

44 DAYS

They never should have gotten off the road.

On April 5, James Foley and three fellow journalists were doggedly pushing toward the front lines in Libya. The coastal highway connecting the small oil town of Brega to the revolutionary stronghold of Benghazi 150 miles to the east was a battle zone: a frenzy of rebel advances against Moammar Gadhafi's forces, followed by chaotic retreats. Foley, 37, a 2008 graduate of Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, had arrived in Libya on March 15 and had been sending some of the best work of his young career to his employers at GlobalPost, an online international news agency. After just a few days on the ground, a story carrying his byline delivered a thrilling account of the action, demonstrating—in Foley's words—the “rebels' fervent desire to go to the front and to fight and to be willing to die.” A graphic video accompanying

Captured by Libyan president Moammar Gadhafi's forces, NU journalism grad James Foley spent nearly two months as a political prisoner. Here's how he made it back to the States. By **Rod O'Connor**
Photograph by **Jessica Scranton**

the dispatch showed charred bodies surrounding a truck blown to bits by Gadhafi rockets.

Foley and American freelance writer Clare Morgana Gillis, 34, Spanish photographer Manuel “Manu” Brabo, 30, and South African photojournalist Anton Hammerl, 41, had hitched a ride with some rebels and were lingering along the highway just outside Brega when word came that Gadhafi's armies were

less than a quarter-mile away and closing in fast.

“[We figured] let's get off the road, because that's the easiest target,” Foley says. “Well, that was exactly the wrong maneuver.”

Within five minutes, two pickups were rolling over the hills, full of men firing automatic and semiautomatic weapons. The rebels retreated in their vehicles immediately, leaving the reporters without an escape route. All they could do was press

their bodies to the ground. “Your mind tries to insulate you from the awful reality,” Foley says. “You think, Maybe we're in a cross pattern and somebody is shooting from the other side. We might be able to get out of this. But when Anton cried out, that was the ultimate reality check.”

Foley called to Hammerl, but the South African had already been killed by gunfire. Foley jumped up and surrendered. He was greeted with five



HOME, FREE Now living in his brother Michael's house in North Andover, Massachusetts, Foley will begin working as an editor at GlobalPost this summer.



LIFE DURING WARTIME
 Foley, pictured in Kandahar, Afghanistan, this photo, and Pech Valley, Afghanistan, right, got his big break in the war-torn country in 2010 when he submitted a story to GlobalPost about a firefight in the Kunar Province.



blows to the head and body from the butt of an AK-47. His lanky six-foot frame gave way. Along with Gillis and Brabo, he was tied up with electrical cords and shoved face first into the bed of a truck. Hammer! wasn't so lucky. His body was left in a bloody heap amid the dust.



James Foley was born in Evanston in 1973 while his father, a family practitioner, underwent his medical residency at Cook County Hospital. He spent most of his childhood in New Hampshire. After graduating from Marquette University in 1996, he spent a few years teaching teens in inner-city Phoenix and Holyoke, Massachusetts. In 2004, he came back to the Midwest to work with the Cook County Sheriff's Boot Camp, a program that provides vocational training for nonviolent offenders. In between those positions, he went to the University of Massachusetts, garnering his M.F.A.

In 2007, he enrolled in a one-year journalism program at Medill, attending classes alongside students a decade younger than his 34 years. "Journalism is one way that we can think of our writing actually being read," he says, acknowledging his fiction career was limited to a few flightless novels.

The lightbulb moment came during a "Covering Conflicts" course taken at Medill's Washington, D.C., campus that exposed him to top-tier reporters and to perspectives on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from former CIA and military personnel. This was it: He had found his calling. As a conflict reporter, he could give a voice to parts of the world where free press didn't exist. He could combine his love of writing with his desire to get his hands dirty and help people.

Another contributing factor to his decision: His younger brother John was serving in Iraq with the U.S. Air Force. "You're like, 'What's this guy going through?'" Foley says. "You really don't know. I did

some protesting against the war in Iraq, and I thought that was one way of contributing, but then your brother goes over there and you want to support him and it changes a lot of things."

Yet, he had no clue how a soon-to-be journalism-school graduate with zero experience could find his way to Iraq. It was easier than he thought. While in D.C., a *Washington Post* reporter connected Foley with Wayne Anderson, a freelancer who was embedded with the Wisconsin National Guard and selling his work to small newspapers throughout the state. Foley e-mailed Anderson and ultimately emulated his approach, bouncing around the Iraqi cities of Tikrit, Tamara and Belad for six months in 2008, first with the Indiana National Guard and then with the 101st Airborne division of the U.S. Army.

"There's the paperwork, and you have to have your equipment and you've got to be vetted. But the process of embedding with a U.S. military unit is actually quite routine," Foley says. "The hardest part is the initial leap of saying, 'I am going to do this.' It's scary."

Foley's family shared his trepidation. "I remember Jim got out of school and he called my mom and said, 'Good news! I got a lead on some discount Kevlar.' There was a lot of concern from that statement," says Michael Foley, another of the four Foley brothers. (James is the oldest, and they also have a sister, Katherine, who is a nurse in the U.S. Navy.) "But if you followed Jim and his career—tutoring people in a jail cell, tutoring [young pregnant] women—that's just who he is."

Foley arrived well after the heavy fighting had ended in Iraq, and yearned to cover active conflict. He trekked to Afghanistan in July 2009, spending the month covering the election of president Hamid Karzai. But as a freelancer at the bottom of the food chain, he had trouble selling his stories. ("I was blogging, essentially.") He returned to Afghanistan in March 2010 and got his big break in April when he caught a gnarly firefight in the

Kunar Province. He submitted a story and video package to GlobalPost, which published the piece a month later. Finally, he felt like a real journalist.



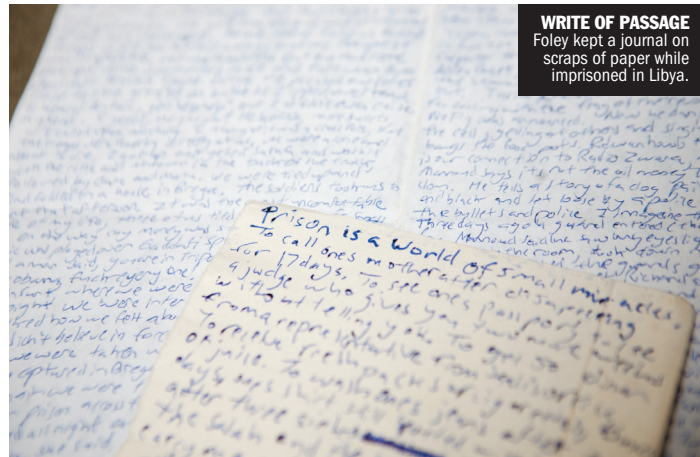
When revolutionaries started raiding Gadhafi's army bases in February, Foley knew he had to get to Libya. The reporter was quick to volunteer when GlobalPost needed boots on the ground.

On the same day Foley reached Libya, four *New York Times* correspondents were captured and held for six days: an ominous sign of events to come. Foley eventually met up with his three colleagues at Benghazi's Africa Hotel, a glorified hostel where most freelancers stayed. Their days vacillated between covering the intense fighting on the fluid front lines near Brega, and returning to Benghazi to enjoy the relative calm and interview members of the rebel transitional council. Foley knew this hot zone offered no official military protection. But it was a worthy trade-off for the freedom to report without being limited to whatever information the U.S. military was willing to share.

"You could push up with [the rebels] and a lot of them were quite open," Foley says. "We even spent the night with them. It was a very exciting reporting opportunity. But there were some close calls.

"It's not just the—oh, I missed getting hit by that much. It's also the adrenaline of telling that story," he says of the rush that draws journalists to the dangers on the front lines. "You want to have your finger on the pulse every day. But on that particular day [when we were captured], we made some critical errors."

After their capture, Foley, Gillis and Brabo were taken to a commandeered civilian house near Brega. "They made us kneel," Foley says. "Right there is the moment of truth: Does the young soldier hit you with the back of his rifle again, or does he start dressing your wounds?" The soldier wiped the smears of blood from



WRITE OF PASSAGE
Foley kept a journal on scraps of paper while imprisoned in Libya.

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Back in the United States, Foley's friends and family were in the dark until his parents received a call from Human Rights Watch in

Geneva on April 7. Foley's brother Michael, who works for the defense contractor L-3 Communications in Boston, began working his contacts and confirmed from the State Department that there was already a case open on the capture. "They reassured us there is kind of a playbook here. Typically, detainees are brought to Tripoli within 48 hours [and negotiations can begin]," Michael says.

Afterward, he learned this "playbook" was based only on a onetime event, the experiences of the *New York Times* reporters. "I called my sister Kate, and she said, 'What do you think they're going to do to him?' She just broke down. And that's when it hit me."

While Philip Balboni, the CEO of GlobalPost, did all he could to help push Foley's case with the government, the Foleys decided to patch together a grassroots organization of friends and family to fill the gaps. Michael took the lead: "It was like, you're working the U.N.; you're working the morning shows; you're working social-media presence." A hastily assembled "Free Foley" website (*FreeFoley.org*) and Facebook page (which quickly tallied more than 3,000 "likes") spread word of the capture.

On April 20, Tim Hetherington, codirector of the documentary *Restrepo*, and fellow conflict photographer Chris Hondros were killed in Misrata, bringing more attention to the plight of imprisoned reporters.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton publicly called for the release of U.S. citizens Foley and Gillis.

Foley was allowed to call home, speaking to his mother for several minutes on April 23—the day before Easter. "It was a huge prayer answered," he says. But on May 2, NATO began heavily bombing Gadhafi's compounds.

Foley's hair, and bandaged his scalp. "That was a sign they weren't going to treat us like just animals or whatever," Foley says. "Those little things are extremely important."

Foley was taken to a military base in Gadhafi's hometown of Sirte for two days, and then to a military interrogation center in Tripoli for another 12 days. At the latter, he was interrogated only once, but the six-hour session was a roller coaster of harrowing moments.

"It was good cop, bad cop. They'd joke with you to show they knew something about pop culture and then they'd scare you [by yelling]: 'Your country is bombing us and killing our children,'" he says. "At one point, they were scaring me because I said I didn't want to go on state TV. [A soldier] told me to take off my shoes, as if he was going to beat the bottoms of my feet. And I started trembling. He saw I was pretty freaked out, and he said, 'Would you write something [instead]?' I said, 'Okay,' and he immediately changed back into good cop."

After a series of kangaroo-court proceedings where they were charged with entering the country without a visa, Foley and the others were transferred to a general prison in Tripoli where they spent almost three weeks

crammed inside concrete cells alongside nine or ten Libyan political prisoners. "We didn't go hungry. We were never beaten," Foley says. His Libyan cellmates—who were roused in the middle of the night for interrogations and subject to mock executions—weren't so lucky. "[The prison officials] were just bureaucratically very weak and not really able to communicate in English.... Of course, the awful thing that happened was [Hammerl] died. And you're going through your head, in your darker moments, if I had to spend a year in this prison, I would do it, because I'm still alive."

“Does the young soldier hit you with the back of his rifle again, or does he start dressing your wounds?”

The family wrote letters to embassies around the world—to Malta, Ukraine, to Hugo Chávez in Venezuela—any country that still had a presence on the ground in Libya. The Hungarian embassy stepped up, negotiating with the Libyans. On May 7, Foley was transferred from the crowded prison to a villa in Tripoli complete with three-course meals, cable TV, and Gillis and Brabo, who had been moved to the villa a week earlier.

On May 18, the Libyan courts set the three prisoners free; on May 20, Foley crossed the border into Tunisia. To his surprise and elation, his brother Michael had flown to Africa to greet him. But this was not one of those kiss-the-ground moments. Within an hour of reaching the Radisson Blu Hotel in Djerba, Foley and Gillis fulfilled a vow they made to each other: They would immediately inform the South African embassy of what had happened to Hammerl. "We told them that he had been killed and that his body had probably been hidden because they knew he was a Western journalist," Foley says. Later that evening, he spoke by phone with Hammerl's widow, who wanted to know every excruciating detail.

In the weeks since his release, Foley has traveled the U.S. to speak at schools and other organizations, including Medill, sharing the details of his ordeal and collecting donations for an education fund he helped set up for Hammerl's three children, including a 14-week-old infant. Foley knew the man for only four days, but his death left a profound impact.

This summer, Foley will begin an editor job with GlobalPost from the safety of its Boston headquarters. But his family knows he won't stay long. And as he ponders his inevitable return overseas, Hammerl remains in his thoughts.

"This [has been] a changing event for me. And for me to go back, trying to beat people to the front line for a story like this, when somebody died and you see a family in so much anguish, is irresponsible, you know? You realize how freakin' short life is. It feels like a tremendous waste. But I do love conflict reporting, and I think it's important. And I think there are ways to do it safely. But at the same time, for me to go back out there, after what I put my family through and Anton dying—such a generous, professional man—is insane, you know?"

To make a donation to support the family of journalist Anton Hammerl, visit FreeFoley.org.