

An interview with Sigfrido Ranucci, director of The Hidden Massacre

Marc Wells

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On November 8, the Italian public television network RAI aired the documentary film The Hidden Massacre, which exposes the use by US forces of white phosphorous bombs on the civilian population of Fallujah in the November 2004 assault on the Iraqi city. This chemical weapon is prohibited by international law, except when used for illumination purposes.

The film, directed by Sigfrido Ranucci, documents the effects of white phosphorous on humans, showing that they are devastating and unequivocal. The agent absorbs the oxygen present in the victim's body, burning it to the bone while leaving the victim's clothes nearly intact.

The documentary is available for free download in English, Italian and Arabic at <http://www.rainews24.rai.it/ran24/inchiesta/video.asp>

Marc Wells of the WWS spoke recently to Ranucci.

MC: What made you decide to explore the white phosphorous issue?

SR: When I started the investigation, I didn't know that white phosphorous played a role. In May 2005, Mohammed Tareq al Deraji, a biologist and director of the Research Centre for the Defence of Human Rights, left Fallujah for the first time since the beginning of the war, heading to Rome. With the support of a few left-wing parliamentarians, the humanitarian organisation "Un Ponte Per..." ("A Bridge To...") called a press conference that was nearly unattended. I was not among the few journalists present. It was my first day of holiday after a long time.

The press centre informed me that Mohammed had brought disturbing photographic material and film footage. I informed my colleagues at RAI and some other reporters from major news outlets. However, it turned out they couldn't go to the conference because they'd been hijacked by their chief editors to cover the "long weekend" traffic.

I asked when I could contact Mohammed. The answer I got was that the director of the Research Centre for the Defence of Human Rights would be heard in Strasbourg by the European Parliament. It was June 5.

Even in Strasbourg, the hall where the preliminary press conference was held was empty, just like the seats of the European Parliament. Mohammed was granted a few minutes to denounce what had happened during the battle of Fallujah. However, the focus of the press, especially the Italians, was on the libel launched by the Lega Nord delegation led by Borghezio against the state president, Ciampi.

This time I was present. Mohammed showed me pictures and footage that shocked me. They showed disfigured bodies with no apparent signs of wounds. The faces were melted by heat, the clothes were practically intact.

The photos depicted people who died in their sleep or while praying.

Mohammed recounted a rain of fire coming down from the sky on the city of Fallujah, people catching on fire, others having a hard time breathing.

My priority was to verify if those disfigured bodies were in fact from Fallujah. I discovered that the pictures had an ID number that I was able to cross-reference in the cemetery registry redacted under the supervision of US authorities. That registry reported the names of the deceased, when positive identification was possible. It also reported the places where the bodies were found—which was often either the Jolan or the Ascari quarters, the neighborhoods that were most intensely hit by the US bombings. Above all, it gave the burial locations.

This information was necessary to establish with certainty that we were looking at victims of Fallujah. At this point, we started seeking US military personnel who would be willing to talk. The Internet proved to be most helpful in this search.

We discovered "Private Ekkle." Ekkle—that was his nickname—had been trying to tell the real story of Iraq. He had been approached by my colleague Mario Portanuova of the weekly *Diario*, who helped me find him.

After 40 days of e-mail exchanges, I was able to convince Ekkle to reveal his true identity: Jeff Englehart, private in the 3rd Battalion of the 1st Division, stationed in Fallujah during the November 2004 bombings. He told us about the bombing of the city, using weapons containing white phosphorous, in the first days of November, immediately after Bush's reelection.

Then I started looking through the RAI archives, at the international contributions, to see what had happened during those days. Surprisingly, I discovered that the night of November 8, Reuters had broadcast some footage that showed a rain of incendiary substances falling on the city of Fallujah. The date and description of the film were consistent with the testimony of Mohammed, who had spoken about such rain, and with the testimony of Private Englehart, who had told us about phosphorous being used on the city sometime between November 7 and 10.

At this point, we decided to show the photographic and film material containing the victims of the bombing to medical and military experts, who confirmed that some of the body wounds could have been caused by phosphorous. Only after such verification we decided to broadcast what would be the biggest revelation in the history of RAI, an investigation that would rock the Pentagon.

MW: Were you personally in Fallujah for some of the filming?

SR: No. I tried for 50 days through Amman, but it turned out to be impossible. However, I did speak with people in Fallujah and with embedded journalists.

MW: The use of white phosphorous is a war crime within a larger war crime, based on the lies of the Bush administration. Is there evidence that it may have been used elsewhere?

SR: I don't have the evidence. However, I believe it happened in Nassiriya as well in 2003 when the US Marines took the city. Adam Mynott, a journalist for BBC, told us in an interview that he personally saw white phosphorous bombs hitting the civilian population. He saw 30 dead and many wounded in the hospital with their skin coming off.

MW: What were the physical and cultural consequences of the use of chemical weapons on the civilian population of Fallujah?

SR: They knew nothing about phosphorous. They only saw and told of incendiary substances falling on the city, people catching on fire or having difficulty breathing. It seems difficult now to explain to them that we went there to free them from someone who was using chemical weapons.

MW: The US denies any use of such weapons on civilians. At the most, it would cynically define such victims as collateral damage of war. Did the evidence you found present a different reality?

SR: I don't know if those bodies I showed are directly linked to the use of white phosphorous. However, I know that among them there were dead civilians, and just like the dead combatants, they displayed no apparent wounds.

Someone tried to write that they were bodies in an advanced stage of decomposition, that they had been in the sun for too long. Right, for these writers they died from a heat stroke! The truth is that these were pictures of dead people whose skin was literally detached from the body, fragmented into pieces. This is an effect that could have been caused by white phosphorous.

MW: In the documentary you correctly refer to the situation as an occupation. Why do you think it is still being described as a war, instead of what it is, precisely an occupation?

SR: I don't like to express political judgments. It's not a journalist's job. Our job is to tell the truth, to expose a fact. Let others make political judgments and assessments. Although I can't deny that our inquest exposes a political world problem.

MW: Your parallel between Vietnam and Iraq is quite correct, and it certainly goes beyond the use of similar weapons. What do you think are the differences between the two conflicts?

SR: The main difference lies in the fact that Iraq offers this immense oil reservoir. Otherwise, the geopolitical strategy is the same: America pursues the appropriation of a strategic location inside a strategic area.

MW: The interviews with the US soldiers were particularly telling. What do you think the impact of the events and the killings they carried out will be on the soldiers' lives?

SR: They seemed completely disgusted by what they had seen in Iraq.

MW: What were your findings with regard to the Iraqi people and their relation to the occupation?

SR: Outside the political establishment set up by the coalition authorities, the Western presence in Iraq is unwelcome. According to a recent poll, only 6 percent of the population still tolerates the presence of Americans in their territory.

MW: Your documentary provoked a reaction at an international level, attracting the majority of people who think this war is unjust or criminal. Were you expecting this type of attention?

SR: The audience's reaction has been incredible in some ways. In just a few days, we had 4 million visitors to the web site. Although no nationally syndicated TV network has cared to broadcast the

documentary during prime time, Italians are organising their own "prime time." There are hundreds of private viewings in associations, clubs, halls. It's been shown even on the walls of a shopping mall in Rome during shopping hours.

MW: Why do you think that in times like these filmmakers and artists in general feel compelled to tell the truth, to some extent more than the media?

SR: Because they feel they must fill the hole, the absence that common people no longer tolerate. Information is poor, not just in Italy, but all over the world.

MW: What was the response of the media to your work? The reason I ask is that I was in Italy when the documentary was shown, and I saw that, while the media presented it, it simultaneously tried to deny its veracity by means of selected interviews with US soldiers and officers.

SR: There have been newspapers that have given proper exposure to our denunciation, others that have tried to question its authenticity. Every frame of our reportage has been analysed. I think if they had done the same work of verification on the sources that "proved" Saddam Hussein's possession of WMDs at the beginning of the conflict, the history of this war would have been different.

MW: What was RAI's position in all this? Did they facilitate it, and if so, to what extent? Also, did the Berlusconi network approach you? Did you have any reaction from his ruling coalition?

SR: RAI, through Rainews 24, fulfilled its duty as a public service denouncing a real problem. I know nothing about political reactions. As I said earlier, I don't think it's a journalist's concern.

MW: You interviewed Giuliana Sgrena, the journalist who was allegedly kidnapped by Iraqis and then, when released, was nearly killed by US fire [one Italian agent was actually killed]. Your documentary clearly implies the possibility that none of that was a mistake or a coincidence: do you think there is a deliberate effort to suppress information and preclude journalists from reporting the real Iraq?

SR: I'd better clarify this point. I don't think there have been premeditated plots behind the kidnappings of journalists. I think that Fallujah has been one of the most censored battles because, on one side, the Americans didn't want to show what was really happening in that city; on the other side, we saw resistance groups that, through kidnappings, further compromised free information.

MW: What are the implications of this? How do you see bourgeois democracy reorienting itself on the question of freedom of information, freedom of press, freedom of assembly?

SR: I think there's a need for truthful information on the war as well as all other aspects of reality that are of concern in people's lives. Today, what's fashionable is reality shows, or rather unreality shows, as I like to define them—far from any reality or truth. Investigations like mine and many others are aired during the most unlikely hours, in the morning at 7:35 a.m. or around midnight! All this is no longer sustainable!



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