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Sgt. Lizzie's Army, A New Face on the Iraq War [1]

During the invasion of Iraq and for several months afterward, there were 700 embedded reporters with U.S. and coalition troops. Literally thousands of stories flowed from those reporters: from inside battle zones; from the streets of Baghdad where a young person would be observed rubbing the sole of the shoe on a toppled statue of Saddam Hussein dragged through the street; from dancing crowds enveloping coalition troops. All this in news reports helped shape early public perceptions about the Iraq war.

Today the number of embeds has dwindled from 700 to 26, as reported to Worldcasting by Lt. Col. Barry Venable, Department of Defense press office spokesman.

The reason for this is not difficult to comprehend. Since the start of the Iraq conflict in March 2003 -- less than two and a half years ago -- more journalists plus media support staff have been killed in that country than during the entire 20-year period of the Vietnam war. There were 70 media deaths in Vietnam. In Iraq, 81 media workers have been killed.

As Adam Powell reported in Washington Journal, "Right now, the most memorable pictures from around the country (Iraq) come from video cameramen embedded with (or members of) the insurgency, showing bombings, beheadings and other anti-U.S. attacks of the day. The insurgents have grasped the power of the photograph, while U.S. media have largely abandoned the field, because it is too dangerous."

Dorrance Smith, a former news chief of the U.S. military-funded TV station in Iraq, Al-Iraqiya, wrote in a Wall Street Journal Op-Ed that numerous times the Arabic channel al-Jazeera "had advance knowledge of military actions against the coalition forces. Instead of reporting to the authorities that it had been tipped off, al-Jazeera would pre-position a crew at the event site and wait for the attack, record it and rush it on air."

Journalistically speaking, the Iraq conflict has become a B-roll war. B-roll, as it is known in TV news parlance, contains the visual elements of a TV report, which is then "voiced-over" by the TV reporter's narration.

But a new cadre of citizen journalists is beginning to counter the popular notion that a picture is worth a thousand words. That evolving press corps is comprised of military bloggers in Iraq and Afghanistan, and their families at home. It is providing another dimension to the story of war, the human interest dimension. This "puts a face" on a news report, which television also craves, from Oprah to 60 Minutes, where someone has something compelling to communicate in their own words, to engage TV viewers.

The new face of TV news is emerging first on the Internet, which will no doubt become part of

TV somehow, as the technologies continue to converge.

During the Vietnam war the average U.S. soldier spent five minutes on the phone every six weeks, says Jeffrey Cole, research professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication, where he is conducting a study of soldiers' use of e-mail.

"During Vietnam," Cole told Worldcasting, "a GI's phone conversation consisted mainly of 'I love you,' 'I miss you,' and 'How are the kids?.' "Iraq is the first conflict where most soldiers have had almost daily access to home through a PC made available to them. Soldiers are connected in a way that makes them part of the daily lives of family and friends. They can help with homework and be involved with family finances. Some National Guardsmen try to stay in touch with their businesses back home."

And e-mail does more than that to minimize the separation. There are hundreds of soldier bloggers on active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere who report what they see and feel each day upon return to the barracks. Hundreds of retired military also maintain professional-looking web sites, as do thousands of military contractors from the private sector, who also blog.

Will they replace real journalists? No. But they have an interactive connection with their readers that most journalists do not enjoy, and bloggers will continue to grow in number and influence.

Will bloggers influence public attitudes about the war in Iraq? Yes, I believe they will, one way or the other.

There are engaging bloggers who will likely be seen doing "news breaks" on cable news channels, appearing on Sunday news interview programs (perhaps their own) and working as mainstream TV reporters. And engineering geniuses will find new ways, with smaller and better computer equipment, to make Internet blogs competitive for audience share with TV news programs, as the technologies become more integrated.

The number of military bloggers is nearing 1,000. One popular blog is Sgt. Lizzie's "Life in this Girl's Army."

The Humvee carrying 24-year-old Sgt. Elizabeth Le Bel and her driver was hit by a roadside bomb north of Baghdad last December. Her driver was killed, but Sgt. Le Bel miraculously survived. During hospital recuperation, she sat down at a computer and became Sgt. Lizzy.

She is now at a military base near Miami, and will soon be leaving the military, a step that's arousing in her strong and mixed emotions. Sgt. Lizzie blogs that she has "a very intense feeling right now. Everything I am, my identity, has been so wrapped around being in the Army, being Sgt. L., that I am uncertain now. I have been looking online, and have done my resume, but it is still a very unsettling thing to think about. Thankfully I have the support of my family and my wonderful sweetheart. I know that this will come out OK. I do enjoy challenges, so this is a new one to face. Life on the outside, here I come, better watch out!

Dadmanley says his site is "Just one man's point of view, from the heart of Mesopotamia." He explains his name as: "Dadmanly. All Dad. All Man, and Manly. Coming soon as an animated feature (with robots and army men and laser guided missiles and stuff) to a Cineplex near

you."

Says Thunder6, perhaps a budding TV reviewer: "Yesterday I received a care package with DVDs of the FX show "Over There," a series loosely based on the experiences of soldiers here in Iraq. … My unit has spent the better part of a year here in Iraq attached to the 3rd Infantry Division (the unit highlighted in the show) and there wasn't a single scene that seemed even remotely plausible. (So) I will say that the show did an excellent job showing the audience one thing: That Hollywood has no clue what our experiences on the ground are really like."

Local U.S. military jurisdictions review blog content for security violations. This week the Army warned bloggers to be mindful that what goes on the web can be read by the enemy. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker informed all Army personnel that images showing weapon systems and information about military tactics could "needlessly place lives at risk."

But milbloggers just want to be themselves. Arkansas National Guardsmen wrote and recorded songs on a laptop which found their way on the Internet, one of which landed a record contract, with these lyrics:

You want to talk about it, you better keep it short
cause I got a lot of lost time I gotta make up for.

Others express their views about the field of battle, like a milblog serviceman who fights insurgents in the streets of Iraq. "We always talked about having the old beehive rounds," he writes, "a giant 120mm shotgun shell filled with 10,000 flashettes - tiny metal arrowhead-looking things. Whenever we had looked down a side street, there were always 10-30 insurgents with RPGs running up and down the parallel streets taking shots at us. And when we shot at them, we either had to spray with coax (a tank machine gun) or hit a guy with main gun. We could have killed so many more insurgents down every alleyway with a beehive round."

Then there is Major K, who tells readers he writes from Iraq "because someone has to…"

"The exchange of ideas can be a wonderful and fascinating process," says Major K. "It can also be very painstaking and frustrating. In training the new Iraqi Army, getting the message across is a very long and cumbersome process. I spend most of my time training the senior officers of the General Staff of the 6th Infantry Division. I am usually training men who are not only older than me, but of higher rank. In this war, every soldier has to be a little bit of a diplomat sometimes. I am now one most of the time."

Spouses of Iraq milbloggers have their own websites for others to read and contemplate, like Christy, whose husband Ryan battles the enemy in Iraq's Red Zone.:

"Right now," writes Christy, "I'm missing things I can't remember about Ryan. The little things. The sound of his voice escapes me sometimes. I try to play it, to remember it in my head, but it slips away.

"I wonder what his face looks like when it's not blurred through the Web cam connection. When I see it clearly, or in pictures, it's a surprise. Wow, Ryan has eyebrows.

"His smell. It's gone from his shirts, the combination of soap and Red Zone deodorant. I

brought them out today but I smelled nothing. I may be reduced to sniffing men's deodorant in the aisle of Wal-Mart soon."

The Mudville Gazette, run by an active duty serviceman who calls himself Greyhawk, cautions "The reader will kindly forgive any tendency to rough language or behavior on the part of the site owner….Good people sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence in their behalf."

"When a soldier is killed or wounded," reports Greyhawk, "the Department of Army calls the loved ones, and despite their attempts to be sympathetic, the nature of the calls has a way of shocking the families. There is just no easy way to say, 'Your son got shot today….' Lt. Col. Kurilla likes to call before the Army gets a chance to tell parents and loved ones the true circumstances. Kurilla is direct, but at least people know they are getting an accurate account.. The calls sound something like this: 'We are sorry to inform you that your son has been shot in Mosul. He's stable, but that's all we know at this time.'"

From Michael Yon's blogspot: "Chaplain Wilson came out from the hospital smiling and explained that Daniel (Sgt. Lama) was fine. The seizure was just a natural reaction to getting shot in the neck. It was just a flesh wound. As if offering proof, Chaplain Wilson said: 'When they rolled Daniel over, the doctor stuck his finger in Daniel's butt to check his prostate, and Daniel said, 'Hey! What are you doing?' Everybody laughed."

And this from a milblogger back in New York City, awaiting his return to Iraq for his second tour of duty.

"I went to see my family before going to Iraq," he reports. "It was really a nice visit. I get to be here for the baby. That's a huge plus, and I know it will make things better on Anne, but I still feel really weird about the whole thing."

This prompted Barb, a reader, to post her comment: "Good that you will be home for the baby's birth - but I know you were ready to go. Just remember the lines from Shakespeare in Love..".
"It'll work out."
"How?"
"I don't know ... it's a mystery."
posted by Barb : 1:01 AM

This is America's new face, coming soon to your TV.