

Spring Break in Iraq

Student embedded in Iraq to cover the war for college newspaper

By Ronald Paul Larson
KRT CAMPUS

There is only one reason to go to Kuwait now, and a person's reaction when I tell them I am going there illustrates it. They either roll their eyes with a sort of "Oh geez!" kind of expression or shake their head in disbelief. I feel a little self-conscious about telling people, but I must admit, I liked to see how they would react.

In London, my flight into Kuwait was delayed by several hours. As I sat at the gate, I wondered who would fly into a country on the eve of a war? In front of me, a Middle Eastern-looking man with short hair and gray eyes talked to a friend about the range of Scud missiles. When he saw me listening to him he began speaking another language.

I couldn't tell what it was. I thought it was either Hebrew or Arabic.

Sitting a few rows away from me was a young man with short hair. He could be military, I thought.

The ticket agent announced that we could begin boarding the bus to the airplane. When I walked to the counter to hand in my boarding pass, I thought I saw Christiane Amanpour, CNN's chief international correspondent, behind me. I heard her voice, and I knew it was her.

I wanted to go back and introduce myself, but I chickened out.

I was the third or fourth person on the bus. Others came on. One man sitting down a few seats away from me asked, "Where's Wolf Blitzer?" The gray-eyed man I saw earlier entered and sat opposite me. "Great," he said. "A busload of journalists." After a few moments, Amanpour got on and the gray-eyed man called at her, "Hey Christiane, if you need a liberal Kuwaiti perspective, interview me." Amanpour acknowledged him and began talking to the people around her.

Then Wolf Blitzer, CNN news anchor, came on board and sat up front by Amanpour.

Wow, I thought, I guess I am in the right place. Although I had been worried about being late because my departure had been delayed by technical problems, I felt relief. Nothing important could happen before Amanpour and Blitzer got there, I thought.

Our flight into Kuwait was delayed another hour on the runway so I took the opportunity to write Amanpour a note saying how much I respected her. During the stopover in Cyprus she invited me up to meet her.

She asked me what school I wrote for, and I told her Cal State Fullerton.

She then asked what unit I was embedded with.

I told her the 416th Engineer Command and then, trying to sound professional, used some military jargon. She pointed out that my readers would not know what I am talking about if I use jargon.

I agreed and, feeling like I had shown my lack of experience, thanked her for her advice. I went back to my seat.

She was very gracious. I felt like I blew it. I wrote her another note thanking her.

I arrived in Kuwait late Monday night. It was too late to go to the Coalition Forces Land Component Command, Public Affairs Office (CFLCC PAO).

I got there Tuesday morning to learn that journalist embedding had ended the day before. I was dumbfounded. How could I come so far, pay so much money, get so much publicity and not have it happen? I explained the reasons for my delay to the officers present and waited for a few hours.

Finally, an officer came out and told me that they would "take care of me." I felt reborn.

That night two CBS cameramen, who were going to be embedded with the 101st Airborne Division, and I were given a lesson on the nuclear/biological/chemical protective suit and how to give atropine antidote injections.

The next morning Staff Sgt. Johnson of the 318th Public Affairs Detachment, a stocky ex-college football linebacker from Indiana, drove

me to Camp Arifjan, which is west of Kuwait City.

"You are the last embed to be placed," he told me.

It was a distinction I could have done without. I am embedded with a cameraman for NBC news, a reporter for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, a cameraman and reporter for TVE (Spanish television) and two Chinese reporters from Phoenix Television in Hong Kong. But most of them will be moving to different units in a day or two.

One complication is the weather. As I write this on a Wednesday afternoon there is a fairly strong dust storm outside.

There is a constant and gusting wind. The sky is brown with sand and many of the soldiers walking outside wear goggles or sunglasses to protect their eyes. Some cover their

mouths with scarves.

The walls of the tents shake and undulate back and forth like waves and the air smells like dust. The only soldiers I have had a chance to talk to are those from the 318th Public Affairs Detachment in Kuwait City.

They all seem to be highly motivated and are reservists from southern Wisconsin, Indiana and the Chicago area.

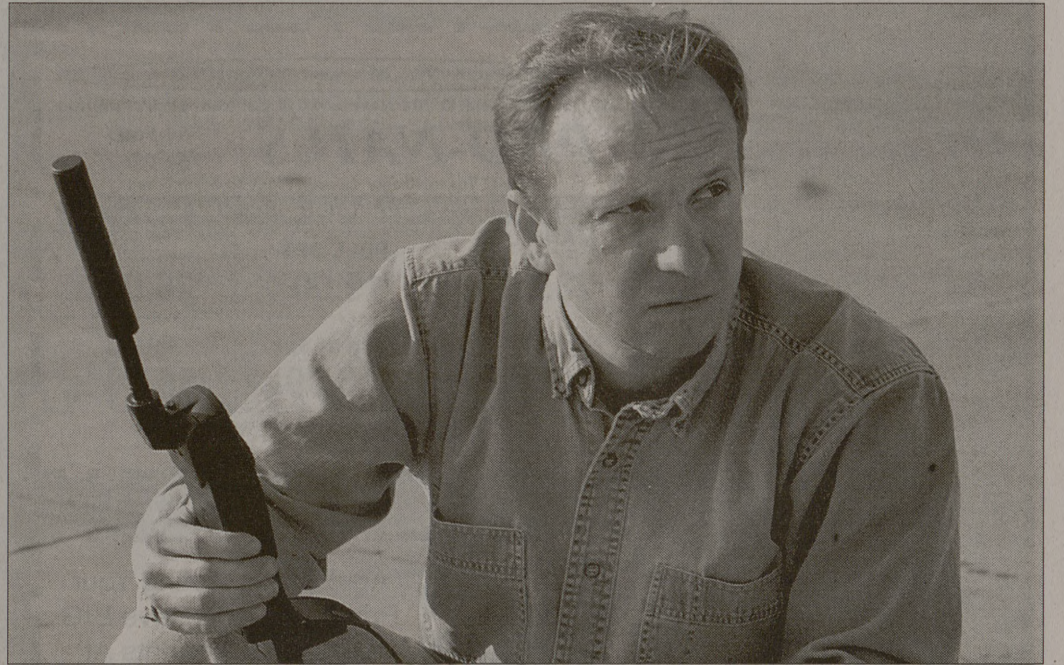
There is a good chance I will be sent to another engineer unit soon and will go farther north. I can report more after Thursday morning. There is still an air of uncertainty here.

The soldiers and journalists know what will probably happen in terms of the big picture, but not what will happen specifically to us as individuals, or when.

In my reporting in the next few weeks, I will attempt to describe what life is like for soldiers in my unit - what I see of the war.

"As I sat at the gate, I wondered who would fly into a country on the eve of a war?"

— Ronald Paul Larson
college war correspondent



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California State University at Fullerton Daily Titan writer Ronald Paul Larson, 39, tests the satellite phone he will be taking to Kuwait. Larson is the only college newspaper journalist for a college newspaper to be embedded with military forces to cover the war in Iraq.

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