





The untold story behind Syria's White Helmets

A tale of love, war and Russian disinformation.

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APRIL 19, 2023 | 6:53 PM CET



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AMSTERDAM — I first met James Le Mesurier in Istanbul. He greeted me at his office, a three-story building in the trendy district of Beyoğlu, along the shores of the Bosphorus Strait. I had traveled to Turkey to meet him, a renowned humanitarian and one of the founders of the White Helmets rescue group in Syria. James had the dignified bearing of a former soldier in the British military, but I sensed a fragility. For years, he had been the target of disinformation from the Russian government, which accused him of being a pawn of Western intelligence, and of financial impropriety. The assaults on his character were taking a toll.

Soon after meeting James in the summer of 2019, I developed a feeling of urgency I found inexplicable at the time. One day, I climbed the stairs from his office to his living quarters on the third floor, where James sat hunched over a wooden dining table, working. A framed motto, in capital letters, hung over dishes in a kitchen cupboard, “OH DARLING, LET’S BE ADVENTURERS.” Books on systems and social change, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, filled a shelf behind him.

“I am sorry for interrupting,” I said, as he looked up from his work. “You need to start writing down the story of your life. You should tell your story and explain how you founded the White Helmets. I would love to help you write it, but if I don’t, you need to do it yourself, and start writing right away.” He was intrigued but preoccupied. There was a heaviness in his demeanor. He said we would talk further, and we did later during my visit. The last time we spoke, the prospect of writing his memoirs seemed to excite him.

James never got a chance to tell his story. Within four months, he was dead. He had fallen from the third-floor ledge of his apartment in the middle of the night.

Since James’ death, others have been trying to tell his story for him. As the war in Syria grinds on, his legacy — and the reputation of the White Helmets — has been subject to an information tug-of-war, with those who were close to James defending him from attacks by the Kremlin and the Syrian government.

I was an active participant in that conflict, and one of its minor casualties. The time I spent with James, and with the telling of his story, has left me wrestling with a series of questions, about him and the organization he headed, and about the role Russian disinformation played in their undoing.

The day I arrived in Istanbul, James took me on a tour of Karaköy, the harborside neighborhood where he and his team worked. James told me about his birth in Singapore, his time in the British military and his experiences monitoring Palestinian prisoners in Jericho as part of the Ramallah Agreement.

As we arrived at a concrete esplanade running along the Bosphorus, I felt a sharp pain in my foot. I took off my black flat, to see blood streaming from where a piece of glass had become lodged in my shoe, slicing through the skin. James, who had walked ahead of me, raced back. “You have only been in Istanbul an hour, and you have already gotten hurt,” he said, kneeling to examine my injury.

I had been talking with James and his wife Emma Winberg about the White Helmets for more than a year. James helped found the organization and its primary backer, Mayday Rescue. He trained Syrians in emergency response so they could rescue their neighbors in the wake of attacks by the Russian and Syrian governments, and he helped grow the White Helmets into a 4,000-person force. In 2016, Queen Elizabeth II awarded James an OBE for his service to the White Helmets and “the protection of civilians in Syria.” James’ teams of humanitarians say they have saved more than 100,000 lives.



When I first spoke with James in 2018, I had recently returned to the United States, deeply disillusioned after years of reporting in China. It seemed that everywhere, the bad guys were winning. I reached out to humanitarian organizations, including the International Red Cross and Mayday Rescue, and volunteered my assistance. Mayday seemed like a perfect fit. As a reporter, one of my interests was human rights. James had succeeded in rearchitecting the world according to values I believed in — empowering the underdog. I wanted to know how he did it, and why.

James and Emma offered to speak with me over Skype, and when I asked what the biggest challenge was in his humanitarian efforts, James had a surprising response. “The Russian government is targeting me personally and my organization with online disinformation. I need help.” The Kremlin’s propaganda machine had been attacking them since 2015,

claiming, among other charges, that James' group was a propaganda front for Western governments, or that the White Helmets had ties to al-Qaeda.

Mayday Rescue provided training, funding and equipment for the White Helmets and was the recipient of substantial international support — more than €120 million in government donations from countries including Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France and Canada. In addition to carrying out rescues, the White Helmets filmed many of their operations, recording evidence of potential war crimes by Russian and Syrian government forces. The online smears were an attempt to delegitimize the group and create a pretext for targeting it with missile strikes.

To me, they also showed James was making an impact. We spoke about my taking on a communications role with his foundation, and I traveled to Turkey to meet him — only to discover that his organization was falling apart.

After I hurt my foot, James took me back to the office, a beige stucco building, on a narrow stone alley, across from a mosque. Green ivy vines climbed its facade, framing the windows, balcony, and a heavy, black steel door. Stretched across the wall was a painted motto in black, capitalized letters: "WHAT WILL SAVE MORE LIVES?" James instructed his staff to use this question as their compass, in decisions small and large.

The White Helmets worked out of the first floor of the building, and a metal spiral staircase led to the second, where Mayday's staff, desks and computers filled the room. Mannequins clothed in protective suits and helmets stood in one corner, alongside rescue equipment and an orange stretcher. Advertorial posters featuring the White Helmets' work lined the walls. "Killing is the easiest thing," read one, "Saving lives is much harder."

There was a palpable tension in the office that surprised me. James got into a shouting match with a public relations manager for the White Helmets over who founded the rescue group. Other employees streamed in and out. One stood apart from the mostly Syrian staff: a European man with gray, curly hair. Mayday employees told me he was the CFO; his name was Johan Eleveld, and he was from the Netherlands. Johan's blue eyes surveyed the room with intensity. The White Helmets were in the process of formally separating their operations from Mayday and physically moving their offices across the city, to a location near Istanbul's airport.

James explained that the White Helmets had grown up as an organization and no longer needed his foundation's support. But one of Mayday's employees suggested another

explanation, telling me the Syria Campaign, a nonprofit advocating for human rights, had spread false rumors about Emma and James among the White Helmets, poisoning their partnership with Mayday. “People are jealous,” she said. (After publication, the Syria Campaign reached out to deny this). Meanwhile, Russia continued to pressure James, attacking him and his organization through state media, tweets, blogs and podcasts.

Observing James amid this tumult, I grew increasingly concerned. I could not pinpoint the source of my apprehension, but my sense of urgency grew that James needed to find a way to tell his story and write his memoirs.



That weekend James and Emma invited me and a college intern from Harvard to spend a night at their weekend home on Büyükada, the largest of the Princes' Islands in the Sea of Marmara. The intern and I took an hour-long ferry and began the walk to the address Emma had provided, past horse-drawn carriages the islanders used for transport. In the late 19th century, Büyükada became a summer destination for the elite of the Ot

empire. Pine trees partially concealed mansions and landscaped gardens along its shore. James' white, wooden house peered over an ivy-covered white wrought-iron gate, down the road from the former home of Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary.

A long dining area stretched past framed maps and a sitting room with a mishmash of textile pillows and chests, to the patio, where couches and cushions overlooked a tiered garden below leading to a private dock and the ocean. The sun was beginning to set behind the treetops and a neighboring island, and James and Emma treated us to cocktails.

They said they were planning to start a new organization, called the Resilience Collective, which would replicate the White Helmets' model of grassroots emergency response in other parts of the world. A key aspect that would differentiate it from the White Helmets is that it would not rely on government donations.

"Humanitarians should get paid as much as Google executives and bankers at Goldman Sachs," Emma said. "We need more people who would go to work on Wall Street to become humanitarians instead, so we should pay them highly. We would like to pay our staff a lot of money, as much as they are worth, and we can't depend on government donors. They would never allow that." James and Emma's work with the White Helmets was a world away from that of my friends in finance in New York, and I was puzzled over what intersecting values she believed could bridge the two.

Dusk gave way to night, and James regaled us with stories of his work, including how he had hand-delivered unexploded chemical weapons ordnance in the trunk of a rental car to British inspectors at a Turkish airport. The inspectors arrived on a plane, in protective gear, and James, in jeans and a button-down shirt, went inside the airport and ordered a cocktail, while they retrieved the munition.

When Emma was inside preparing dinner, he said, "If you come to work for me, I would like to send you to Iran." I demurred, explaining that I knew journalists who had been arrested in Iran, and it wasn't a place I was interested in traveling to. James didn't elaborate, and I wondered if he was speaking from fantasy, or if he had work planned there.

The intern and I slept on the bottom floor of the house that night, which looked out onto another outdoor sitting area with white couches and cushions and palm trees. James and Emma took us out on their boat the next day, and we sped along the water, past Büyükada's beaches and Istanbul's skyscrapers on the horizon.



On my last day in Istanbul, James and I met at a cafe near his office. “I came to say goodbye,” he said. He wore a pale-yellow linen suit. As we ordered coffee, he pulled a pair of spectacles from his pocket and seemed embarrassed, “I have to wear glasses now to read.”

“Thank you for your kind and gentle way of talking with my staff,” he said. “I want to hear your ideas for telling my story.”

I spent the next few months back home in Washington D.C., preparing — among other things — for a formal job interview with James and expecting to continue our conversation

about the writing of his memoir. At 6:40 a.m. on November 11, I was awakened by a text, “James has been reported dead at the office/apartment in Istanbul.”

“Apparently pro-Assad trolls are posting pics of his body on Twitter,” the texts continued from one of James’ colleagues. “You can’t ‘fall’ from those windows.”

I looked online. Russian state media had uploaded videos of James lying in the alley outside of his office to YouTube. It was still dark when they were filmed, and dawn had not broken yet in Istanbul. James’ shirt had risen, exposing his stomach, and one of his arms was stretched out, away from his torso. A yellow Labrador dog I recognized from my visit to Beyoğlu was sleeping in the video foreground, unaware of the tragedy behind him.

I was shocked and upset and reached out to Emma and James’ staff to express my condolences. Turkish police barred Emma from leaving the country and placed her under house arrest for several weeks while they investigated his death. They determined that James died of “general body trauma linked to a fall from height,” that there were no signs of foul play, and that James had committed suicide, jumping from the ledge of his third-story apartment.

I searched for reasons why James would have taken his life. Was it the ongoing assaults on his reputation? Three days before his death, Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs tweeted, “The White Helmets’ co-founder, James Le Mesurier, is a former agent of Britain’s MI6, who has been spotted all around the world, including in the #Balkans and the #MiddleEast.” The tweet went on to accuse James of ties to terrorist organizations.



Pressure was also building on James from other quarters. Reports later emerged in Dutch media that Johan Eleveld, Mayday Rescue's CFO, had accused him of financial misconduct, and auditors had visited James just days before his death, inquiring about his personal finances. (Eleveld did not respond to a request for comment.)

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad had his own theory, which he explained in an interview with Russian state television, three days after James died. "It is quite possible that Turkish intelligence agencies did the job upon the instructions of foreign intelligence services," Assad said. "Possibly, the founder of the White Helmets had been working on his memoirs and on the biography of his life, and this was unacceptable."

Contacted through its foreign ministry and its embassy in the Netherlands, the Russian government did not respond to a request for comment.

By February 2020, Emma had moved from Istanbul to Amsterdam, where Mayday Rescue was headquartered and James and Emma had a house. We spoke over the phone, and Emma described James' "clear burning sense of right" and how Russia's campaign of online disinformation actually "broke his confidence." She had signed on with a literary agent, and film production companies were reaching out. Emma said she was interested in me continuing the work I had discussed with her late husband and helping her tell his life story.

In July 2020, the Volkskrant, the Netherlands' main newspaper, reported a Dutch auditor had discovered forged receipts at Mayday for an amount of \$50,000. The story also detailed tensions with government donors over salary requests by James, Emma and another Mayday administrator. It included the auditor's concerns about a potential conflict of interest because James' wife was also working at Mayday.

Emma told me the CFO was the main source for the report, that he was lying, and that there was no fraud. After James' death, Grant Thornton, an accounting firm, conducted a forensic investigation of Mayday, and, according to news reports, found "no evidence of misappropriation of funds." The firm did, however, find "significant gaps in the administrative organization" and "significant cash transactions that have not been (fully) recorded in the cash books and/or general ledger." Auditors "had to reconstruct a number of financial events and are unable to provide certainty in those cases." The firm concluded the cash withdrawals had been justified and fully accounted for and the missing \$50,000, central to the CFO's complaints, was a result of a "misunderstanding." James had offset the bulk of the amount against his salary.

Emma attributed the disorganization to their zeal for getting the work done and putting off administrative tasks. I found it hard to believe that James, someone I had admired, could be guilty of the misconduct detailed in the Dutch news reports.

Emma encouraged me to move to Amsterdam, so that we could write a book and proposal for a film based on James' life, together. "You have the perfect background for this," she said. I was eager to leave the chaos of the U.S. during the height of the COVID pandemic and relocated to Amsterdam that October. I also wanted to memorialize James' life, and share its lessons, so humanitarians and policymakers could replicate his success.

I arrived as Amsterdam was entering lockdown. Emma's residence mirrored aspects of their life on Büyükdada. Her and James' home was in a neighborhood called Prinseneiland, bordered by canals and drawbridges. Their €1.6 million apartment sat on the ground floor, and was like a dark, linear cave, with exposed brick and wooden beams, leading to a light-filled living room and shrine to James in the back, featuring his photo, candles and flowers.

Emma was simultaneously working with the Guardian and the BBC on stories refuting the Volkskrant's reporting and detailing the disinformation targeting James before his death. Sometimes she bantered with Russian diplomats over social media. In one tweet, Russia's representative to the U.N. wished Emma a merry Christmas, and advised her to "Stay safe and sane! ;)"

Shortly after my move, I began receiving phishing emails in Cyrillic. Russian state media seemed to be tracking our work, writing of plans for a film and mass media campaign to restore James' reputation. "Mainstream efforts to deify [him] are evidently ongoing," Russia Today reported. Moscow was still watching every move Emma made, looking for vulnerabilities to turn into weapons in the information war.

I began drafting outlines for the book and film and sifted through hours of recorded conversations with Emma. She told me of her love for James, and the years before she met him when she worked for the British government in Damascus, Syria. She said several times she had worked for MI6.

After that, she said, she moved to Istanbul, and Erbil, Iraq, where she founded a strategic communications firm, alongside former members of the British military. The company produced covert propaganda aimed at Iraqis. One of its campaigns sought to deter people from joining the Islamic State. "The Russians learned from the British," Emma told me. "We invented covert influence ops." In 2016, the Guardian reported her firm was providing media support to the Syrian opposition, under close supervision by the British government.

Emma was living in Erbil in 2016 when she met James, who had already earned international renown for his work with the White Helmets. Emma said she asked James to

meet in Istanbul to develop a plan for the rescue of thousands of people in the path of a dam about to breach in Iraq. She said they instantly connected, and during their courtship, she began working for Mayday Rescue and later took a seat on its board. They married in 2018.

Emma said James had no savings and was incapable of managing his finances. After beginning work at Mayday, she encouraged him to increase his salary to build up his retirement funds. James and the other directors' salaries amounted to hundreds of thousands of euros a year. "What was he spending it on?" I blurted out, during one of my conversations with Emma.



Their home on Büyükdada was a rental, and Emma described the more than £120,000 she said they spent on its decoration. She showed me a photo album documenting the home's interior design. The decor included rose bushes she had brought from England and sinks and brassware purchased during a trip to Morocco. "We loved beauty," she explained.

Emma described a series of financial decisions at the foundation that confused me. The night James died, Emma said he wasn't worried about the auditor's assertions of forged receipts for \$50,000. She said James was concerned about what they had done with their retirement accounts. Another director, she explained, had wanted money from Mayday to purchase a home in England. She didn't elaborate.

During our research, Emma did not want me to go through James' emails. She specified that I couldn't write about "the boat," but it was unclear to me which boat she was re

By my count, there were three. Emma also asked me not to speak with some of the Syrian staff of the White Helmets. She said they thought she had been a bad influence on James.

She retraced the hours just before James' death. He was facing questions from auditors and government donors about Mayday's finances, and a renewed attack on Twitter from Russia's foreign ministry. The stress of the allegations made her sick, and Emma said she was throwing up in a bin beside their bed.

"James knelt beside me and said, 'We have three choices: We can both commit suicide.'" Emma formed the symbol of a pistol with her hand, with the barrel at her temple, pulling the trigger. "You can use your dark arts to fix this situation," James continued. "Or we can fight this."

Emma replied, "We'll fight this." When she woke up, James was dead.

I never learned what "dark arts" meant.

Three months had elapsed since my arrival in Amsterdam, and I was feeling trapped. The Netherlands remained under lockdown, and much of the world seemed paralyzed by COVID. I crafted a proposal for a six to eight-part streaming series, called "Lionhearted," about James' life, work, and his fight against Russian disinformation. Calamity Films, a London film production company, made an offer for the treatment. "You are a torchbearer for James and me, and the telling of our story," Emma said to me at the time.

Three days later, just before we were to meet and finalize the deal, Emma inexplicably changed her mind. She said she was too overcome with grief to continue with plans for a book, and that the film production would continue, but without me. "This is my life story, and I don't see any reason for you to be involved," Emma said.

When I asked about compensation for my work and move to Amsterdam, Emma replied, “That was the risk you took. It was a shared risk, and I am sorry that the risk did not work out.” I hired intellectual property lawyers in London, who sent letters to Emma and the production company notifying them of my claim to the copyright of the treatment I had worked on and requesting compensation for my move to Amsterdam and the time I had invested. This matter is yet to be resolved.

(Asked to comment on the details included in this article, Emma through a law firm sent a series of letters to POLITICO seeking to stop its publication. She did not confirm or deny she had worked for MI6 but said she had been formerly employed by the U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office. MI6 works with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, as the department is currently known. She said she had been advised by her agent that my requests for compensation were not proportionate to the role I had played).

To this day, I am still processing what this episode in my life meant, and how my conviction that James should write his memoirs led me down this path. The end of my work with Emma came as a shock, especially because it came out of the blue and seemed random, without cause. At least none that she gave me.

Since my work with Emma ended, I’ve had plenty of time to roll James’ story around in my mind. What I keep coming back to isn’t the good he and Emma did with the White Helmets but why it turned out to be so easy to undermine. As I looked into James’ life, I realized that Moscow’s disinformation-fueled influence campaign had succeeded and that part of the reason it did was that some of the material they used to destroy his reputation had enough truth in it to be plausible.

Emma had told me she had once worked for British intelligence. James had served in the British military, as an intelligence officer in Bosnia and Kosovo. The BBC later reported that years before working with the White Helmets, he had tried to join MI6 but had been rejected. Then there were their accounting troubles — and their lavish spending.

All this provided fodder for Russian propagandists to spin into a narrative — that James, his foundation, and Emma were exploitative profiteers working for Western security agencies running a “fraudulent humanitarian group.” For the Russians, the bar was low. They didn’t have to prove anything. They just needed to create enough doubt about James’ leadership to discourage donors from making their work possible.

James' struggles offer lessons for small local organizations, NGOs and donors in navigating the information battlespace. Nonprofits managing tens of millions of euros in government donations need transparency, oversight and an independent supervisory board. The most powerful way for the West to counter Russian disinformation is to not provide grist for the Kremlin's narratives in the first place.

James told me that when he founded Mayday Rescue in 2014, his conception of the White Helmets was precisely the opposite of the neocolonial effort Russia purported it to be. His idea was to do something fresh in the humanitarian world: to put aside the paternalistic impulse to rescue people, and instead, empower local communities to save themselves. This concept is what allowed the White Helmets to grow and succeed, and James' approach to humanitarian work has had a lasting impact on the field.