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# Insight

Makhudu Sefara

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Photojournalist Anton Hammerl captured this moment of a prayer accompanying a rocket on April 3 2011 in Benghazi during the Libyan civil war. Inset, a snapshot of Hammerl and his wife, Penny Sukhraj-Hammerl.

I let him go to cover a war, writes **Penny Sukhraj-Hammerl**, and now I need to find out why my husband never returned — and who was responsible for his death

## Ten years in a dark hell of unanswered questions

I met my husband, Anton Hammerl, in the most unpleasant of situations on April 14 2000.

As a journalist for Sunday World, I was fixed on closing in on a grim story I'd been working for just a little over a month — tracking a fast-growing trend of child prostitution in Diepsloot, north of Johannesburg.

Community nurses who I befriended at a local clinic revealed that mainly white men from Sandton were paying for sex with underage girls.

For weeks I'd scouted the scene in the evenings. I watched white men cruise a secondary route between Muldersdrift and Diepsloot in posh cars. The road was lined by slight and clearly underage girls, some still in black school pinafores. Almost all carried Hello Kitty or Disney princess-themed shoulder bags.

The ask of Anton was awkward. We needed him to pose as a client to entrap the worst case I'd found: a 40-year-old sex worker selling her daughter for R200. It was going to be the story that would force the local authorities to take action.

Walter Dhladhla, then pictures editor of Sunday World, talked Anton into taking the freelance job since we had no white male photographers on staff.

When I briefed Anton, he seemed up for it, if a little nervous. But there was no questioning his commitment. He was willing to put himself on the line because he knew this was quite likely the only way to tell the story.

In the end we not only got the story but uncovered the shoddy response of local authorities to the continuing abuse.

April 14 was my birthday; I was chuffed because the story was the front-page splash. I was grateful to Anton

and said as much professionally. Later the success of the story landed me a role at the Sunday Times.

It wasn't until December 2000 that Anton and I hooked up, at a chance meeting in Melville. Still feeling somewhat new and nerdy to the Joburg scene, I went with a colleague to a photographers' rooftop gathering. It was a neat little affair, comprising a motley crew of talented photographers. Over cheese and wine, the photojournalists talked through slideshows of their most recent foreign assignments.

The party moved to Ratz Bar across the road, where conversation drifted from the continuing conflicts in Kosovo and Afghanistan to the challenges of covering the young democracy that was SA. The journalists were clearly irritated with the public's obsession with celebrity culture.

This second meeting was the unexpected beginning of our romance; it was his birthday too.

I was privileged to know Anton as my husband, and loving father of his children. For nearly eight years of marriage, I had at my side an open and honest human being who was totally committed to his children, and genuinely cared for others. He was a gentleman and, when he wanted to be, also a cheeky devil.

By 2006 I'd moved to The Star. I'll never forget Valentine's Day that year. On our way to work, Anton bought three dozen or so roses from a street vendor outside the ANC's Luthuli House headquarters in Pixley Ka Isaka Seme Street, Johannesburg.

When we got to work, he began handing out the flowers to the women who worked at the newspaper

house, focusing on the lovely ladies whose jobs were not desk-bound, many whom he referred to as "Mama" or "Ma". With a loud and infectious "Happy Valentine's Day!" and a hug in some cases, he presented lush red roses to cleaners, security guards and cooks in the canteen. Oh, what a joy to see them, laughing, some shyly, but every one so deeply affected and delighted that this handsome somebody who dashed in and out of the building with bulging bags full of camera kit going about his news business thought of them as special.

When I got to my desk, there were a dozen delicate blooms already waiting. There was no mystery about whom they had come from.

Life in Johannesburg could be a grind, so we made it a priority to get out of the city at least once a month. It didn't matter where, we just needed to get out to take in the stunning countryside, away from fumes and deadlines.

We had a mutual love of fishing, sea or river. It meant our monthly trips would almost always gravitate to a place where we could do a spot of fishing. Painfully beautiful memories hit me now like they haven't in a while, of sitting in the late-afternoon sun, casting colourful fly-clad rods in a dance with river trout, while enjoying a sip of favourite wine or whiskey. We talked and reminisced about our lives, loves, family, God, politics, nature. We dreamt and had visions for each other, and for our children.

When it came to his children, his affection was deep for each one. Aurora would always be his princess for her loveliness. Neo, he called his "champ" for his sporting and academic prowess, which baffled Anton —

he battled terrible insecurities based on school records alone, unbelievably unaware of his own fierce intellect. Hiro, the last-born, he adored.

In the weeks before Hiro's arrival, Anton meticulously cleaned every inch of our modest two-bed maisonette flat in Surbiton, London. He worried about his own eczema flare-ups, and that these could be a problem too for the new sprog. He lovingly hand-washed every single item of the newborn's clothing with detergent for sensitive skins.

When Hiro arrived, Anton got stuck in effortlessly, waking up and taking turns with night feeding so I could have as much rest as possible.

In the middle of that domestic bliss, I released him to go to Libya, knowing it would be tricky for him to follow the story once I returned to work after my maternity leave.

We both believed in the importance of telling the stories that mattered. I believed in Anton's desire to pursue that. From covering street crime in Johannesburg and township violence in Thokoza, to taking pictures of the pitiful child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Anton was driven by a deep desire to document, and to use his camera to reveal the truth of what he saw, in the hope that the impact would evoke some kind of change.

That was still the case when he went to Libya in 2011, aiming to document history unfolding. After just a couple of days, the images that he filed captured the deadly energy of the constantly moving frontline, and depicted the fragility of a civilian-turned-militia rebel crew who were determined to prise control from the grip of a dictator.

But he also stumbled upon a group of Bangladeshi hospital cleaners. Anton wanted to know why the Bangladeshi hospital cleaners had not yet fled →

### No closure for family

Ten years after photojournalist Anton Hammerl went missing in Libya, his family want answers.

Hammerl, who was living in London with his family at the time, travelled to the war-torn country in 2011 to cover the Arab Spring.

His wife, Penny, had given birth to their son, Hiro, seven weeks before his departure.

Hammerl, 41, was shot by pro-Gaddafi forces after being targeted as part of a small group of journalists, including the US reporter James Foley, who was himself subsequently kidnapped and murdered by Islamic State in Syria.

Hammerl was left for dead in the desert after Foley and fellow journalists Clare Gillis and Manu Brabo were captured, and his body has never been recovered.

The case was briefly investigated as a war crime by the International Criminal Court, but it was dropped after the death of Muammar Gaddafi and the fall of his regime.

After years of chaos and conflict in Libya, the family hope the new interim government will be able to help them find his body.

"On the face of it we believe there is reasonable evidence to believe that Anton's death was a war crime," said Caoilfhionn Gallagher QC, who is representing the family.

Research into Hammerl's death that Foley had been working on at the time of his own murder had been supplied to the campaign.

"This wasn't journalists just caught in a crossfire. They were identifiable as civilians and journalists when they were targeted and Anton was killed during an enforced abduction."

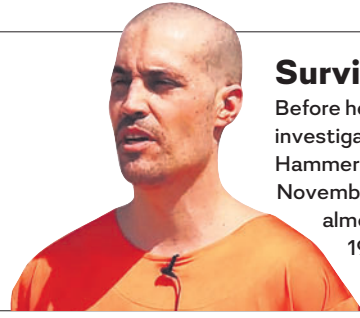
Hammerl had been covering the conflict between pro-regime and anti-Gaddafi forces when the group he was with came under fire from Libyan soldiers in a remote desert location near Brega on April 5 2011.

Initially the family were led to believe by Libyan officials that all four journalists had been captured, and it was only six and a half weeks later, when the survivors were released, that it was revealed Hammerl had been killed and his body left in the desert.

Since his death there has been sporadic and vague information about the location of his body, with a suggestion in 2012 that a body matching his description had been found in a mass grave of 170 people and DNA samples had been taken but never delivered for processing.

Now the family hope they will finally get the answers they so desperately seek.



**Survived Libya, beheaded in Syria**

Before he was executed in Syria, photojournalist James Foley was investigating Anton Hamerl's death. He had been captured with Hamerl but was released after a few weeks. Little over a year later, in November 2012, Foley was abducted by Islamic militants in Syria. After almost two years of abuse and torture, he was beheaded on August 19 2014 in a barbaric execution recorded by his captors. Two of his alleged killers are in the US awaiting trial.



Above: photographer Thys Dullaart took this picture of Anton Hamerl in the Greenwich foot tunnel under the Thames in London in 2009. Inset right, Hamerl with his last-born child, Hiro, in London in February 2011. Hamerl left for Libya a few weeks later, on March 28.

**Timeline**

- On March 28 2011 Anton Hamerl travelled to Libya to cover the uprising against the Muammar Gaddafi regime.
- On Monday April 4 2011, Hamerl skyped with his family, telling them he would drive with a group of journalists to a location some distance from Benghazi to report on the conflict.
- They did not hear from him again and on April 7 2011 the family learnt from Human Rights Watch in Geneva that Hamerl was believed to have been captured by Gaddafi loyalists, along with three other journalists – American journalists Clare Gillis and James Foley, and Spanish photojournalist Manu Brabo.
- The family mounted a campaign for Hamerl's release – all the while believing he was being detained by the Libyan government.
- 44 days later they learnt that on April 5 2011, Hamerl had died in the desert, just outside of Brega, an oil town in eastern Libya.

# 'Someone needs to answer for his death'

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Libya, by then gripped by civil war.

For sure, the likely truth of their story would centre on the hardship of the villages they came from, where desperate families depended on the cash they would send back from work they were doing at great personal risk.

Anton didn't get the chance to tell their story. He did not return from Libya. He was gunned down on April 5 as he and three others – James Foley, Clare Gillis and Manu Brabo – came under fire from forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi.

There was no question that Anton was clearly identifiable as a member of the press, holding no firearm, with only a camera strapped around his neck. What happened amounted to a war crime and an investigation should have been launched.

His killing was unlawful and there is much to suggest Anton was a victim of enforced disappearance.

Anton died on April 5, but for 44 horrific days, we were led to believe he was missing and detained with the three other journalists.

From the moment we were told that he was missing, our lives turned into a living nightmare. We had none of the support that a family in our situation ought to have expected. Instead we were drawn into a ring of falsehoods, perpetuated by

powers we knew we could not trust.

Everything felt dark. I struggled at times to see a way forward. I felt like I was drowning.

Still, we put on the bravest of faces, and reached out boldly to every government that had any presence at all in Libya in those terrible days. It was all done in a desperate effort to find out what had happened to Anton.

With every one of the 44 days that passed, we fought our deepest fears. With every call that Foley, Gillis and Brabo made to their loved ones, the deeper we sank into a continuing dark hell of questions without answers until we began to question ourselves too.

Were we fooling ourselves? Were we being stupid to believe the countries that told us he was alive and well? Was it naive to trust the officials who said he would call us? Were we being unnecessarily difficult in pleading for a proof-of-life call? Should we have just trusted the governments involved when they said he would be released?

Maybe, just maybe, we were incompetent and altogether blind? Where are you, Anton? Where are you? Where are you?

It was the journalist community on the ground that mobilised to provide us with a regular chain of information. They were our lifeline. There was a heavy reliance on journalists in the period following Foley, Gillis and Brabo's release to get information as

**#JusticeforAnton**

The first legal step of the #JusticeforAnton campaign was pro bono, but the organisers will have to pay to take the fight to the next level, including legal advocacy. There's a campaign through CrowdJustice to raise £10,000 (R200,000). If the amount isn't reached by April 30 all the funds are lost.

To contribute, go to [www.crowdjustice.com/case/justice-for-anton-hamerl/](http://www.crowdjustice.com/case/justice-for-anton-hamerl/)  
For more information, go to [www.justiceforanton.com](http://www.justiceforanton.com)

to what was actually happening. This is information that you expect to be provided by the local authorities or governments.

Yet often it is also down to journalists to investigate these matters at great personal risk.

Foley was a great support to us following Anton's death. He and Gillis were among the journalists who returned to Libya to help us find Anton's remains.

They should not have needed to do this. The various states involved in Anton's case are signatories to global humanitarian rules that place

responsibilities on them to hold inquiries in circumstances such as ours. This means they are obligated to investigate when a person has been killed or disappeared in the context of war.

We have never had any proper investigation. No government has seen fit to help and aid our search, a search which, frankly, cannot be done by a family so far removed from the scene, and without the resources and specialist skills needed to begin an investigation.

The states involved – Libya, SA and Austria, on account of Anton's dual South African-Austrian citizenship – have always had access to these legal mechanisms and resources.

Instead, for 10 years, there has been a "collective shrug", according to Caoilfhionn Gallagher QC, the Doughty Street Chambers barrister helping with the latest legal effort. "An apathy on a grand scale," Gallagher told *The Washington Post*.

There is no denying that we have been let down. We are not the first family this has happened to. I fear we will not be the last. However, I hope that our effort in trying to find the truth of what happened to Anton sets a precedent that prevents others suffering as we did. Someone needs to answer for his death and what happened to him after he was killed. No-one should be deprived of the truth.

My hope and wish is that through the campaign for Justice for Anton, we will ensure that these cases are

taken seriously and properly investigated.

I don't want to think of Anton hurting, Anton alone, Anton feeling scared and vulnerable, crying out for help, until he could cry no more. I'd rather cherish my personal memories through the pain that never ends.

I'd rather also appreciate the remarkable man I loved and knew as a colleague too. This recollection from a journalist, Ryan Calder, who was with Anton in his last days in Libya, is now etched in my mind as I too seek to bring him back home:

"After our failed attempt to speak with the two Bangladeshi janitors, Anton and I climbed back in the car. On the way back to Benghazi, I got to know him a little. He was square-jawed and handsome, with thin-rimmed glasses, upturned collar, mad-scientist hair dropping down to a widow's peak, and a soul patch that made him look bohemian and raffishly intellectual – all in all, a little more elegant than the rest of us bumming around Libya, and effortlessly so. It didn't take more than a minute to tell that Anton was worldly and very sharp, but also kind-hearted and self-effacing.

"He recounted, in his charming SA accent, his photo projects in various corners of the world. And he spoke warmly of his family back in London – of his wife and children, including one who was seven weeks old when he left for Libya."

Anton, here's to you. I think of you every day. We will find you.