



We find out how specialist wedding planner Bonnie Bates helped a brave soldier and his beautiful bride enjoy the best day of their lives

WORDS and IMAGES: BONNIE BATES

A BREAK FROM War



WEDDING PLANNERS share all the emotions of planning a special day for couples getting married abroad and the anticipation, excitement, and tearful happiness up to the 'just married' moment is simply inebriating. But when the groom is a combat medic in Iraq on his third deployment and the bride-to-be is planning their fairytale wedding for when he will be home safe, the emotional stakes are one step higher.

Coming from a military family whose Daddy was deployed to Vietnam for 18 months in the late sixties, I know how that silent waiting weighs and I have seen what it means to have your plans continually change as they extend your tour at the last minute. So when Heather first wrote to me and mentioned that Greg was in Iraq, I knew how important it would be to support her during the planning process and accompany them both through to their wedding day, flawlessly. 'I chose you because I saw 'military family' on your website,' Heather wrote, and our bond was immediate, deep and without words.

AN UNLIKELY BEGINNING
Heather and Greg are used to not only the rough times of a country at war, they are also both from Gulfport, Mississippi, one of the areas hit the hardest by Hurricane Katrina. It seems like those hard times bring them luck though – they met in the hurricane's aftermath as she had to change jobs and ended up working with Greg's

sister, and he was sent home from his tour to help his family repair damage. 'People only saw New Orleans on TV,' says Heather, 'but in Gulfport the suffering and loss of homes and jobs was tremendous.'

'It was Greg's idea to get married in Italy. When he first asked me if I wanted to get married in Italy I couldn't believe it! We were both so excited to be visiting and getting married in one of the most beautiful countries in the world.'

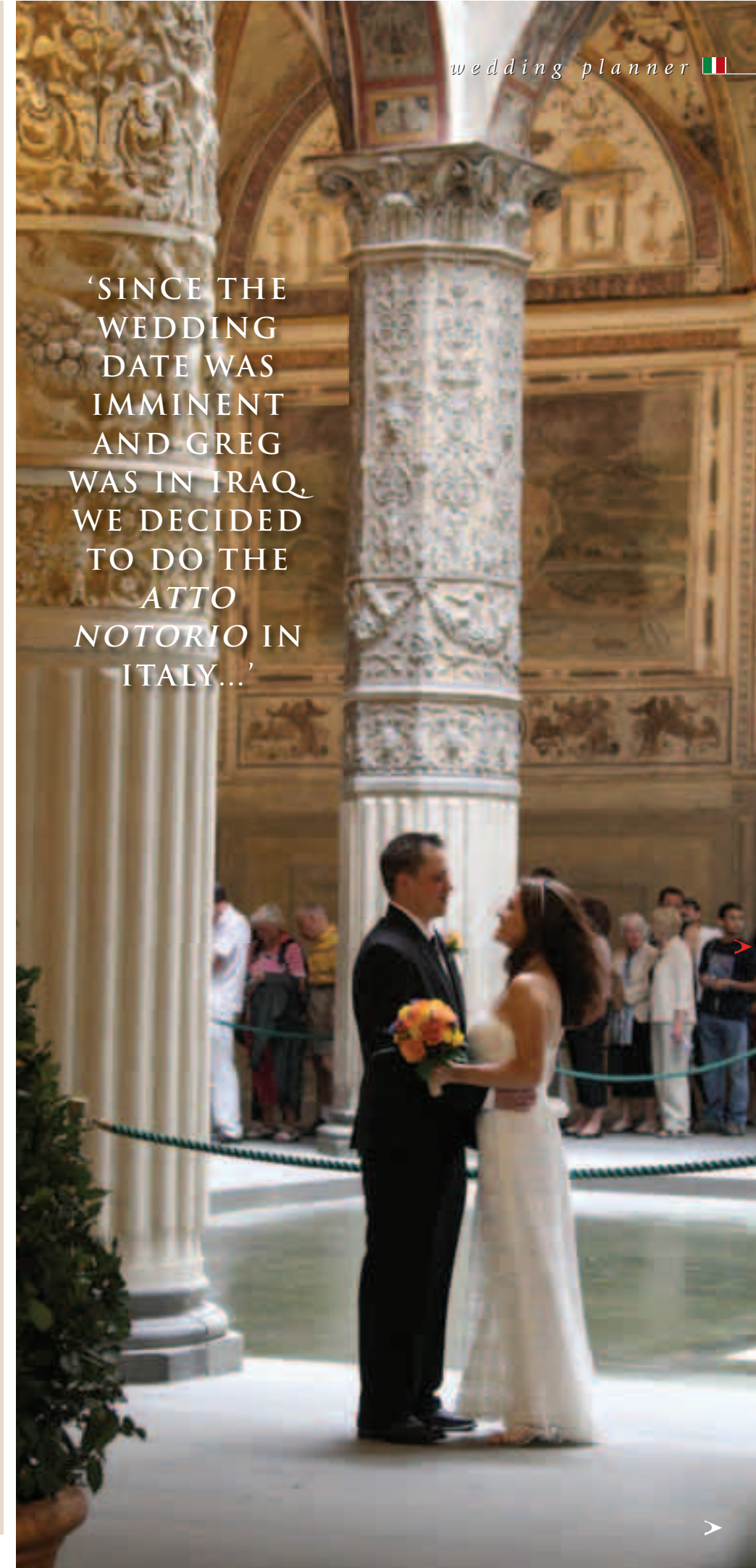
Their planning had started in January and with an estimated wedding date of May, perhaps it could have been a little tight for a destination wedding! 'We began looking on the internet for wedding planners in Italy and found who we believe to be the best wedding planner ever, Bonnie Marie. She made our journey so easy and stress free. All we had to do was send her the right paperwork and make sure that we made all of our flights to get there on time.'

'Since the wedding date was imminent and Greg was in Iraq, we decided to do the *Atto Notorio* in Italy and this affected our choice of venue. As time was of the essence, getting everything done in one day was essential, and a wedding in Florence became the ultimate choice.'

Heather and Greg had envisioned their trip as a wedding-honeymoon, so they started in England and moved down through European countries from there. 'Before travelling to Florence people told us that it was by far their favourite place in the entire world and that we would fall in love with it, and they were completely right. Our hotel was absolutely wonderful. We had our own private balcony which overlooked the hills of the city. We would just sit there and look at how beautiful everything was.'

AT A LOSS FOR WORDS
Needless to say, they were in awe walking through Piazza della Signoria and seeing the Wedding Hall. 'One day before the wedding Bonnie took us into the Red Room and let us see where we would be getting married. Greg and I had seen pictures of the room and thought it was beautiful, but once we actually got to walk in it and see how amazing it really was we were completely speechless!'

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First impressions stick and I knew that it was important for Heather and Greg to feel at ease in this 'home away from home', since they had left everything behind them to make their wedding day truly unforgettable. So I made a point of walking them through the different stages and introducing them to the people who helped shape their special day. The trip to the florists, Franco Fiori (www.franco-fiori.com) made Heather's eyes sparkle. She had a hard time deciding how to match her bouquet with her pearl white wedding dress, but Gianluca's creative talent and exquisite taste guided her towards a splash of peach and yellow, with a matching peach boutonniere on Greg's lapel, for a lovely spring day.


But as we all know, spring also means a good chance for rain. '*Sposa bagnata, sposa fortunata*' were words that echoed all morning long as the rain, rain, rain came down, down, down! 'Everyone in the town clapped for us and told us '*auguri!*'" says Heather. 'They said that we were lucky because it was raining on our wedding day.'

SPOT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

However, that didn't affect photographer Massimo Bonon (www.studiobonon.it) at all. Expert eyes and top quality equipment made the rain drops disappear and the magic shine through every close of the shutter. Massimo found the perfect distance and angle for some wonderfully romantic shots outside the Palazzo Vecchio and throughout Florence. We decided that the distance must be the key to great photos because when we would turn



to look for him, he would be gone... then we would spot his white telephoto lens spying through a crowd of tourists across the square.

Heather remembers a touching moment just outside the Palazzo Vecchio: 'One of my favourite memories will be the little kids that were outside the palace on a field trip, standing around Greg and I, clapping for us, and then when the photographer told him to kiss me they all said '*ewwwww!*'! Then on our way to an intimate toast waiting at the Golden View Open Bar (www.goldenviewopenbar.com), Greg asked me if I felt like a princess yet, and with this huge smile on my face I said 'Yes!' 

For more information, visit www.myweddingsandmore.com



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