



UNH MFA Student/Former Embedded Reporter Cited In Book On Iraq

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DURHAM, N. H. - University of New Hampshire graduate student Nathan Webster will tell you this about his first stint in Iraq as a freelance embedded photojournalist: he had no idea what he was doing.

He wasn't a seasoned newspaperman; he had an undergraduate degree in communications ('95) and had worked for a small paper for a year back in 1996.

And yet, his reporting found its way into Pulitzer Prize winner Tom Ricks' book "The Gamble." Webster is even credited with "according to."

"In 2007, I got it in my head that I was going to go over and write stories about the soldiers I met," says Webster, who graduates from UNH in May with an MFA in nonfiction creative writing. "To be an embedded journalist, you don't have to be associated with a news agency. If you can show up with body armor, you can go."

So, he laid out about \$3,000 for gear and a camera and wound up in Bayji, about 125 miles north of Baghdad. The city of about 200,000 inhabitants is home to Iraq's largest oil refinery.

Webster lived with a unit of 100 soldiers for three weeks, during which time the area was mortared every day.

"There was a constant sense of dread," he says.

And yet, he went back. In 2008, Webster spent another three weeks in Iraq, this time about 30 miles outside of Baghdad, in Tarmiyah where it was less violent and he felt safe.

Yet a month after he left, the town was attacked and an American soldier was killed.

"In 2007, I really had no idea what I was doing. But the second time was different," Webster says.

After both trips, the Stratham resident was able to sell his stories to newspapers in towns where the soldiers he met and wrote about were from. He also wrote for longwarjournal.com, the Web site where Ricks found Webster's story.

It was by accident that Webster learned he was quoted in the book. He contacted Ricks about a book tour the Washington Post correspondent was doing and Ricks emailed him back.

"He told me he was familiar with my work and that he had quoted me," Webster says. "I'm listed in the index: Webster, Nathan. To me, this validates my approach. It tells me that my work is credible."

His experiences in Iraq form the basis of his 300-page thesis, a book titled "Can't Give This War Away."

"That first night I flew into Iraq, the oil flares were venting into the sky. It was like flying into hell," Webster says. "It made me realize even more what I wanted to do; I wanted to be able to write 15, 20 inches about the average soldier who was there. I wanted to tell their stories."

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

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