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**HEADLINE:** Scientist whose first loyalty was to seeking truth

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**BODY:**

I first met David Kelly six years ago in between his frequent trips to Iraq as a United Nations weapons inspector. He could look stern when he shook your hand and looked at you like a research scientist studying a furry laboratory animal. But there was a warmth in his smile and his personality that was immediately engaging.

He said to me. "So, what do you want to know about? Botulinum toxin? Anthrax? VX? Sarin?" There was a twinkle in his eye and gentle mirth in his voice, and I was captivated straight away by his enthusiasm.

He was an academic who boasted he had escaped the dreary confines of academia by the skin of his teeth. From a research post at Oxford University he joined Porton Down, Britain's bio-weapons defence establishment, where he became head of microbiology. The Gulf war in 1991 was to change everything.

"When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, little did I realise that Saddam Hussein would dictate the next 10 years of my life," he said. From 1991 until 1998 he made 37 trips to Iraq, many as Britain's chief weapons inspector with the UN.

He was as delightful in conversation as he was determined in his work. His favourite stories were told to me in the bar of the Waggon & Horses pub opposite his home in Southmoor near Oxford. He had a good line in anecdotes about Saddam's top scientists, many of whom studied in Britain.

"They are disarmingly polite," he used to tell me. "They love England and talk about their alma maters in a way that makes you forget they were designing weapons to wipe out thousands of people."

Kelly would interview them over and over again, carefully transcribing their answers and going back forensically over the same ground to check for consistency.

His favourite foe was Dr Rihab Taha, the head of Saddam's bio-weapons programme.

It was Kelly who dubbed her "Dr Germ".

Her response to Kelly's questions was to launch into an angry shouting match or to burst into tears. Other UN inspectors were disarmed by this reaction and found her impossible to deal with. Kelly, with the patience of a research scientist involved in a long experiment, would wait for the tantrum to subside then resume questioning.

He admitted to me he had fallen in love with Iraq. For all the heat, grime and discomfort of his trips, there was something about the landscape and culture that drew him back. His biggest fear when the row broke over the BBC report was that he would not be allowed to resume his work in Iraq. "I just hope they don't ground me indefinitely," he said.

Kelly spoke to lots of reporters. Judith Miller of The New York Times relied on him hugely for the book *Germ* she co-authored about bioweapons. Tom Mangold, the former BBC correspondent, found him a mine of information on Saddam's arsenal.

For a civil servant he was remarkably open, though he always resisted publicity.

To interview him on the record, he would request that you ask the Foreign Office press office, which invariably declined. But once in a while he didn't mind being quoted if you told him you needed a named source for the story. "Just don't get me into trouble," he would say.

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He told me just before he died that he had been speaking to the press for 10 years and had never had a bad experience. "If someone abuses your trust you just don't deal with them again," he said. His bosses at the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office were used to his unorthodox ways, he assured me.

He believed he was performing a service by conveying complex scientific subjects in simple, comprehensible language. He used to paraphrase Einstein (at least that's what he told me) who said: "Any scientist who can't explain the most complicated theory to an eight-year-old child is a charlatan."

But his openness was also his vulnerability. It would have been easy to twist his words. He was not a government employee, a "Whitehall official" or a member of the intelligence services, though he did work closely with them. He was a scientist, whose loyalty was to what he believed was right or wrong, true or false.

He teased me, saying I had wasted my doctorate in engineering by becoming a journalist. "You could switch careers and be a UN inspector," he told me. "It is not too late. Make up for all those years you squandered."

He chided me once or twice for writing in journalese when he said I should be using simple, elegant language. "Don't go over to the dark side," he warned.

I visited him most often in the summer, when his garden was in bloom. I would find him in his study, poring over some new document, passed to him by MI6 ("the boys at Vauxhall Cross," as he referred to them), which he would teasingly refuse to show me. Or else he would be in his garden trimming the edge of his lawn, occasionally mopping his forehead and wiping his spectacles.

Janice, his wife, would bring tea or lemonade. His daughters (he had three:

Sian and twins Rachel and Ellen) would arrive or leave with boyfriends or girlfriends. It was a happy household; I believe it gave him strong roots to do brave and sometimes dangerous things in Iraq.

In recent weeks he underwent a change and it took a while for me to work out why.

Last month I phoned him in Qatar at the central command for coalition forces in Iraq, where he was preparing to enter Iraq for the first time since 1998. Instead of sounding excited he was anxious. He flew to Baghdad and spent some time working with the Iraq Survey Group, a team of more than 1,000 scientists, including 100 or so Britons scouring for weapons of mass destruction.

I called him again when he returned to find out about his mission. He was uncharacteristically taciturn. "I need to keep my name out of the papers at the moment," he said. It was not hard to put two and two together. But when I asked him, point blank, he denied having spoken to Andrew Gilligan.

He avoided my invitation to lunch, which he normally would have accepted with gusto. When Janice told me he had postponed his return to Iraq scheduled for early July I drove down to his house and found him in his garden.

He had just been told by the MoD press office not to talk, but he spoke to me anyway and told me he had been through the wringer. He looked gaunt and his eyes had lost their sparkle. It was the last time I saw him alive.

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