



NEWSDAY WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT TOM FRANK '84 WENT TO WAR IN IRAQ AS AN EMBEDDED REPORTER ARMED WITH A LAPTOP, A SATELLITE PHONE, AND A DIGITAL CAMERA. BY TOM FRANK '84

Members of the 3rd Infantry Division are driving into Baghdad after the city fell. Tom Frank '84 left the blue chair to take the photograph.

The broad outcome of the war in Iraq may not be known for years, but in one aspect the results are already clear. The long-standing antagonism between the military and media over war coverage is dramatically changed. The Pentagon's experiment with attaching an unprecedented 775 reporters to military units has been so widely hailed by both sides that it is guaranteed to become a fixture of future military action.

Reporters, angered at their sideline status in the 1991 Gulf War, had almost unfettered access as they lived with military units marching across the Iraqi desert. The military, frustrated that its success stories weren't being told, was rewarded with tales of bravery, drama, and humanity.

There were problems, naturally. Some embedded reporters, such as the *Washington Post's* Lyndsey Layton '86, worked under substantial restrictions imposed by media-hostile commanders. Television broadcast extensive combat footage, often with too much cheer-leading and too little context. "Unilateral" reporters working on their own often were shunned by military personnel, alarming some that embedding was another way to control access and coverage.

Perhaps the most significant change was in the media's tone. Stories were told through the eyes of military personnel, often with empathy. One reporter witnessed Marines killing three unarmed Iraqis but didn't lead his next story with the incident. Rather, he said, he "was careful to put it in the context of scared young men trying to protect themselves."

I was one of the fortunate journalists. I spent one month with an Army helicopter brigade whose commanders invited me to combat briefings, showed me cockpit videotapes and encouraged me to talk to every soldier. Their candor enabled me to describe the pilot who cheered in his helicopter while blowing up an Iraqi tank, the private who resented giving medical treatment to Iraqi fighters, the warrant officers who quickly realized that Iraqis resented their presence. It was war in vivid detail.

KUWAIT CITY, MARCH 2, 5:17 A.M.

I'm lying in a hotel bed awake—not wide awake, but groggy-awake. Annoyed-awake. Awake when all I want to do is sleep because I've been up for three hours and asleep for only 90 minutes before that. I've tried stuffing foam plugs in my ears, snapping a sleep mask over my face, watching Kevin Bacon movies with Arabic subtitles. Useless.

I arrived in Kuwait three days ago, and I suppose I could tell myself this is jet lag. But jet leg does not

jar you awake, heart thumping with fear, mind racing in horror. I am about to join the U.S. Army division that will lead the invasion of Iraq with 20,000 soldiers blasting a hellstorm of missiles, rockets, artillery and tank rounds against an enemy widely expected to unleash chemical and biological weapons whose gruesome potential terrifies even the most tattooed infantry grunt.

I will carry a notebook and pen. I am a reporter. I am going to war.

My main qualification for this assignment, as best I can tell, is that I don't have a life. I have no wife, no kids, no girlfriend—no one whose absence would cause me pangs of homesickness over two months or generate pleading calls for an expedited return. I stress this point to *Newsday's* foreign editor one day in mid-February when I heard war correspondents were being sought.

"I don't even have any pets," I added for cocky effect. The next day I was told to start getting ready.

My gear falls into four categories whose importance corresponds directly to their cumulative weight: gear that keeps me clothed, clean, alive and employed.

The heaviest category, by far, is the last. I have: a laptop computer with power adapter; a laptop-sized satellite phone with spare battery; a cable that connects to the laptop for e-mailing stories; a power adapter; and a compass to figure out where to point the contraption; a hand-held satellite phone with a spare battery, earphone, connector cable and power adapter; a Nikon 4500 digital camera with two spare batteries; two flashcards, battery charger and lens paper that proves no match for desert sand; a shortwave radio that consistently loses reception as the Alistair Cooke hour transitions to BBC news; six spare batteries and an attachable antenna; a 200-watt DC-to-AC power inverter the size of a thick paperback that plugs into miniature alligator clips that fasten to a car battery to power any of the aforementioned items; a half-dozen American-to-European or European-to-American plug converters; an extension cord; a small tape recorder with four minicassettes and four spare batteries; a brick of 12 reporters' notebooks and four pens—one blue, one red, one black, one green, which I alternate each day to organize my notes.

I separate the items by function, cram them in Ziploc bags and stuff them into a large daypack. It weighs 36 pounds.

The remaining 47 pounds of gear so thoroughly fills an internal-frame backpack that I remove nonessentials—comb, spare pants, deodorant. A bul-



letproof vest with inch-thick ceramic plates in front and back and a Kevlar helmet occupy most of the space. There are two bottles of NATO-approved decontamination powder, six chemical safety lights, and a flashlight and headlamp with red filters required by the military to block white light visible to enemy snipers.

To this stockpile the Army adds a charcoal-lined chemical-protection suit that I will wear every day for a month in Iraq and a gas mask that will remain permanently strapped to my side in a green canvas case with three atropine shots to be (self-) administered in case of exposure. There is a fourth shot for Serious Circumstances so beyond anything I can fathom that the explanation shuts down my brain.

For 10 days in late February and early March, I live in the seaside Kuwait Hilton with fellow reporters neurotically testing satellite phones, neurotically debating whether to get vaccines for smallpox and anthrax (I get neither) and neurotically trying to relax at parties that are single-sex and alcohol-free.

Then I am embedded.

We 85 journalists joining the 3rd Infantry Division climb into chartered city buses one afternoon at the hotel. We are driven past Kuwait City's dreary cinderblock architecture and discount shopping sprawl to a desolate highway running north toward Iraq. As dusk settles, the convoy passes through a U.S. military checkpoint and turns off the highway. We sputter across the flat, lifeless desert for a four-hour stop-and-start journey to the division's bases.

It's nearly 10 p.m. when I am dropped off, with a photographer from the Agence France-Presse, at an Army base. Newly built Camp Udairi feels like a miniature city with grid patterns of platform tents, a hospital, a store, hangars, dirt roads, and a mile-long tarmac stacked with helicopters.

Two soldiers pile my gear in the back of a Humvee and drive me in the darkness to a 40-foot-long tent that will be home for the next week.

I open the green canvas flap and step into fluorescent brightness. Seventeen soldiers, including two women, are lounging on their aluminum-frame canvas cots two feet apart and enjoying what I would later learn are standard leisure activities: writing letters, sleeping, and cleaning their guns.

A blur of handshakes, friendly chatter, and food offerings greet me. I am assigned a cot between two veteran soldiers, one wizened and wry, the other from South Dakota, both about my age. A major turns out to be from the small Pennsylvania town where I started

my journalism career; we discover a mutual friend. Another late-30s soldier has a laptop that plays music. Sitting on his cot as we wind down my first night, he pops in a CD: Neil Young's "After the Gold Rush."

I feel instantly at home.

My battalion operates Apache helicopters, the military's premier attack helicopter. The Apache prowls 100 feet off the ground, skulking in the dark night for tanks and other armored vehicles to blow up with the eight laser-guided missiles and 34 rockets it carries under stubby wings. A gun perched under the nose fires 30-mm. cannon shells at a rate of 600 per minute.

I spend hours while stationed at Udairi hanging around the helicopters with pilots on the tarmac, wedging myself into the cramped cockpits, sliding on the tight headsets, gripping the left handle that aims the laser, fingering the right-hand trigger that launches

NEWLY BUILT CAMP UDAIRI FEELS LIKE A MINIATURE CITY WITH GRID PATTERNS OF PLATFORM TENTS, A HOSPITAL, A STORE, HANGARS, DIRT ROADS, AND A MILE-LONG TARMAC STACKED WITH HELICOPTERS.

the Hellfire missile. Each helicopter costs about \$25 million, and as I gaze at the long hazy rows of some 200 birds, my liberal instincts try to berate the extraordinary sums they cost and the devastation they wreak.

But those thoughts do not go far. Rather, I imagine an Apache hovering in the air, a sleek black missile curling up from under a wing before rocketing down to its target and blasting it in an explosive shower of flames. Wanting to feel outrage, I feel instead giddy awe at their sheer, brute power.

The Apache's two cockpit seats preclude passengers, so my first helicopter ride comes in the open cabin of a Black Hawk. I am with a dozen soldiers from the Apache unit's sister battalion, sitting on top of each other and our gear. Each soldier rests his M-16 automatic rifle across his lap; 30-round ammo clips are taped to the grips.

We fly in formation with a dozen other Black

Hawks, buzzing above the brown desert that stretches unbroken by any sign of life or vegetation. After an hour, we land in the middle of nowhere at an abandoned military air strip, its runways rubble and cratered by bombs dropped 12 years earlier.

A burly young private climbs out through the helicopter's sliding side door ahead of me. He looks stern and alert. He steps on the pavement and silently slides a clip into his rifle. The war began one day ago. We are in Iraq.

The war's early stages make clear that the Apache battalion I'm with will see little combat. The Iraqi strategy of hiding in cities, trying to draw U.S. forces in, works against Apaches, which are vulnerable to small-arms fire—rifles and rocket-propelled grenades—that Iraqi fighters can unleash from close range hiding on rooftops and in alleys.

But war comes to those nearby, and on our third day in Iraq a convoy of Marines passing through the city of An Nasiriyah 10 miles north is ambushed in one of the war's bloodiest attacks on U.S. forces. Two Marine transport helicopters land at our airstrip and drop off wounded Marines for treatment at the field medical station, which is nothing more than a few litters quickly set up next to a small beige medical truck with a red cross.

By night, one Marine is left, sitting on a litter in the glow of generator-run lights hooked to the medical truck. I start to approach him and stop. Back home, interviewing hospital patients typically requires clearance through a thicket of guards, flaks, doctors, and relatives. Here, I only have to walk five feet. Nothing can guide me but instinct, which is torn between sympathy for what the Marine has been through and duty to report it.

I find the battalion doctor, a 29-year-old resident, and say I'd like to talk to the Marine. The doctor chats briefly with him and motions me over with a nod. I am stunned to see a scrawny 19-year-old kid, no more than 125 pounds, with acne, glasses, a high-pitched voice, and fear all over his bandaged face. He tries to answer questions with rambling tales of being hit by mortars, machine guns, heavy guns ... a fire in the back of his amphibious assault vehicle ... hiding under a bridge ... Marine helicopters unloading everything. But he conveys one message with perfect clarity in his shaky voice.

"That's the worst shit I've ever seen," he says. "I don't want to do it again."

Our move from the airstrip to the next in-the-middle-of-nowhere desert encampment further north is

repeatedly delayed. On the morning we are finally supposed to leave, a sandstorm sweeps in.

I am lying on the airstrip next to the Black Hawk in which I expect to fly, and believe I had actually fallen asleep when a soldier pats me on the shoulder and calmly suggests I put on my body armor. An enemy company is three miles south.

I stand up. I walk to the helicopter. I panic. My mind shouts, "Get me out of here," as if I could be magically extracted. Then I ask a soldier what I should do.

"Got a weapon?" he says, ripping a grenade out of a carton and stuffing it in his chest pocket.

"Of course not," I reply.

"Then find one," he says and rushes away to join the line of soldiers lying in the prone firing position on the edge of the tarmac, valiantly pointing rifles that suddenly seem puny.

Back home I respond to trouble by assessing a scenario's worst possible outcome and working my way back to a reasonable solution. But now the worst possible outcome is getting killed—a prospect that lurches me from panic to denial to horror and then ... to calm.

I climb out of the helicopter and begin taking notes. I chat with a medic loading her pistol. In a few minutes, another report arrives. The enemy three miles south were enemy prisoners under Marine escort.

As our unit moves north, skipping from encampment to encampment every few days, the source of discomfort begins to shift. The blast of artillery, so powerful I can feel it from two miles away, no longer rushes adrenaline. The sight of rocket launches, which initially sent me scrambling for my vest and helmet, barely merits my attention.

One night at the midpoint of the war when 3rd Infantry Division armored units are storming past Karbala to within 50 miles of Baghdad, I lie outside in my sleeping bag on a cot and gaze at the star-splattered sky until my eyes go fuzzy and I fall asleep. A few hours later, I'm awakened by artillery blasts in the distance and roll over back to sleep.

Several nights later, we are 20 miles from Baghdad and the evening is peaceful. Someone has a laptop, someone else has a *Spider-Man* DVD, another soldier has Jiffy-Pop. The laptop is plugged into a generator and set on a litter against the medical truck. Cots are set up in front of it, popcorn is passed around, and a dozen soldiers banter through a night at the movies as an Apache stands nearby, silhouetted by a sliver-moon.

Yet after three weeks in the desert with no shower and no break from the sun that pushes the tempera-

ture above 100 degrees each day, filth has become egregious. The Middle Eastern desert is not sand but powder, chewed up by Army trucks and pelted by the incessant helicopter rotors. Dirt works into every pore of my skin, crusts my scalp, and layers the inside of my sleeping bag. Under the dull light of my headlamp, the back of my hands look like they belong to an 85-year-old blacksmith.

My hand-held satellite phone and tape recorder are destroyed. My laptop screen is cracked internally and barely usable. I have eaten nothing but meals-ready-to-eat for a month. A source of relaxation does not exist. I am hanging on. My editor suggests a day off, to which I reply, "And do what exactly?"

I rejoice one morning, hearing we are breaking camp and driving to Baghdad. Our convoy of about 50 vehicles joins with other convoys forming a slow-moving line several miles long. We rumble through villages whose residents line the one-lane road, some buoyantly waving, others skeptically glaring, many hoisting white flags.

I ride in the back of an open-air truck strewn with knapsacks, bottles of water, and MREs. There are 10 soldiers and me, all geared up in helmets and vests. We bounce along the rutted road. The soldiers point rifles with one hand and cameras with the other. They banter incessantly, spit tobacco juice, and smoke. I drop my veneer of dispassion, laugh at their jokes, and throw back one-liners.

We reach Saddam International Airport at night in the middle of a thunderous exchange overhead of rockets and artillery. It would turn out to be the last serious fight of the war. Within a day, the statue of Saddam Hussein is torn down in Baghdad.


Realizing the fighting is over, I begin a desperate search for a ride into central Baghdad. After a few days at the airport, I stumble on an Australian TV crew with two SUVs and room for me but no time to wait. I bid a frantic and unceremonious farewell to a couple of soldiers and am gone.

I arrive in Baghdad on a sunny afternoon with hundreds of journalists who are suddenly free to enter the country without a visa and work without the oversight of government minders. The two main Western hotels are so packed that my offer of a \$100 bribe cannot get me a room. I run into an old journalist friend who hands me her room keys.

Aided by a translator and driver who came looking for work outside my hotel, I spend the next five days traveling through the city's neighborhoods where goats eat garbage in the street, and report on people

who had been liberated yet felt newly oppressed by looting, chaos, and foreign occupiers.

When my editor says it's time to come home, I put up no fight. On the ride board that journalists have set up in the hotel lobby, I see a convoy is leaving for Amman, Jordan, in two days at dawn.

The night before I go, the hotel generator has conked out. I pack in my dark seventh-floor room. Gunfire ripples outside. The moon glows on the murky Tigris River. I climb into bed and try to sleep. But my mind is charging, excited, alive—wide awake. 



# DATELINE IRAQ

## Members of the Wesleyan community reporting from Iraq or its vicinity included:

 **WILLIAM BLAKEMORE '65, ABC NEWS**

 **RANDALL PINKSTON '72, CBS NEWS**

 **GREG PALKOT '76, FOX NEWS**

 **DAVID LYNCH '81, USA TODAY**

 **TOM FRANK '84, NEWSDAY**

 **LYNDSLEY LAYTON '86, WASHINGTON POST**

 **KURT PITZER '88, PEOPLE MAGAZINE**

 **BERNARD WEINRAUB P'93, '98, NEW YORK TIMES**

IF WE MISSED ANYONE, PLEASE LET US KNOW.