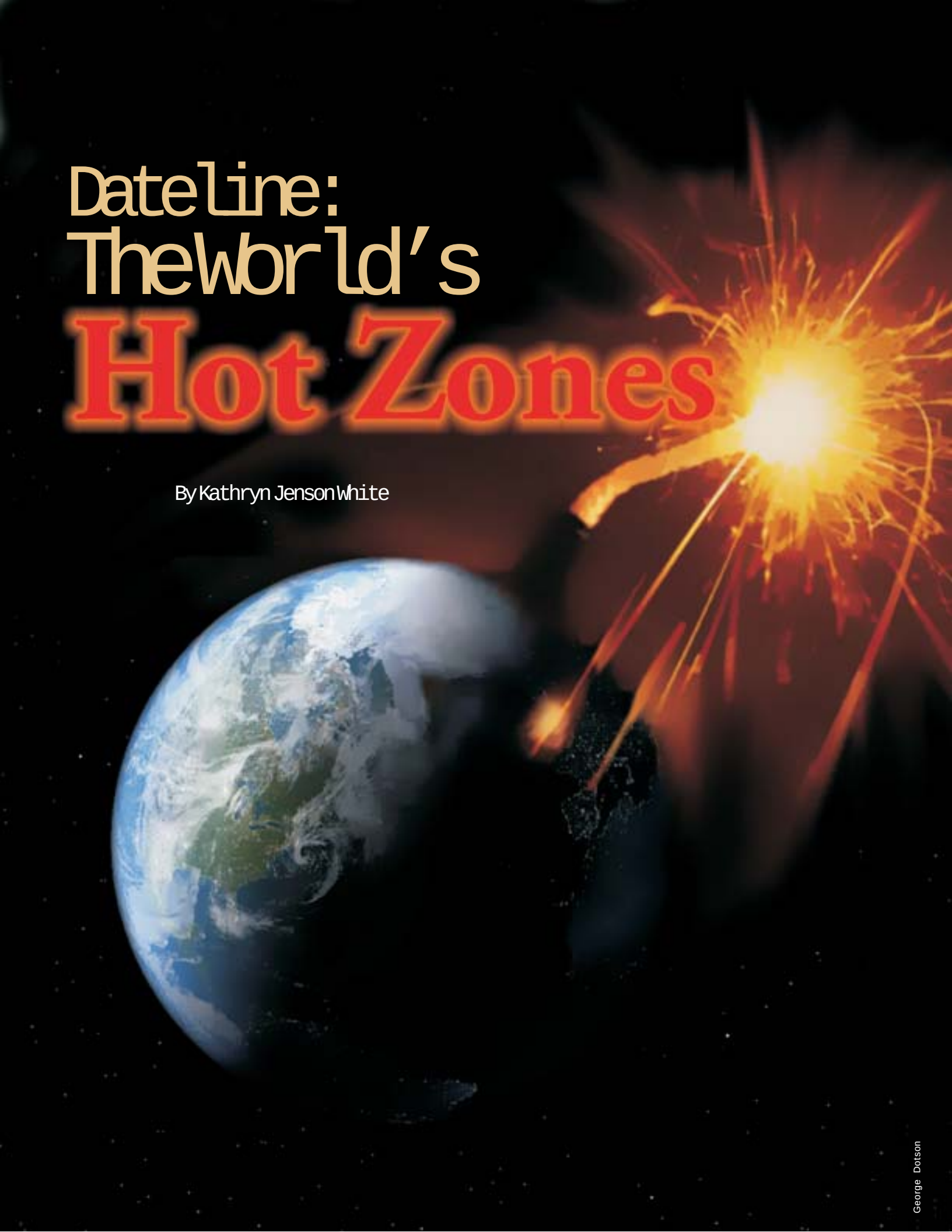
Dateline: The world's Hot Zones

By Kathryn Jenson White



George Dotson

The pen may be mightier than the sword figuratively, but in reality there is no contest when a man or woman wielding a Bic of information faces a hostile individual pointing a Beretta of destruction.

The reckoning of journalists worldwide who died in the line of duty in 2004 ranges from 78 on International Press Institute Death Watch 2004, to 56 on the *Columbia Journalism Review's* online list. The Committee to Protect Journalists Web site confirms that 36 journalists and 18 media workers died in Iraq in 2003-2004. Ever-improving technology that allows real-time reporting of hostilities makes that reporting increasingly more dangerous.

Those who return from assignments in war zones or even from difficult foreign postings are, most say, changed. Some of those changes are positive, others undeniably less so. Even in many non-combat situations, American foreign correspondents can encounter hostility just *as* Americans or, no matter their nationality, because they seek to expose facts others want hidden. The University of Oklahoma's Gaylord Professor Joe Foote, who edited the 1998 book *Live from the Trenches: The Changing Role of the Television News Correspondent*, says the person who chooses to become an international correspondent possesses certain identifiable characteristics.

Photo Provided

Afghan children interview Ben Fenwick.

"There is a little risk-taking spirit and adventurous nature in every journalist, but foreign correspondents in it for the long haul have an extra large dose," he says. "It seems that just about everyone enjoys it at first, but the travel, isolation, danger and trauma get to them after awhile. There is a mid-career demarcation where some correspondents pull back to domestic or non-war assignments, and others keep right on going. This latter group is a special breed. They crave being where the action is and can't operate except in high gear."

Despite the "travel, isolation, danger and trauma," Foote notes, many journalists who have passed through what is now the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication have sought the international beat. Among those accepting the jeopardy challenge are Hannah Allam, a 1999 graduate serving as Knight Ridder bureau chief in Baghdad, and 2004 Pulitzer Prize winner Anthony Shadid, at OU in 1986-87 and now in Baghdad for *The Washington Post*. Ben Fenwick, who earned his bachelor's degree in 1988 and his master's in 1998, served as an embedded reporter in 2004 with Oklahoma's 45th Infantry Brigade in Afghanistan. Ellen Knickmeyer, who left OU a few units shy of a degree in the late '80s, is now Associated Press bureau chief in West Africa.

Margot Habiby, 1994 graduate with a bachelor's in both journalism and political science, works in Dallas for Bloomberg News. However, she spent 1997 through 2000 as a correspondent in the United Arab Emirates. Covering oil and gas from Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council from Saudi Arabia, the Middle East and North Africa economic summit from Qatar and OPEC meetings from Austria and Indonesia, Habiby did not live in the kind of physical danger those reporting in actively hostile areas do, but she dealt with other issues resulting from cross-cultural journalism.

Allam, who served as editor of *The Oklahoma Daily* in 1999, is not just an international correspondent: At 27, she has become the de facto cover woman for the profession, her image gracing the December issue of *Editor and Publisher*, the newspaper trade journal. In November, Allam published a first-person account of her Iraq experiences that drove home the shock and awful truth of war in a way no standard inverted pyramid story could have. Under the headline "A deadly dateline," Allam detailed her daily danger and noted she had lost at least three friends to the violence.

"Our American and Iraqi correspondents have been shot at countless times, attacked by knife-wielding rebels and bruised by stones lobbed from angry mobs," she wrote. "They've been trampled by riotous demonstrators, arrested by a renegade police force, taken hostage by militiamen and burned by red-hot shrapnel.

"After one bombing, a young boy shoved a severed hand in my face. Another time, I used a tissue to pick shreds of human flesh off my shoes after covering a car bombing. Gagging, I gave

THE COST TO THEIR PERSONAL LIVES IS HIGH, THEIR COMFORT AND SAFETY FORFEITED, AS SOONER J-GRADS TAKE ON THEIR PROFESSION'S MOST CHALLENGING AND DANGEROUS ASSIGNMENTS.

Courtesy *Editor & Publisher*

OU grad Hannah Allam's assignment in Iraq put her in harm's way–and also on the cover of her profession's trade journal.

up and pushed the sneakers deep into the trash."

In a phone interview from her hotel in Baghdad, Allam talked about her initial reluctance to write this heart-wrenching piece in light of the reporter's general admonition to keep personal feelings aside.

"That one was done kicking and screaming," she says. "It came about because of the Farnaz Fassihi e-mail. She's a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who's a friend of mine. She sent a message to 40 of her friends, and it got leaked. That caused a huge appetite for information about what it was like to be a reporter here. Everyone's publication was nudging them toward first person pieces. In the end it turned out to be pretty therapeutic."

Those who love those whose career choices land them in harm's way often need therapy of their own as they grapple with internal conflicts about the choices.

"It's a hard dichotomy," says Allam's mother, Beverly Allam, of Moore. "We've raised them, we've trained them, we've nurtured them and we've helped them achieve their goals. They go out to do what they've chosen to do, and you want that. But then there are the mother's heartstrings on the other side.

"Hannah has been in so many situations in which she should have been dead by all rights. She's told me she has no idea how or why she's lived through it. She called me from inside the shrine in Najaf when she was trapped for 30-something hours. She was the only Westerner in there. If they had known that, they probably would have killed her."

Like many of her colleagues, Allam speaks of journalism as a service profession and expresses a sense of responsibility to report beyond the surface, to provide insight that readers would not otherwise have. As professionals, they know they are responsible for the official account; that is easy to tell. They risk their lives, however, to tell the rest.

"I think you have to tell yourself it matters even if you get blown off the front page by Britney Spears' marriage on the day of a major attack," she says. "That can be demoralizing, as it can be when you work hard on a dangerous assignment and the story gets buried on A27. You think, 'Why did I dodge bullets for that?'

"I want my readers to hear the stories of the everyday Iraqis. There are 26 million here, and only a fraction are taking up arms against American forces. Others are more concerned about electricity and jobs. Anything that shows Iraqis as humans makes me happy."

Like Allam, Shadid seeks to illuminate outside the official spotlight. Unlike her, he has not always successfully dodged the actual bullets international reporters can face. In March 2002, he was shot in the shoulder while covering the Israeli/Palestinian conflict for *The Boston Globe* in the West Bank city of Ramallah. While Allam has worked in Baghdad since late 2003, Shadid has spent almost a decade as an international correspondent, going abroad the first time when he was just 25. His strong belief in his work's importance is tempered by a clear-eyed recognition of its toll.

"I wouldn't trade a year of the life I've lived," he says from the house in Baghdad he shares with his *Washington Post* colleagues. "I feel that I've lived three lifetimes in just 10 years of being a foreign correspondent. But at the same time, it requires incredible personal sacrifice. I wasn't able to make it work in terms of my marriage. I'm divorced and that's due at least in part to my career. I've seen it destroy a lot of people's personal lives. It's a hard thing to recommend to others for that reason.

"You have to always question whether the story is worth it.

"But you're also pulled by the story; there's no doubt about it. Part of the reason I'm here right now is that I know this story is not only defining the region I've covered for half my life, but it's also defining the country I was born in. I understand the significance and importance of that, and it does push me to stay here to understand it and convey it to readers."

Shadid, a Phi Beta Kappa who has done graduate studies at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, helps his readers understand not only through reporting, but also through longer, in-depth work. His book, *Legacy of the Prophet: Democrats, Despots and the New Politics of Islam*, appeared in 2001. Coming up from Henry Holt is *Night Draws Near: An Odyssey through Baghdad in War and Its Aftermath.* In addition to the Pulitzer, he has won many other awards for his work in the United States as well as in Beirut, Libya, Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

"If there's anything different about foreign reporting, and I've always had difficulty explaining this, it's the sense of taking a step back and being more authoritative with your voice, saying 'This is the story, and I'm going to define it for you,' rather than

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Bill O'Leary/*The Washington Post*

letting officials or authorities or records define the story as you see in local and national reporting. You have to figure out how to file stories, how to work the phone system, all these things.

"Here, every time you leave the house, you have to determine whether it's safe to go to a neighborhood. You keep your eye on the street to be sure no one is following you."

Shadid praises *The Post* for its enlightened approach to counseling for employees dealing with the aftermath of a posting to a war zone. To help keep himself mentally healthy, he chooses carefully how to define his occupation.

"I would never call myself a war correspondent," he says. "I don't like war. Fighting is boring and repetitive, and it doesn't have a lot of context for me. But I do find something meaningful in exploring how lives are shaped and reshaped in circumstances we can't really imagine in the United States. Some reporters may consider themselves war correspondents, may have even a hunger for that. I think that is dangerous for a couple reasons. It leads to risks you probably shouldn't be taking, and you lose what gives these circumstances their own character, what distinguishes this story from many other war story.

"I try not to cover war as war, but as a backdrop to people's lives. Time and again, I see instances of heroism, courage, strength and even beauty amid the horror. Those glimpses always restore my faith, as tattered as it may become."

Knickmeyer joined the AP in 1990 and first went overseas eight years later. She has covered wars from Kosovo to East Timor, in Congo, Liberia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Two days after the World Trade Center bombing, the Associated Press sent her to the Middle East. She did not return for six months, which was fine with her. She has no plans to leave the foreign beat, a career path she marked fairly early.

"My freshman year at Washington University in St. Louis was the Reagan era, and I thought I wanted to go into business and make lots of money," she says. "I took a year off and worked for my mom, who was state editor of *The Tulsa World*. She insisted I take a copygirl job. I didn't want to do it, but once I got in the newsroom, I was hooked.

"During the 1991 Gulf War, I changed my focus. Watching that from Oklahoma and watching CNN do its star turn made me want to be involved in news that took in the whole world."

Knickmeyer has been in West Africa for three years.

"Our region is 23 countries, which means 23 different stories," she says. "Africa is an under covered and ne-

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Bill O'Leary/*The Washington Post*

Even as he works in the midst of armed conflict, *Washington Post* correspondent Anthony Shadid tries not to report war as war but to focus on how the lives of the Iraqi people are shaped and reshaped by the horrific circumstances that engulf them.

"YOU WEIGH THE RISK AGAINST THE STORY YOU'RE GOING AFTER AND ERR ON THE SIDE OF CAUTION. "AT LEAST, I TRY TO."

– Ellen Knickmeyer

Photo Provided

him to many troubled areas, but never to an active war zone. He was in Guatemala to cover civil rights activist Rigaberta Menchu Tum's winning the Nobel Peace Prize. He was in Chiapas doing a four-part series on the Mayan uprising for *National Native News* during the Zapatista uprising. He was in Bosnia as forensic anthropologists were identifying bodies exhumed from mass graves. Then came April 19, 1995.

"When my Oklahoma City bombing coverage got me connected to Reuters, I was already used to the notion of conflict and death," he says. "Then, with September 11, I felt this overwhelming need to do something. It was horrifying to just watch the

glected area. You can feel a sense of mission about covering it. A lot of the world thinks of Africa as famine and AIDS and war only. The first time I came, I was filling in on a desk in Nairobi. I would be at work before sunrise. I'd watch thousands of workers filing into the cities to start their jobs and all these streams of school children. Everyone was working so hard just to buy school uniforms and keep their kids in school. It struck me that people in Africa try so hard. I don't think people often see that side of Africa."

While Knickmeyer's many filed accounts do show that side, she has had to report, too, on human suffering and violent conflict in potentially dangerous situations.

"You weigh the risk against the story you're going after and err on the side of caution," she says. "At least, I try to. You do what you can and accept that bad luck happens. I've lost colleagues in Sierra Leone; a couple people I knew were killed. I've been stoned a couple times by mobs, but not seriously hurt. I don't think I'm courageous, but I think some things bother me less than they do other people. I don't get afraid of things as much. I think my danger thermostat is just set a little differently."

Knickmeyer has covered the war-ravaged Darfur region of Sudan, where, analysts say, fighting has killed at least 70,000 and forced more than 1.2 million to flee. In Iraq, she was with the first company of the first Marine battalion crossing into Iraq. She was back in Baghdad in January for the elections.

Lindel Hutson, AP chief of bureau in Oklahoma City, says that "tenacious" might be the best word to describe Knickmeyer.

"Overseas, you have to be more resourceful," he says. "Ellen went in during the first invasion of Baghdad. You don't pull up in a tank and walk into a phone booth. If there was a way to get the story back, Ellen would find it if she had to find a camel to ride across the desert."

Behind Fenwick's five months as an embedded reporter in Afghanistan with the 45th was a 16-year career that had taken

Maj. Eric Bloom

In Afghanistan Ben Fenwick only wore his journalist's uniform when accompanying Marines on a combat operation and at a flag raising ceremony on the grounds of Camp Phoenix, which honored his father, a combat veteran of WWII, Korea and Vietnam.

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Home-front reaction to the first Gulf War caused Margot Habiby to seek foreign assignment. Covering the Middle Eastern business beat for Dow Jones did not take her into danger, but being a woman and an American made cultural accommodations necessary.

Oklahoma City bombing, but when I started reporting, I felt satisfied being in the mix and doing something constructive about it."

Inspired by the work of Shadid and Knickmeyer, with whom he crossed paths at *The Oklahoma Daily*, Fenwick wanted to go to Iraq in 2003 as an embedded reporter, but when his mother became terminally ill, he stayed home.

"The war was in full tilt, and I had missed it," he says. "More than 350 reporters were embedded with everything from front line units to cooking units; they didn't need me over there. That was one of the most covered wars ever. But you've got to count. What are you as a journalist if you don't matter? And you only matter by wading in and getting in the mix."

Then came the announcement that Oklahoma's 45th would be deployed to Afghanistan. Fenwick worked and talked and trained for almost seven months, managing to become the only reporter he knows of embedded with troops from his own state.

"I felt that was the most important thing I could be doing at that time," he says. "There are questions about whether Iraq was the right thing to do, but there's pretty much no question that Afghanistan was necessary. I wanted to cast my lot with my fellow Oklahomans. They are citizens. We should have oversight, and the newspaper is the only way to do it. It's a high responsibility in my opinion. I said, 'I'm not going to miss this. I'm born, raised and educated in Oklahoma. I must do this.'"

[Ben Fenwick's personal account follows on Page 10.]

While Habiby's business and finance-based international beat kept her out of dangerous situations overseas, she got there because of a war.

"I was a freshman at OU during the first Gulf War," she says. "People were being assaulted on campus. My father teaches Middle East policy at OSU. He was outspoken and on television and radio as an expert. My parents got bomb threats. My mother told me not to come home.

"The night the war started, I was in the honors dorm and was going to watch TV before dinner. Some students were in the lounge, and I heard one guy say, 'Let's go pop some popcorn and watch the war.' That quote made *Newsweek's* 'Perspectives' section. It was like the Olympics, 'Go, team, go.'

"I think that experience hammered home the need to be a foreign correspondent."

In Dubai, where she was Dow Jones' chief Middle East correspondent, she did not have to alter her behavior dramatically, although in Saudi Arabia and Iran she did have to cover her hair and wear something long and loose.

Travel as a woman also could be complicated, especially as an Arab-American who could be taken for a native. On a trip to Saudi, she traveled dressed as an American but stopped to don an

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abaya and a scarf before deplaning. Two men began giving her a hard time in Arabic for "running around the world in Western clothes and then coming back to Saudi and covering up."

On another trip, because of a paperwork mix-up and given that a single woman cannot stay in a hotel alone without written permission, the desk clerk told her she could not have her room. Her ministry minder said he would fax the papers as soon as the office opened, but the clerk still refused.

"I had taken my passport out," she says. "The hotel clerk opened it. He looks at it and looks at me. He says, 'Oklahoma?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'I went to the University of Tulsa. You can stay.'

"Later that evening I was with a Reuters correspondent. He was concerned about being seen with a woman not his wife. I said 'Don't worry about it.' As we walked by the counter, the clerk was staring at us. My friend was frightened. He thought the clerk might be secret police. As we walked by, the guy smiles at me and says, 'Oklahoma.'"

Oklahoma has served these professionals well in many ways, from shaping them personally and professionally to being the source of situation-saving coincidence. In return, they have served not only the state but also their country by living lives shaped by difficulties ranging from discomfort to danger. They have reported for hazardous duty so that others could read, in safety, about world-shaping events.

"It is always important to have first-hand reports from areas of conflict because in a globalized environment anything and everything that happens could, ultimately, affect the U.S. economy, foreign policy, etc.," says Peter Gross, who, like Foote, focuses on international reporting and holds a Gaylord endowed chair in the Gaylord College. "International reporting is the web that ties people together; it gives us a front seat to what our neighbors, distant and near, are experiencing, thinking and doing. War coverage is a brutally draining assignment. Most reporters have to deal with a foreign culture, language, economy, political environment and so on. It is akin to being asked to lead, yet you don't have directions to where you are going. It is also a positive challenge, however, that allows you to learn and grow, and, in the process, inform the rest of us."

Freelance writer Kathryn Jenson White is an assistant professor of journalism in the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

Embedded in Afghanistan

By Ben Fenwick

WHILE MOST MEDIA ATTENTION FOCUSES ON IRAQ, A SOONER REPORTER JOINS OKLAHOMA'S 45th IN THE STILL-DANGEROUS CAMPAIGN THAT BEGAN IN 9/11's AFTERMATH.

Our C-17 cargo jet landed at midnight, March 6, 2004. It was scary when the orders came from the cockpit to saddle up. The soldiers I flew in with put on their bulletproof vests and helmets so we could land at Kabul International Airport, an old shot-up, former Soviet air base at the edge of the city. The pilots turned on red interior lights, which preserve night vision but bathe everyone and everything in a ghastly, blood-red glow.

I am a 1988 journalism graduate of the University of Oklahoma, a veteran of macroeconomics. I saw action getting my graduate degree at OU in 1997. I was armed with choice words and bad algebra. However, I had a lot to live up to. My father is a World War II veteran who fought in the Pacific, landing with the Marines at the Battle of Okinawa. My oldest brother fought with the Marines in Vietnam and was wounded. My other brother served at the tail end of Vietnam on board the aircraft

carrier Coral Sea, and my sister was a 25-year Air Force wife whose husband flew nuclear-armed B-52s during the Cold War. This was my first war.

The C-17 banked left and right as we came in, some kind of evasive maneuver, popping flares to throw off any heat-seeking missiles we had sold the Afghans in the '80s. We screamed in for a rough landing. The pilots braked hard, throwing us back and forth in our seats like the crew on the old Star Trek bridge. We rolled to a stop. The Air Force crew chief—who also had a vest and an M16—threw open the door, and we hefted our bags and filed out.

As I stepped off the plane onto the tarmac, there were no bullets, no bayonet charges from crack Al Qaeda terrorists. Instead I met Maj. Eric Bloom, the media officer for the 45th Infantry Brigade. I had worked with him back in the States on my bid to get embedded, sent him frantic and even testy e-mails, haranguing him to get me over sooner. He did not seem to have a trace of animosity about this.

"Ben! You're here!" he said. "Welcome to Afghanistan! You're gonna love it. It's nothing like we were told."

This was all my idea. It started with the onset of the latest Iraq war when I had heard that the military was trying a new process of war reporting called "embedding." According to the Pentagon's embed guidelines:

Maj. Eric Bloom

"... OUR ULTIMATE STRATEGIC SUCCESS IN BRINGING PEACE AND SECURITY TO THIS REGION WILL COME IN OUR LONG-TERM COMMITMENT TO SUPPORTING OUR DEMOCRATIC IDEALS. WE NEED TO TELL THE FACTUAL STORY—GOOD OR BAD—BEFORE OTHERS SEED THE MEDIA WITH DISINFORMATION AND DISTORTIONS, AS THEY MOST CERTAINLY WILL CONTINUE TO DO."

This approach, to tell the truth before it can be distorted, was used in World War II by the British to counter broadcasts by the Nazis. The Brits called it "inoculation." By telling a story, good or bad, before that story was released by the enemy meant that the public was inoculated with the truth, preventing them from becoming "infected" with a lie.

At first I sat at home, listening, reading and watching reports from the front during the initial Baghdad operations. Many were by people I had gone to school with, reporters like Ellen Knickmeyer, now a bureau chief with the Associated Press; or Anthony Shadid, who hunkered down in Baghdad, sending out a series of reports that would later garner him the Pulitzer Prize. I had been at *The Oklahoma Daily* when both were there, all of us just figuring out which end of the word processor was up.

A year later, Oklahoma's 45th was called to Afghanistan. The Thunderbirds? I knew about them. For years I had tried to wrangle an angle on a feature about this unit. During World War II, the Thunderbirds had been a division, landed at Anzio in one of bloodiest battles of the war, and later marched through France into Germany, liberating the Dachau concentration camp. The 45th now was a smaller unit, a brigade. A quick check of the records told me the unit had not deployed since Korea. It would be the first time this Oklahoma unit would see a war zone in 50 years.

I called the state public affairs officer for the Oklahoma National Guard, Col. Pat Scully. It took many weeks to get answers and approved. I also managed to get gigs writing for two Oklahoma papers, *The Tulsa World* and *The Oklahoma Gazette*. An old classmate and fellow staffer from *The Daily*, Wayne Greene, called from Tulsa and confirmed I would be working with him. Thus, *The World* became the only paper in the state to provide regular, daily coverage of the 45th in Afghanistan.

The day came for my goodbyes, then I drove to the embarkation spot in Colorado.

We filed onto an enormous green transport plane. Strapped in on the uncomfortable plastic benches they use for seating, we rocketed off for the 22-hour flight.

It took me a good week to get over the trip. Within that week, I went on my first patrol with 45th soldiers, members of the 279th Infantry Battalion. The small, daytime patrol was just around a surrounding bit of Kabul but was an eye-opener. Among the first sights I saw were children age 6 to 7 carrying bags of garbage from our dump, the bags easily as big as they were. Other children ran up to meet us, some with infected boils on their bodies. Around the camp I saw fields littered with human waste, where the Afghans grew food. I saw open cesspools we had to gingerly skirt as we wound through a nearby village compound.

Crowds of children flocked to us, trying to paw through the items we carried—one stole my pen. Two girls in shawls hid in

a doorway watching us furtively and fled when we met their gaze. At one point, someone fired a shotgun, but it was too far away to hit us. We charged the compound from where we heard the shot. Locals we stopped and questioned said it was a hunter. And this was my first patrol.

In one feature I wrote for Reuters, I interviewed a British unit, the "Gurkhas," famed for more than a century as elite fighters. I met other allies working with the Okies, including French, Italian and German security force troops. There was even a contingent of Mongol soldiers teaching artillery to the Afghans. I ran into a few friends from home, and each time we marveled at how amazing it was to be a bunch of Oklahomans together in a place on other side of the world.

At one such event, a graduation ceremony for one of the trained Afghan battalions, Ellen Knickmeyer appeared. Knickmeyer becomes more legendary with each passing year. Earlier I had run into another journalist in Afghanistan who told me he had met her hitchhiking into Baghdad during the beginning of the war. Hitchhiking to the front in a war zone. A woman. In a Muslim country that does not cotton to such freewheeling initiative. After working in the AP's Rome bureau, she took over their Western Africa bureau. She had covered wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. At the Kabul graduation, I introduced her to Brig. Gen. Thomas Mancino, the 45th's commander. After a short conversation, we realized we were all Tulsans. It was like some kind conspiracy.

Ben Fenwick

Fenwick grabbed his camera to catch U.S. Special Forces returning fire on Al Qaeda positions that had launched a nighttime rocket attack on Camp Tillman.

Shortly thereafter, I left Camp Phoenix on a medical convoy operation to Mazar-I-Sharif in northern Afghanistan. After a long, dangerous journey through a ruined Soviet tunnel in the mountain passes, we arrived at a British compound in that picturesque city. I learned two things there: (1) that the 45th had a contingent of peacekeepers operating in a "hot" province that had recently had an uprising, and (2) that the Brits would fly me there.

"We took showers from a barrel, ate rice and beans or Army rations, and appreciated the amenities such as the two outhouses for facilities and a satellite uplink through which I was allowed to file stories."

Maj. Eric Bloom

Correspondent Ben Fenwick stands on the ruins of Tarnak Farms, once an important Al Qaeda outpost near Kandahar, Afghanistan. This base was destroyed by U.S. cruise missiles during the Clinton administration.

That time turned out to be a breakthrough for me in Afghanistan. I found myself with the unit's commander, Lt. Col. Hopper Smith, for a roommate in the mud-brick shack that served as the headquarters for "Task Force Spartan." Spartan's mission was to advise the Afghan National Army soldiers in the peacekeeping in Meymenah, the capitol of Faryab province, a wheat-growing pastoral region filled with unrest and opium.

Smith, an Oklahoma state representative from Tulsa who stepped down from his elected position to answer the call with the 45th, spent his time shepherding a unit of very individualistic, rugged Okie soldiers in an even more rugged setting. We took showers from a barrel, ate rice and beans or Army rations, and appreciated the amenities such as the two

Ben Fenwick

Since the U.S. Army likes its soldiers clean-shaven, Fenwick was not allowed to send back this shot of a bearded captain leading a column of Afghan soldiers on patrol.

Ben Fenwick

Battle Capt. Matt Reiten mans the headquarters tent at Camp Spartan, an airstrip occupied by the 45th during unrest between the Afghan provisional government and local warlords.

outhouses for facilities and a satellite uplink through which I was allowed to file stories. The uplink was engineered by Capt. Matt Reiten, an engineering Ph.D. student from OSU to whom I still owe a number of beers.

I spent the days with Task Force Spartan patrolling the green hills along the border with Tajikistan. A few of these patrols were fired upon but mostly were left alone by the warlords, who nonetheless resented the American presence in their sensitive drug-growing region. One field of opium grew at the end of the runway in Meymenah, just outside the concertina wire of Camp Spartan.

A religious man, Smith once helped set up a drug treatment center in Tulsa. He had also developed legislation to restrict precursor chemicals to methamphetamine production, legislation that has helped recently to curb Oklahoma's meth problem. Smith resented the opium growers but also knew he was powerless to stop production. In fact, American forces were ordered not to undertake drug interdiction while in Afghanistan.

"That's the part of this I really don't like," Smith said. "But I like to think we are at least keeping an eye on it."

After more than three weeks in Meymenah, the mission wound to a close. I boarded a British flight back to Kabul and rejoined the 45th main body at Camp Phoenix. I was tired and thoughtful, about ready to return to the States. However, things had opened up in Kabul. The press, which had showed up in droves for the "Bin Laden hunt," was gone, searching elsewhere for stories. I was free to go places that before were impossible. Maj. Bloomarranged, and got, a position for me with a firebase on the Pakistan border with the Special Forces. I took the offer.

A six-hour helicopter flight found me at Camp Pat Tillman, named for the football star who died in fighting on a nearby hill. I was familiar with the area from a previous story I had written for *The World*, in which 45th soldiers and their Afghan counterparts were ambushed by 60 Al Qaeda. They killed 19 before the Al Qaeda units retreated back across the Pakistan border. This was definitely what I had imagined I would see when I came to Afghanistan.

While there, I joined about a six or seven patrols led by the Special Forces soldiers in charge of the firebase. The mission there was very sensitive, as I was unable to photograph or in any way identify the Green Berets in charge of the operations there. I also agreed voluntarily to have my stories reviewed by the camp commander, a compromise to which most journalists would never agree. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to be as sure as possible I did not compromise the safety of the unit. I found that my stories rarely needed revising. The only one I felt was unfair was when I was asked to cut pictures of regular 45th soldiers because they had beards. The Army does not like regular soldiers growing beards.

I also grew a beard. Afghan locals consider Americans' unshaven faces to be an affront. Having a beard when engaged in regular contact with Afghans made the going smoother.

Ben Fenwick

Fenwick flew into Afghanistan with the 279th infantry battalion but only photographed its departure from Camp Phoenix, electing to remain for two more weeks to cover the exodus of the 45th's main body for Reuters and *The Tulsa World*.

"This time I felt I was about ready to return to Oklahoma. It was July, and I had accomplished as much as I could of what I had set out to do."

During this particular trip, the base came under fire. Al Qaeda units, which operated along the border, set up rocket attacks on the base during the full moon. At 4 a.m. a volley of rockets screamed over the camp, rousing us out of our bunks. I ran out in my pajamas and took pictures in the twilight of the Afghan units returning fire. Al Qaeda's rockets missed the base completely, a usual occurrence. Only a little later did I realize I had run out without my helmet or vest. Later attempts by the Special Forces to catch the insurgents were met with frustration each time as the rebels would just run back across the border where the Americans were not allowed.

After about two weeks at Camp Tillman, hiking through the Utah-like countryside with patrols, I returned to Phoenix. This time I felt I was about ready to return to Oklahoma. It was July, and I had accomplished as much as I could of what I had set out to do.

Then came another break. This time, 45th-trained Afghan units joined with the Marines in a large operation to the south, near Kandahar. Despite my misgivings, I seized the opportunity.

That the region was hot and dusty does not begin to convey the experience. Daytime temps soared to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. The dust had the consistency of talcum powder and lay a foot thick on the ground of the main operating base, Camp Ripley. The dust covered everything and still permeates much of the gear I took with me.

From Ripley, the Marines sent two task forces north into Taliban-held highlands. They sought out ambushes and drove purposely into them to flush out Taliban fighters, then killed them as soon as the insurgents opened fire. In one action, the Marines killed as many as 120, a large firefight by Afghan standards.

I spent 10 days with the Marines in an operation called "Thunder Road," completely in on the briefings and participating daily on the patrols. It was hard going. We slept each night on the rocks along a dried creek bed, awoke and got underway before dawn, and bedded down on the rocks again after nightfall. There were two firefights with the unit I had joined. In each, no Marine casualties were taken, but they killed the Taliban units who fired on them. I helicoptered out as the operation ended. I later discovered I had lost 15 pounds.

By this time, I had lingered in Afghanistan until it was nearly time for the 45th to pull out. I decided to wait two weeks and join the main body as they left, covering their departure for *The Tulsa World* and for Reuters. It was a poignant time, and fraught with worry. Previous units had come under fire during their time leaving Afghanistan because Al Qaeda and Taliban wanted to demoralize the international effort by killing soldiers on their way home. Luckily, though, no such attacks occurred on the 45th.

In the end, the 45th accomplished its mission of building the central corps of the Afghan National Army, readying the country to have its first-ever free elections. When those elections were held this fall, they formally selected Hamid Karzai as the country's first president, a goal that would not have been met without the 45th's training of the army.

My own goals were met, too. I had followed the people from my own state into the War on Terror and stayed the course with them. I had seen Oklahomans, born and bred in this state, warmed by its suns, taught in its schools and lettered in its universities, take on the task mandated by that September 11 three years earlier, and meet its measure.

And we all came home alive.

Ben Fenwick is a freelance journalist whose articles appear regularly in The Oklahoma Gazette.