

Prisoner of War

BY JESSICA GIANNONE

How a New Haven journalist with a predilection for danger found herself on the wrong side of the shooting in the Libyan civil war

In a civilian prison somewhere in the sands of Tripoli, not far from the scenes of violent rebellion that precipitated the downfall of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi last year, a detainee found herself quite far from home in the Libyan desert. This detainee was not a “spy,” as her captors alleged, but a female freelance journalist from the Elm City.

Before her capture, journalist Clare Morgana Gillis, who routinely reported for *The Atlantic* and *USA Today*, was in the middle of covering Libyan upheaval as a freelancer, after having come over from Egypt on another freelance assignment of her own.

“It’s just instinct,” the 35-year-old Gillis explains, of her predilection for finding danger. “You either kind of have it or you don’t in terms of running into a place that everyone else is running out of.”

This month marks the first anniversary of Gillis’ mid-May release from the Tripoli prison in which she was detained by forces loyal to Gaddafi, after being captured April 5 by government forces under increasing pressure from rebel insurgents. Gillis spent a month and a half in confinement with fellow journalists who accompanied Gillis with Libyan rebels across the desert before their capture. Gillis was later transported to a women’s prison.

Gillis was in the company of American reporter James Foley of *GlobalPost* and Spanish photographer Manu Brabo of *European Pressphoto*, on their way to report from the front lines of the Libyan



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civil war before the shooting started. The group was traveling with the rebels, whom Gillis had come to know quite well in her time spent covering modern-day North African turmoil.

"Gaddafi soldiers at 300 meters," one of the rebels the trio were accompanying shouted as party drove through the deserts outside Brea. Gunfire sounded as rebel vehicles fled the area. Government soldiers jumped out of trucks on their way to capture the four civilians left behind, showing little mercy as two tried to take cover. Beneath a small cluster of trees, Gillis feigned at playing dead before a soldier forced his fist into her skull before dragging her to a vehicle with the others. The fourth civilian, South African photographer Anton Lazarus Hammer, was left for dead at the scene.

Of her capture, Gillis recalls: "It's as if you're watching it happen outside of your body. And then I had this kind of moment. It's like, 'Hey, girl — this is really happening. Like, pay attention.' But you know, there's also the sense, this is totally out of our hands right now. There's

nothing we can do and just, you know, try not to make any sudden moves. So that's what we did."

Gillis' capture precipitated an international incident after no word of her fate surfaced for more than two weeks after she was taken into custody April 5. "I became the story," recalls Gillis, "and no journalist ever wants to become the story."

At the time of her capture, Gillis says that although she didn't think she was going to die, her greatest scare came from the experience of coming under fire and realizing she was being shot at.

"Usually you're in a position a lot where there are bullets around, there's things in the air," says Gillis. "You got to watch out. But you don't know where it's going to hit, and [you hope] they're not aiming at you."

"In this case, it was like, 'No — they are aiming at us.'"



In prison, Gillis' survival strategy was to continue to remind herself that she "had

the power" in the situation during her questioning at the prison as an accused spy, mainly because she had the answers to the questions being asked of her.

Despite her fears about what might happen to her, Gillis says she thinks her detention was harder for everybody "on the outside" — her parents didn't even know if she was dead or alive for 16 days — than it was for her and fellow captives because the prisoners had one another for support.

"We could talk," she explains. "We knew that we were being treated fine. We knew that we were okay, but people on the outside just didn't know this."

Gillis and her fellow prisoners filled the long hours of emptiness with chats about "favorite books, movies, life histories." They tried to fill the time with yoga, sit-ups and reenactments of scenes from *The Big Lebowski*.

When Gillis was interrogated and accused of being a spy against the beleaguered

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Gaddafi government, "I thought well, it's like, 'Okay — it took them long enough to get around to this.' [The accusation] was on the table, and when they started talking about it really seriously, I was like, 'Okay, this is all bull****. Like, I'm not a spy. Google me. You'll see I wrote articles.'"

In response, her interrogators "just seemed to have very little familiarity with the concept of Google or what one might use it for which made me lose a certain amount of faith in their entire investigative technique," she says.

"In prison, one thing you realize really, really fast is all you have is your own mind," Gillis explains. "Like, you can't control your external circumstances. So you have to keep your mind strong because if your mind goes, you don't come back from that."

Gillis was finally released on May 19, after a hearing before a Libyan judge. After that she was transported to the Tunisian border and released.

In light of her experience, Gillis explains it shows no good to dwell on "things that can't be changed." She says after an experience like that, all she could ask for is to gain some wisdom and approach future jobs with the notion lessons can be learned.

"[Danger] was on our radar," Gillis explains, "We just didn't think it was going to happen that day, or to us, or generally. But that's, you know, your first mistake...It's a dangerous job. I didn't realize the extent to which that was the case before it happened."

She attributes her attraction to covering foreign wars and revolutions to having "just a curiosity and an occasional lack of common sense."

She adds that her experience serves as a reminder to put her safety first in future adventures, and "hopefully not misadventures."

"This has become the normal, where she is in a country where there are problems," Gillis' mother Jane explains, "and she's going to do what she wants to do, and we support her."

Gillis says she plans to continue to be based in Libya, though not reporting from there exclusively.

"I've devoted a lot of time to Libya, and I think it's been pretty productive."

Gillis reiterates it is she who chooses to go to these faraway places and cover these stories, which are history in the making.

"I, for whatever reason, like doing [reporting] in dangerous places, kind of sketchy places," she says. "What is adrenaline producing about interviewing people in these situations is you just get straight to the hopes and dreams. Like, they have the sense they could die today, you know? Or they're dealing with what it is to look at another human being and try to kill him. And that's profound power and emotion."

Gillis adds, "It's really close to the surface and that's the adrenaline rush...to tap into that just by being on the scene."

"That's why I freelance," she says. "I don't want anyone telling me what to do or when I should come or when I should go. Because every story has its own rhythm, and you have to spend time to discover it." ❖

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