

E-Mail-Interview mit Jim Landers

A. Would you please give a brief curriculum vitae ?

Age 52 (born 11 Feb 1951); Bachelor of Arts, in English, with Honors, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, 1974; Employed by The Dallas Morning News since 1981, primarily as a Washington correspondent covering business and international affairs; international editor of The Dallas Morning News from 1988 to 1994; edited and acted as one of 11 writers for the paper's Violence Against Women: A Question of Human Rights series, which won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting

B. Where and in which period of time were you appointed as a journalist / photographer during the Iraq war?

I was embedded as a reporter from March 15 until April 14 with the 2nd Tank Battalion of the U.S. Marine Corps. The Battalion was one of the first U.S. units to cross into Iraq on the evening of March 19, as part of the 5th Regiment of the 1st Marine Division. The Battalion stayed in a combat posture until reaching Baghdad on April 6. For the two months prior to joining the Battalion, I was in Kuwait and Bahrain doing independent reporting.

C. What does the term "embedded" mean to you personally? How would you define it?

Embedded means you live with the soldiers, sailors, airmen or Marines in the unit of your assignment. You are there with them in the theatre for as long as they are in combat operations. You don't fly out in the evening to go back to a hotel. You don't leave when things are boring to find another unit with more exciting prospects. You live under the same conditions they do -- the same food, the same hygiene and sanitation, the same billeting, the same work hours. Your advantage over them is you are not a combatant; you do not answer to orders from anyone but the commanding officer of your unit; and you have virtually unrestricted communications access, which you furnish on your own.

D. How was the moral atmosphere towards the Iraqis / the Allies in the country you reported from?

The Marines were, as a whole, very curious about the Iraqis, and anxious for the Iraqis to view what they were doing as a good thing. There were a few individuals out of the roughly 1,000 in the Battalion who viewed the Iraqis as "ragheads" or "hajjis" with no real interest in their individuality. Most of the others seemed ready to go out of their way to provide rations or water to Iraqis in need, particularly Iraqi children. The unit was responsible for the deaths of nine Iraqi civilians in vehicles that tried to cross a roadblock, but there was considerable anguish among the Marines involved in this incident as well as by their commanding officers. The Marines were trusting toward Iraqi civilians in ways that were not always justified. As the war progressed, and the Marines encountered armed Iraqis using women and children as human shields, this trust wore thin. Once they reached the northern suburbs of Baghdad, however, the joy of the Iraqis there at being freed from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and his sons left many of the Marines feeling the war was fully justified. The Arabs I spoke with in the region had differing views toward the Allies. Many Kuwaitis in positions of government, law or other civic leadership were very supportive of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. They found him completely untrustworthy, and they felt Kuwaiti security would

only be assured by a new government. The Saudis and Bahrainis I spoke with felt the United States had completely lost its moral compass in invading Iraq. They did not find it a justifiable extension of the American war on terrorism. They did not believe the U.S. claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. They thought the war was imperialist, urged on by Israel and Israeli interests in America and would lead the United States to grief in the Middle East. The Iraqis I met while embedded with the 2nd Tank Battalion were of several opinions about the Allies. So long as the outcome was in doubt, they were wary of the Marines. They wanted food and water, but otherwise, they wanted to be left alone. They feared the Marines. Some even thought the Marines might kill them in cold blood. About one week into the war, the Marines began to meet Iraqis who were still frightened, but urged the Marines to keep going, to fight all the way to Baghdad and until Saddam was removed from power. Once the Marines reached Baghdad, the Iraqis were jubilant. Within hours, however, they began demanding to know when the power would be restored, when water would be restored, when medical doctors would return to deal with their health ailments. They were impatient for better results, and looked to the U.S. military to provide them.

E. Who put you in charge with your reporting in Iraq?

I worked the The Dallas Morning News and some of our affiliate companies, such as WFAA television in Dallas, the Providence Journal in Providence, Rhode Island, and the Riverside Press-Enterprise in Riverside, California. I was given the assignment because I volunteered, because I was well qualified by my previous reporting experience in the region and because my editors wanted someone with considerable experience to represent the newspaper at the front lines.

F. Which medium did you use for your reporting?

My reports were available in the Dallas Morning News; over the Internet, through several Web sites owned by our company (dallasnews.com, wfaa.com, rpi.com, belo.com, projo.com, etc.); and through wire services that have access to our stories, such as the Knight-Ridder Tribune News Wire.

G. Which steps did you take in order to get information which was important for you?

I first tried to ingratiate myself with the Marines of the 2nd Tank Battalion. I went to a media boot camp at Marine Corps Officer School in Quantico, Virginia. I did physical training with the battalion. I brought better maps than the Marines were using. I helped them with some translations with civilians (NOT with interrogations) with my limited skills in Arabic. I showed them copies of some of the stories I'd written and published. This effort to gain their trust was rewarded by the commanding officer of the battalion, who took me into his confidence and shared battalion battle plans, problems, frustrations, and his excellent coffee. I did not make wholesale use of this information, and certainly did not use it to make public the battalion's plans or locations. But the information provided me with about as clear a view as I think I could get of the battalion's goals and how well those were carried out. The other information essential to my reports came from the Iraqis we met. Working with my own limited Arabic and with the battalion's Kuwaiti interpreter, I often gained Iraqi insights on what was happening.

H. How important is characteristics of medial influence concerning the recipient/

reporter?

I am not certain of your meaning. I prepared myself strenuously for the physical demands of embedding. I worked for several months toward achieving the Marine Corps own physical fitness requirements. This was very important to both the rigors of the assignment, and with gaining the trust of the Marines. I also received inoculations for smallpox and anthrax. These were voluntary, but I felt they were also important in gaining the confidence of the Marines, so that they would know they did not have to worry about my risk of infection (anymore than their own) if we were exposed to biological weapons. I followed the medical advice of the Corpsmen and physician of the Battalion regarding anti-malarial medications and so on.

*I. In your opinion, to which extent were you influenced in your reporting by others?
Did you have the impression to be able to report in a free way?*

I was free to report without censorship or prior review by the Marines. I realized that what I was reporting was being read in the United States by the families of these Marines, and even my some of the Marine commanders in the field with the division. (The Internet.) That put a premium on accuracy, in matters such as rank and unit, because the average Marine (and, I suppose, the average soldier anywhere) takes great pride in having these noted accurately. Since I was filing my stories by dictation over a satellite phone, there were occasions where Marines overheard what I was reporting. I was only once approached about this after a file, and it was to urge me to report the full rank of those I cited, and not just Sergeant for Staff Sergeant or Gunnery Sergeant. There was one occasion where I asked a company commander and the battalion commander to read my story for accuracy before I filed it. That was an article about the deaths of 9 Iraqi civilians shot by the Marines at a road block. The article described the worst incident this particular company encountered. It did not cast them in a favorable light. I asked them to read it so they could correct any misinformation I'd gleaned from Marines and Iraqis I'd interviewed. They made no changes in the story.

J. To which extent were receptive persons influenced by your reporting in your opinion?

Most of the feedback I received was from family members of the Marines. They were grateful to hear about the unit. They also seemed to appreciate the different perspectives on the conflict I hope were evident in my reports. A few readers were critical of the report on the deaths of Iraqi civilians; a Dallas police detective accused me of treason. But both Arab readers and Marines seemed generally appreciative of my reports. Those who opposed the war did not change their minds, and those who supported the war did not change, either.

K. Could you choose the manner and place of your reporting freely?

I was able to report within the area where the battalion was located. I was not at liberty to move away from those locations. I did not have independent transportation. I was able to speak with Iraqis within the area of the battalion's location, and no one tried to stop me from doing this sort of work. The Marines encouraged it, in fact, since I was able to learn things about what the Iraqis were feeling and about the background of our location. I was denied access to Marine interrogations of Iraqi prisoners. I was told this was covered in the ground rules under the Geneva Convention prohibition on humiliating treatment of prisoners. No parade before the media, no photographs, etc.

L. How do you understand the term manipulation in general?

Manipulation means to provide a partial view of the facts that spins a story in a direction favored by the person doing the manipulation. It can involve physically screening/hiding, avoiding places or failing to give truthful answers.

M. Did you feel manipulated during your reporting? Did you have the impression that some parts you were told or showed didn't correspond with the truth?

I did not feel manipulated. I felt the Marines were anxious to have me relax and feel friendly toward them, in a strategy of friendly seduction, but there was no real art in it. This was a combat unit. There was no time to orchestrate, and no control over the environment. I did witness the regimental commander castigate the battalion commander for the lack of good feeling conveyed by individual Marines in my stories. But nothing changed in the way I was treated after that incident.

N. To which extent do you think that recipients were manipulated by your reporting?

I would hope my readers did not feel manipulated by my reports. Before embedding with the Marines, I reported on many aspects of the pending conflict. I wish now I'd been more skeptical and critical of the administration's contentions about weapons of mass destruction. The Marines seemed to expect an attack with these weapons from the onset of the war, and showed genuine fear of such weapons in the drills and false alarms we went through. I know some of my readers feel I was not critical enough of the Bush administration's contentions about Iraq's threat to the United States. This covers my reporting before I was embedded, however.

O. Which steps did you personally take in order to avoid a manipulation of your pieces of news?

I tried to get the perspective of the Iraqis on what was happening. I moved about talking to ordinary Marines as well as officers so that any "line" from the commanders could be vetted with the ranks.

P. Which role does, in your opinion, play the influence of media?

Media has a large role in these sorts of stories, especially television. There are now many sources of information, and visuals, that readers and viewers can see. Viewers in the Arab world had an abundance of views from their own television networks. I did sense many of them felt unprepared for the outcome, however, after nightly reports of setbacks for the American military. On the U.S. side, it was difficult to put the information about the conflict into a useful perspective, because it went so rapidly. There was a lot of bad analysis about bogging down in a quagmire before the fall of Baghdad. There is a great deal more of that in the news today. The story as it is happening now is a particularly hard one to report without good knowledge of Arabic and the ability to work among the Iraqis.