sam Kiley: It's quite hard to tell the difference. I mean, it sort of, the kids were not allowed to boo me from behind doors.

I mean, that was always the case anyway. A lot of this stuff is sort of cumulative, but, yeah, I would be kind of comically stiff-legged, like a kind of five year old in a tantrum over some perceived slight or infringement.

Ramita Navai: Er and you said that you are over it? **[Both laugh]** Well, hang on a minute.

Sam Kiley: But what this injury does to people [00:32:30] is it strips them of their belief and their right to exist.

And so rebuilding that belief is pretty straightforward and should be understood by anybody who works with people who are exposed to this kind of thing, not least civilians to whom this kind of thing was happening all the time. I also was not that interested in, you know, I was supposed to be messed up.

You know, everybody in Iraq was going through this kind of experience every single day. I was not that interested. In fact, I wasn't the least bit interested. I just wanted to get through the day, get onto the next job. Keep paying the bills, keep educating my kids. You know, very tolerant family put up with it.

And then in the end, in fact, I recovered entirely from the effect of that by going to Helmand and getting shot to ribbons for six months in Helmand doing my book. But by then I was doing exactly what I wanted to do, with the people I wanted to do it with, being treated with the utmost respect and even though it was highly [00:33:30] violent, I haven't looked back.

Ramita Navai: Explain this to me. Why on earth would you need to go?

Sam Kiley: I didn't to, it just happened. I mean, I didn't, I wanted to...

Ramita Navai: Well, you made it happen.

Sam Kiley: Yeah. Well, I went to do the book because I wanted at that stage in my career to - I'm completely hooked. The drug for me is to be where history is happening and to really know what I'm talking about.

Ramita Navai: Is that the addiction you're not addicted to the adrenaline?

Sam Kiley: No, God no. No. I'm sickened by it. I'm completely disinterested. And when it does kick off, people are very freaked out by me because I appear to be completely indifferent, completely cold-blooded, not interested, not excited because I know that you've got to keep your wits about you in order to kind of -

You know, panic will get you killed anyway. But no, not remotely interested in that aspect of the job. What I really, really do love is knowing what I'm talking about from [00:34:30] the ground up and above all you can't go and illustrate what's going on - you know, we've been talking about me, which is a sort of nauseating subject. The reason I'm there is, and this does sound pompous but it is true, it is to report on the lives of other people and how they're being affected. I mean, you know, for any number of reasons, lately, not least because I don't

want this shit happening to my kids in my country. You know, I'm really, really, really good at spotting the ingredients of a coming conflict, like really good.

And I can see them potentially - I mean, I'm not bonkers. I don't see a civil war emerging in the United Kingdom anytime soon. But climate change may mean that, will mean for certain that my grandchildren and probably my children will spend a significant part of their lives in some kind of conflict.

Ramita Navai: And how did covering another war help you heal?

Sam Kiley: It wasn't covering the war that helped me heal. It was being around people [00:35:30] who were very very respectful of what I was doing. Were pretty amazed as to why on earth I was doing it. I was not embedded. I was a completely free agent given completely free access across the whole area of operations for Helmand.

And I was the only person who could get on a helicopter, including the Brigadier without signing a manifest. I could just hop on any vehicle I wanted to. I was given access to secret information. My self-belief returned. You know, it was an extremely dramatic period in which my countrymen were killing and being killed. Some of the people I knew very well and some of them, you know, in combat environments that I shared with them. But I was just doing what I wanted to do. And I'd kind of, I got control of my life back. I got my own, you know, got my mojo back, you know, and when I got back I haven't looked back.

I barely, you know, I don't, you know, I'm just the shit I've always been rather than the twisted one that I became for a period. [00:36:30]

Ramita Navai: How did the experience of your near execution in Iraq change your perspective on life?

Sam Kiley: It didn't really, it was just a really terrible thing. It wasn't a kind of recovery from cancer story that made me want to live every day like it was my last or something like that. I don't know. Maybe I became a bit more of a hedonist. It'd be difficult to have increased that. I mean, I've been pretty good at living life to the full anyway.

Ramita Navai: What did you learn from it?

Sam Kiley: Nothing.

Ramita Navai: I knew you gonna say that

Sam Kiley: Nothing.

Ramita Navai: But I find that hard to believe.

Sam Kiley: Well, yeah.

Ramita Navai: I mean, but look, most of our colleagues who have been through terrible situations, even if it's affected them really badly, will say that they learn something about themselves, about how they deal with trauma or there must be something.

Sam Kiley: [Sam scoffs] I don't think so. I mean, I don't know learning more about yourself.

I can't remember. I mean, I don't [00:37:30] think so.

Ramita Navai: Do you know wh? I think you are absolutely resolutely saying you didn't learn anything about yourself because even though there's lots of bluster with you, actually, you don't have an ego. And I think it's your kind of innate modesty, without blowing smoke up your ass because I hate to do that, but I think that's what it is. I think you think that it would be, God, what's the word called?

Sam Kiley: Self-indulgent.

Ramita Navai: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Which is what I thought about therapy when I started therapy. I didn't do it because I thought it just felt too self-indulgent. I can see that in you.

Sam Kiley: Well, that's very kind of you, I mean, I'm not sure so many of my colleagues would agree that I don't have an ego, but the...

Ramita Navai: Well, no, that's what I was saying. There's that bluster and there's what you project, but actually deep down, I think you don't and you feel it's very self indulgent, and that's why you shy away from these questions.

And you must have learned something about yourself. You just won't allow yourself...

Sam Kiley: Why? Why does everything have to be, you know, I [00:38:30] mean, you know, I don't...

Ramita Navai: It doesn't have to be in that sort of cringy self help...

Sam Kiley: It's a sort of trope of American literature that, you know, it wasn't until I was confronted by my own mortality that I realized how beautiful a buttercup could be or the joys of fresh rain on my face, I was pretty good at enjoying that stuff anyway.

Ramita Navai: Do you think culturally, there's a difference between the way we process really traumatic experiences in Britain?

Sam Kiley: No, I think the whole idea of the stiff upper lip, I mean, look at the way the Brits behave when they go on holiday, we're not a nation of stiff upper lip. We're a nation of people puking in the streets and screeching like stuck pigs.

Ramita Navai: That's why I love us.

[Both laugh]

Sam Kiley: You know, we're appalling. No, that's a sort of Hollywood myth. Americans are much more buttoned down and they're as brave as lions too.

Ramita Navai: But they're much more open about exploring...

Sam Kiley: Well in the literature they are. I mean, this is why [00:39:30] you're asking me.

Ramita Navai: The id.

Sam Kiley: This is the whole point about yeah, the ego or the ying and the yang or whatever **[Ramita laughs]** I dunno. I mean...

Ramita Navai: You're not taking this seriously, Sam.

Sam Kiley: No, no, but I mean, I just, I think it's absolutely fair enough and say, look, it was a really terrible thing, left me quite damaged, and I got over it. And also, you know, I mean, it's kind of inherent in the issue about this whole podcast is we are not the point, you know? I don't expect to escape from my job unscathed. I expect to be scathed badly. I hope to be able to recover and look

after my family and be kind to the people that I love and to be broadly speaking a more or less semi-decent human being, you know, fighting against my own worse instincts.

But the reality is that sometimes these things are just bad [00:40:30] days.

Ramita Navai: And you think nothing good came of that?

Sam Kiley: No, definitely nothing good came of it. Absolutely nothing good came of it. No, it was bloody awful. I wish it never happened. Horrible.

Ramita Navai: I mean, you've been so lucky and so many of our colleagues haven't been. You, in particular, you've lost lots of friends and colleagues along the way.

Including, and forgive me for mentioning this because I know you don't like to talk about it, but including your cameraman Mick Dean.

Sam Kiley: I was his correspondent.

Ramita Navai: Who was killed by a sniper in Egypt in 2013. Sam, how does one live with that? How do you live with that?

Sam Kiley: That is a day by [00:41:30] day.

[Sam crying]

Not my story. It's Mick's story.

Ramita Navai: Yeah, I mean, Sam, it's painful looking at you now because, yeah, these are scars. Yeah, these are scars and I'm sorry for making you go through all of this, but you keep on doing it. We keep on doing it.

Sam Kiley: Well, we've got no transferable skills.

[Both laugh]

No, we're, I mean, you know, it's because it's worth it. Because it is. We've got to believe that it's worth it. And every now and again we make a difference. Quite frequently we don't. And I've contributed to the whole genre of, historically, of war as entertainment. Wittingly or unwittingly. I'm [00:42:30]

allergic to it . I think, I hope I've always been, but I've definitely been part of the problem. But you know, it's not often one can point to points in one's career when it made a difference, but cumulatively, we hopefully make a difference. Sometimes it's quite hard to believe that we do. And, you know, I've been doing this so long now I hope I've got something to contribute analytically. An awful lot of my work may be set in places that I might be standing on the front line in Mosul, but I'll be hopefully making sense of it for the viewer. Not kind of whizz bang look at me. I'm wearing a flak jacket sort of nonsense.

Ramita Navai: How has covering conflicts changed from when you started to now?

Would you say it's safer?

Sam Kiley: No, I don't think it's safer. I mean, this goes to a completely different subject altogether, but [00:43:30] war isn't a sport. I mean, you've heard me rant about this in the past. It's a good thing that there are international rules and regulations about how people conduct themselves at war.

But these are wars, you know, war is about saying to your enemy if you don't do what I tell you to do, I'm gonna smash your baby's head against a brick wall. None of it is some kind of activity that can really be policed. It is the end of reason. It is by definition. You know, I mean, all of these are truisms, but there's still a sort of sense that, you know, has war got safer?

It's a perfectly rational question until you say it out loud. It's like, well, how do you have a safe war? You know, war involves dropping bombs on people. Is there something safe about that? No, I don't think it's got safer. I mean, there's more concern about our safety.

That doesn't necessarily even translate into actual safety. I mean, it's a very complicated debate.

Ramita Navai: If there's one [00:44:30] piece of wisdom you've learned from doing this job and facing death and danger, what is it?

Sam Kiley: I can only think of facetious things to say. Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die. I mean -

Ramita Navai: Well, that's not facetious.

Sam Kiley: I don't think that there's any particular wisdom that won accrues as a result of these sorts of things. I mean, you know, I sound very kind of, I just don't give this stuff much thought. I don't kind of, you know, make church steeples out of my fingers on the plane home and say to myself, you know, what lessons can I take away from this?

I mean, I will be analytically picking over similarities between the criminal structures that underpin the Assad regime and those that underpinned Mohammed Farrah Aidid and the Bosnian Serb mafia or whatever it might be. Those are the interesting things that I look [00:45:30] at and study and they keep me awake at night, literally thinking about, you know, these are important stuff.

I'm really not that interested in, you know...

Ramita Navai: I think eat, drink and be merry are wise words. And actually when dad was dying, in dad's last days that's what he said to me. They were his only wise words that he wanted to impart me; eat, drink, and be merry.

Sam Kiley: Well, he was a wiser and much better looking man than me.

Ramita Navai: [Ramita laughs] He was.

Sam Kiley: So I'd listen to him.

[Both laugh]

Ramita Navai: Sam, thank you so much. Thank you. I really -

Sam Kiley: Thank you.

Ramita Navai: - appreciate you sharing these stories with us because I know how difficult and painful it is for you.

Sam Kiley: Well, thank you Ramita. I've hated every minute of it.

[Ramita laughs]

Ramita Navai: Oh, give me your hand. Thank you darling.

To learn more about Sam's work, I recommend starting with his book [00:46:30] *Desperate Glory*. It's a beautifully written, gripping and remarkable account of the reality of the Afghan war. We've attached a link in the show notes. You can also catch Sam on *CNN* and follow him on Twitter. His handle is @KileyCNN.

Thank you for listening to this episode of **The Line of Fire**. If you'd like to follow me, my Twitter handle is @RamitaNavai and if you've enjoyed this episode, please rate, review and subscribe and tell your friends they can find us wherever they get their podcasts. Until next time.

The Line of Fire is a podcast from *Aurra Studios*. It was hosted by me, Ramita Navai and produced and edited by Chris Scott. Our executive producers are Matt Raz and Richard Osman [00:47:40]