

# Dateline Iraq:

## Journalism students go to war

By Brian Patrick O'Donoghue





CANFIELD



HEWITT



HOFFMAN



O'DONOGHUE

The liability form spelled out the downside.

"I AM VOLUNTARILY ENTERING A WAR ZONE that has already claimed the lives of civilians, journalists and armed soldiers," the university's waiver stated. "I understand that journalists working in the Middle East have been killed, captured, tortured, beheaded, injured, and traumatized, while undertaking activities very similar or identical to those that I am ..."

Three UAF journalism students and I went through the two-page document line by line with Julie Baecker, chief risk officer for the University of Alaska system. She made sure Jennifer Canfield, Tom Hewitt, Jessica Hoffman and this professor had received the articles e-mailed with that waiver, including a graphic account of *The Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl's kidnapping and murder.

"Our role isn't placing limits on what our student learners can do," Baecker explained. "It's ensuring they have the information needed to make informed choices."

In weekly teleconferences leading up to the jump-off date, I'd done my best to scare these students off. It didn't help that experienced war correspondents were confident students could handle the assignment, especially with the security embedding provided.

Joking about our faint prospects of surviving a month embedded with Alaska-based soldiers serving in Diyala province, Iraq, we each signed on the line and initialed where required.

What followed surpassed expectations.

◀ *Jessica Hoffman photographs Camp Victory from Al Faw Palace in Baghdad. The palace, constructed during Saddam Hussein's regime, serves as headquarters for the U.S. Army and other coalition forces. Left inset: Military souvenir coin presented to UAF journalism team members by Col. Burt Thompson, commander of the 1-25th Stryker Brigade Combat Team. The coin commemorates the Arctic Wolves' yearlong mission in Diyala. The lightning bolt/heart represents the wartime service insignia worn by 1-25th SBCT soldiers. Top of page: The rose is commonly associated with Iraq. All photos courtesy of the UAF Journalism Department.*

### Body armor and sweat

As embedded journalists, we observed Iraq through a window opened by U.S. soldiers. We couldn't freely come and go. We traveled "outside the walls" with and protected by soldiers of the 5,000-strong 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, nicknamed the Arctic Wolves. Ideally, news organizations rely on both embeds and journalists operating independently for a broader perspective. Even so, the brigade's window proved wider than we'd imagined.

"We pretty much had free rein," Hoffman, the team's TV reporter, put it. "They knew the missions we were going on, but never said, 'Hey, let me see your video just to see what's in the background.' That surprised me. I expected them to be more watchful."

We learned to thread individual body armor plates into our vests, then shouldered those 38-pound IBAs and as many water bottles as we could carry, following soldiers sweeping palm groves, abandoned villages and wadis for weapons in steadily intensifying heat. We trailed soldiers as they canvassed villagers and supervised distributions of food, tools and other humanitarian goods. We sipped tea with Iraqi police and Iraqi army soldiers.

Some of us walked Iraqi streets with security details, others chased soldiers spilling from a helicopter in a pre-dawn raid. Hewitt became one of the first western reporters to interview detainees freed by court order from an Iraqi-run prison. Canfield stalked Forward Operating Base Warhorse with her camera after dark, turning towering T-wall blast barriers into art. One assignment involved Hoffman donning a canine "attack suit." Military trainers had dogs take her down on the run — hard!

We produced daily stories datelined Warhorse, or Grizzly, or Normandy, Cobra, Caldwell and other brigade FOBs and smaller installations. Offered free as a public service, UAF journalism's coverage reached a statewide audience. Students earned clips

in the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* and *Anchorage Daily News*, video made newscasts on KTUU, KTVF and other TV stations in Anchorage and Fairbanks, blog posts commanded an online section of *Alaska Dispatch*, and several reports aired on Alaska Public Radio Network.

Students further circulated their work in a blog, [shorttimers.blogspot.com](http://shorttimers.blogspot.com), as well as a Facebook account under the same name. Hewitt, Hoffman and fellow journalism majors are working on a broader multimedia package of Iraq stories for *Extreme Alaska*, the department's online publication.

"Get the adventure you expected?" asked Col. Burt Thompson, the 1-25th's commander, as our departure neared.

We'd heard warning sirens, but hadn't been near a firefight — the closest we had come had been the thunderous reports from big guns manned by the 2nd Battalion, 8th Field Artillery, "terrain denial" fire discouraging insurgent rockets and mortars. Still, what we'd glimpsed conveyed America's staggering war investment, the complexity of the Arctic Wolves' mission, and the uncertainty clouding the future of rubble-strewn, irrigation-deprived Diyala province.

"For some of these students," I told the colonel, "it's likely a life-changer."

## War games 101

Though it came together on the fly, our embedding assignment developed from relationships forged over years.

In fall 2004, the UAF Journalism Department partnered with what was then known as the 172nd Infantry Brigade to offer students a course called "Pen & Sword: Covering America's Military." The brigade commander, Col. Michael Shields, saw value in preparing his Iraq-bound soldiers for the media's presence on the battlefield. Fort Wainwright officers appeared as class speakers. Students were credentialed and took part in training exercises staged out of Fort Wainwright and Eielson Air Force Base in Fairbanks, and out of Fort Greely, near Delta Junction, Alaska.

In spring 2008, volunteers from my news reporting class embedded less formally in the 1-25th's war games for extra credit. Afterward, UAF's student newspaper, *The Sun Star*, published "A year in the desert," a year-long series of columns written by Alaska-based soldiers serving in Iraq.

In March 2009, UA President Mark Hamilton, a retired two-star Army general, floated the idea of embedding for real. When I sounded out brigade contacts, I heard that UAF journalism embeds would not only be taken seriously but would indeed be appreciated by soldiers and families yearning for stories about the brigade.

We take pride in multimedia storytelling at UAF. Iraq offered opportunity for demonstrating students' versatility reporting in print, radio, TV and online formats. I knew that students would profit. Classrooms can't match experience gained in the field, reporting stories of true consequence.

To do the job right, we needed about \$10,000 of new equipment, primarily high-definition cameras and video-editing laptops. Plane tickets for four, war-zone insurance, my own salary and other expenses pushed the projected tab to about \$30,000. No way could such expense or risk be justified unless I found an audience for the team's work.

A few news organizations I approached questioned the benefit — and sanity — of taking students into a war zone. More responded positively. If the work was good, most said they'd be interesting in publishing or broadcasting our stories.

## Ultimate field trip

"Young reporters have always traded their skin making a reputation," observed Robert Meyerowitz, the department's 2008 – 2009 Snedden Chair of Journalism. He pointed to his own



experience covering South American conflicts for National Public Radio.

The department made Hamilton a proposal. The president authorized a \$35,000 grant from the UA Foundation, with money donated by BP and ConocoPhillips.

We got a dozen serious student applicants. Faculty whittled the list to five. After talking with their parents and weighing the skills each might bring, I chose our final team: Canfield, a radio reporter and blogger, incoming *Sun Star* editor Hewitt, both 25, and Hoffman, 28, a polished video technician and budding photojournalist.

Current Snedden Chair David Offer, an Army veteran and former *Stars and Stripes* editor, pointed out that student reporters arguably possess an advantage. “The age factor increases the potential for a kind of storytelling that older, more experienced journalists might not see or tell.”

I can vouch that students and soldiers found immediate common ground discussing bands, fantasy football selections, video games, movies — hobbies and interests foreign to this gray-bearded professor.

As far as the Army knows, UAF’s school-sponsored embeds are a first. Articles about the project appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Editor and Publisher* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, among others.

Eric Heyne, interim dean of the College of Liberal Arts, praised what he termed our “innovative professional training on an international stage.”

### What did students take away?

Hoffman gained confidence that she can deliver on deadline. “There’s going to be assignments in the real world where I’m going to think, ‘Oh God! I have nothing.’ But you just have to look for it.”

Canfield finds herself riveted by news reports about bombings and other grim events she formerly avoided. “It’s really sensitized me to the war in Iraq and the whole war on terror.”

Hewitt also reckoned those weeks spent traveling Iraq in Strykers and mine-resistant armored vehicles yielded insights worth a year of classroom study about the region.

At the brigade’s return ceremony this fall, an Army Alaska officer inquired if UAF journalism has considered putting our field lessons to use. “You ready for Afghanistan?”



Brian O’Donoghue, a journalist and recovering dog musher, is chair of the UAF Journalism Department.



Read more about our students’ adventures in Iraq at [www.uaf.edu/aurora/](http://www.uaf.edu/aurora/).



▲ A soldier from 1st Platoon, 2nd Battalion, 8th Field Artillery Regiment, helps Jessica Hoffman scale a dry canal nearing the end of a long patrol conducted in temperatures that reached 120 degrees.

◀ Jennifer Canfield interviews an Iraqi police officer with the help of an Army translator.

## Dateline Iraq:

# SAYING GOODBYE



By Tom Hewitt

BAQOUBA, Iraq — Shortly after entering the police station, Staff Sgt. Daniel Blalock of the 1-5 Infantry Regiment found himself in the embrace of an Iraqi police officer.

“I knew it was going to be a sad day when we told them we couldn’t come back,” Blalock said, after he returned the hug.

Blalock and other members of 1-5’s Charlie Company had come to the station, just north of Baqouba in Diyala province, Iraq, on a mission to help train the Iraqi Emergency Response Force. The ERF, a special branch of the Iraqi police trained for security operations, had worked with the American soldiers for months, and today was the final session.

For several members of Charlie

Company, it was also their last day in the country before beginning the journey home to Alaska.

In the open courtyard of the station, the U.S. troops began drilling the ERF members on room clearing. Staff Sgts. Juan Batista and Bradley Thomas led the Iraqis through establishing defensive positions, kicking down doors and doing a sweep of a mock room. Each four-member team rotated through the training while the other police officers sat and watched in the shade of the building, waiting for their turn.

“Seems like we’ve done a couple hundred training exercises with these guys,” Thomas said. He praised the ERF members’ initiative. “They really want to learn what we teach. They’ve grown as a

whole team.”

In an office next to the square, Iraqi Sgt. Maj. Abdul Hadi reflected on the time his men and the American soldiers had spent together. He happily recounted how the security situation had improved over the course of the 1-25th Stryker Brigade’s deployment in the area, but when asked about the situation going forward, his mood darkened.

“It was bad, that June 30 withdrawal,” Hadi said, referencing the date when the security agreement that barred U.S. troops from operating unescorted in urban areas went into effect. “There are militias in the cities, and the Iraqi authorities do not have the strength to control them.

“Lots of officers who were in Saddam



▲ Soldiers from Bravo Company, 1-24th Infantry Regiment, heft metal detectors along with their usual gear as they prepare to sweep for weapons near the Udaim River in Diyala province, Iraq. The dawn patrol, staged out of FOB Grizzly, came up empty-handed.

Hussein’s government are getting back into positions of authority,” Hadi continued, “And they are seeking power again. I trust the U.S. forces more than I trust the Iraqi government. Our relationship is better.”

Blalock reassured Hadi that soldiers from the brigade replacing the 1-25th would continue the work that they had started together, but Hadi still seemed unhappy about the Alaska-based soldiers’ departure.

Out in the courtyard, Thomas corrected the ERF members as they entered the mock building. “You’re waiting too long in the door,” he said. “If there’s a bad guy waiting, he’ll pop you right as soon as you enter, and then your buddies can’t get in to help you.” He pantomimed a shooting motion as

the first Iraqi officer entered the room and paused in the doorway. “And remember, you should have your gun up as soon as you come in. You step across the threshold, it should already be at your shoulder.” The translator struggled to keep up as Thomas barked orders.

After a few hours in the late morning sun, the training ended. Blalock, Hadi and a few other members of the American and Iraqi forces ate a traditional Iraqi meal and posed for pictures together. Hugs and e-mail addresses were exchanged, and then the U.S. troops put their body armor on and walked out to their Stryker vehicles.

Hadi escorted the Americans through the Baqouba area in an Iraqi police SUV. When they reached the main road out of

town, he pulled over and let the vehicles pass. The rear gunners waved to him until he was no longer visible, obscured by the Strykers’ trailing cloud of dust.



Tom Hewitt is a journalism student at UAF. Since returning from Iraq, he has served both as the editor-in-chief and web editor of The Sun Star. He eagerly awaits the opportunity to seek a job in journalism after graduating, taking the contrarian view that a market with lots of unemployed Pulitzer Prize winners must be good for those with no experience.



Find semaphore and Morse code information at [www.uaf.edu/aurora/](http://www.uaf.edu/aurora/).