

Farrell's reply to CPJ
February 5, 2010

On the last night of our captivity Sultan Munadi and I heard the sound of NATO helicopters above the house where the Taliban were holding us, followed by gunshots and explosions. The Taliban fled the house.

Once they left we escaped through the gate of the courtyard. We ran along a high wall of the courtyard surrounding the house, beside a ditch.

When Sultan reached the corner of the wall he continued beyond it into an open clearing. Someone shot him as soon as he emerged from behind the wall. He barely had time to say "journaliste, journaliste" in accented English before shots were fired, and he fell to the ground.

I did not see the shooter or shooters. I did not follow him into the clearing, which would have been suicide. Instead I dived into a ditch.

Several minutes later I heard British voices above me, right next to where Sultan had just been shot. I shouted that I was a British hostage. I followed the British soldiers' instructions and emerged from the ditch.

I gave the soldiers my name and newspaper, and the very next thing I did was twist around and point to where Sultan was lying and said that I thought he had been shot. He was in plain sight even to me—and unlike the soldiers I had no night vision goggles. The soldiers told me that they had Sultan's photograph, so they were obviously aware that he was with me, and were able to check if it was him. Then they rushed me away.

Yes, I told them I thought Sultan had been shot. I told them that because I wanted them to go and help him. How could I possibly have known that he was dead? The soldiers were nearer to him than I was, and they got into the clearing where he was lying before I got there.

Before I emerged from the ditch Sultan was lying just a few yards away from them, wearing very light-coloured clothes. He was in the same open clearing that they were in. And when I emerged from the ditch I could see him, very easily even at night.

The British soldiers saw me come out of that ditch. They told me when and how to come out of the ditch, and were watching every move I made when I did so. They ordered me to lie down on the ground immediately, one of them jumped on top of me, and then they rushed me away. So those soldiers must know that after I emerged from that ditch I could not possibly have checked Sultan's medical condition. Has anyone spoken to them?

As they took me away, from the second I came out of the ditch I was constantly, repeatedly, asking the soldiers if they had any news about Sultan, I was asking them if

they knew what had happened to him, I was asking them was he dead or alive, and was he being brought out with me on the helicopters. I got no solid answers.

After the helicopter landed in Mazar I was repeatedly asking British diplomats exactly the same questions. Indeed it was the first question I asked when I got off the helicopter, and it was the first thing a British official discussed with me on the tarmac.

Those are not the questions of someone who knows that his colleague is dead, although I certainly feared it. My *NYT* story mentioning his death was written many hours later, with the benefit of later knowledge, when other people had already confirmed Sultan's death to me.

Could I have checked Sultan's condition before emerging from the ditch?

Is anyone seriously suggesting that having watched Sultan being shot on sight that I followed him into the line of fire and then took his pulse or perhaps held a mirror to his mouth to check for breath? In the middle of a battle? Unarmed? That did not happen. It would have been impossible, and suicidal. It is too ridiculous for words.

I deeply, deeply regret that the events of that night are still having to be raked over to ascertain the truth. I know it is deeply painful for Sultan's family not to have closure on who shot him, and why.

I am all too aware that not only did Sultan die that night, but also one of my rescuers, Corporal John Harrison. He should not be forgotten in this. He died trying to save our lives, and succeeded in saving mine. I saw him being carried on a stretcher to the helicopters which flew me to safety. I will always be grateful to Corporal Harrison and his colleagues for rescuing me. Five months later, not a day goes by when I don't think about him, and Sultan, and the other Afghans killed. Not least the scores who died in the NATO bombing raid which brought us to Kunduz in the first place.

It is wrenching that those deaths led to more deaths. It is even more wrenching that the exact circumstances of Sultan's death should continue to be shrouded in claim and counter claim, providing a chance for the Taliban and other propagandists to fill the vacuum with conspiracy theories, lies and rumours.

I have provided all the answers I can, and I hope that others who are in a better position to fill in the gaps will do so, to give Sultan's family, other Afghan journalists and all his colleagues and friends the answers they are still looking for.

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The New York Times