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UAF quartet joins Fort Wainwright soldiers in Iraq

By [Richard Mauer](#)

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Kortnie Westfall couldn't believe what she had just heard.

Summoned to a meeting in April with the president of the University of Alaska, she thought she was in trouble for something in the campus paper, the Sun Star. She was the paper's editor and this was the first time Mark Hamilton had called her and the photo editor to his office.

Hamilton had a bombshell, all right, but it was an opportunity.

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"If I can find a way to get you there at no cost to you, would you be interested to go to Iraq?" he asked.

Westfall's mind started racing. "It was a little bit of, 'Hell, yes!' And a little bit of, 'I can't believe he just said that.' "

The meeting only lasted a few minutes.

"We were so excited I think we all called our families right away," photo editor Chris Cruthers said. "Unfortunately, things didn't work out."

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GOING TO WARHORSE

Much to their disappointment, Westfall and Cruthers are not among the three UAF students on the way to Iraq this weekend with a journalism professor for a month-long embed with Fort Wainwright's 1st Stryker Brigade. Westfall has just graduated and Cruthers is about to, and the university decided that only continuing students could go.

In their place are incoming Sun Star editor Tom Hewitt, 26, from Fairbanks; Jennifer Canfield, 25, a 2002 East High graduate from Anchorage; and Jessica Hoffman, 28, from Delta Junction. The professor is Brian O'Donoghue, a former Fairbanks Daily News-Miner reporter.

Adventurous and sometimes foolhardy college students have always been a presence as newspaper and radio stringers in war zones. But as far as O'Donoghue was able to determine in his months of preparations, it is the first time a university has made an official field trip of embedding with a military unit engaged in overseas combat. An Army spokesman said it has certainly never happened in Iraq.

The three students were picked from among a dozen initial applicants, in part to represent the diversity in media: a writer (Hewitt), a radio journalist (Canfield) and a videographer (Hoffman). They plan to be based at the Strykers' headquarters at Forward Operating Base Warhorse near the provincial capital of Baqouba, 30 miles from Baghdad.

At Warhorse, they may go on armored or foot patrols or spread out to other bases. The commander of the brigade, Col. Burt Thompson, has said he will have the students accompany him as he circulates around his battle space, meeting soldiers, Iraqi security commanders and local officials. It's likely they will go out with a provincial reconstruction team working to restore the local economy and services. At some point during their embed, they may find themselves guarded by Track Palin, a soldier and the ex-governor's son, who serves on a personal security detail in the brigade.

The students will prepare accounts and attempt to get them published in print or online or get them broadcast. They also have a blog.

CRAZY LOOKS

"It didn't take much of a brainstorm at all," Hamilton, the university president and a retired Army general, said in a recent interview. Rather, he said, the idea of sending the students to Iraq seemed like a logical follow-up to what they had already done.

Sun Star reporters embedded with Stryker soldiers during their training for Iraq and role-played reporter and subject, Hamilton said. He was also impressed by a special project called "A Year in the Desert," featuring dispatches from brigade soldiers after they reached Iraq.

O'Donoghue, the journalism professor, is the faculty advisor to the Sun Star. Once Hamilton's idea took life, O'Donoghue seemed the natural choice to organize and lead the trip.

As a young freelance journalist in 1979, O'Donoghue spent four months in Cairo filing dispatches for a wire service, so he knew something of the Middle East and of reporting under difficult circumstances. As a UAF professor, he taught a military reporting class called Pen and Sword.

O'Donoghue checked with the Army. The public affairs officers were enthusiastic and the Stryker brigade commander vowed to cut through any red tape that might get in the way.

Hamilton, meanwhile, was getting crazy looks from university lawyers and risk managers.

"What I told them was, I understand the role of risk management. You identify the risks, and then I'll manage it." Hamilton said he made it clear he wasn't asking anyone but himself to put his neck on the line.

Hamilton joined the Army during the Vietnam era and saw combat there and later in El Salvador, but that didn't play much into his decision, he said. What experience did tell him, however, was

that the students' hosts in Iraq would take their protection very seriously, he said. And dealing with danger is part of being a war correspondent -- why not train for it?

"Their stomachs will pitter-patter a little bit. It's not a bad thing for a journalist to feel," Hamilton said. "Talk about getting some sense of the people that you're looking at."

Putting students in a war zone might be new, but the university has long dealt with risks in Alaska. Biology and geology students on field trips have to cope with bears everywhere in the wild. A grad student was on Redoubt volcano a day before it blew this spring, O'Donoghue said. In 1997, an entire beginning mountaineering class at the University of Alaska Anchorage plunged down a snow chute on Ptarmigan Peak in Chugach State Park, killing two students and injuring 12.

Still, few geology or wilderness studies majors are likely to be asked to sign a liability release acknowledging the possibility of kidnap, torture and beheading.

"It was pretty extensive," Jessica Hoffman, the videographer and student, said of the waiver. "The one that kind of surprised us all was that it specifically stated in there that you could be beheaded."

The students were required to read about the kidnapping and beheading in Pakistan of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl. They studied the capsule summaries of each journalist killed in Iraq as reported by the Committee to Project Journalists -- the toll at the time was 139.

"Filling out those forms is valuable," said Hewitt. "It makes you check yourself and think, 'This is what I am getting myself into,' when you see the space on the form where you have to indicate your blood type and helmet size and the first person you want called when you get killed."

It was just such thoughts that led Jennifer Canfield, the student from Anchorage with the expertise in radio reporting, to laugh off the mass e-mail that the journalism department sent out in April announcing the possible Iraq embed. About 10 days later, she got an e-mail from O'Donoghue asking her if she would apply. "There's no fucking way they're going to get it approved, so I applied for it."

Well, it was approved, and with a budget of \$35,000. Out of that money, O'Donoghue had to get round-trip tickets to Kuwait and reliable video and audio equipment.

Insurance became a crisis. The only commercial policy he or the university could find would pay just for body recovery -- and that was something the Army would've provided for free, O'Donoghue said.

"I had some angst about taking students into a dangerous situation where they could be disabled and maybe face long-term consequences that they may have not grasped," O'Donoghue said.

Then someone tipped him off to the international press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders. For about \$4,500, he could get everyone life, long-term disability, medical and job retraining coverage.

When the journalism department pared the 12 applicants to five, it was up to O'Donoghue to pick the three who would go. Even though most of the students were in their mid to late 20s, he wanted to hear from their parents.

Uh oh, thought Canfield, the East High graduate whose mother was a single mom. Canfield had planned to tell her mother she was going to be really busy for a month, so please don't call. Now she figured she'd better tell her before O'Donoghue did, and was delightfully surprised by how supportive she was.

"She's my mother -- I don't talk to her about a lot of things," she said. "Now I'm thinking of all the other things I might want to tell her."

Hewitt's mother also was worried. But his father, a former Marine wounded in Da Nang in the Vietnam War who went on to a 30-year career as an outdoors writer, was all for the trip.

"He thinks the idea of somebody going over to write about the war is a lot better idea than going over to fight it," Hewitt said.

Hoffman grew up in a military family.

"My Mom is pretty upset about it. My Dad is a little concerned, but he was more concerned about the risk-to-compensation ratio." If she was going to Iraq, he told her, she should at least be working for a military contractor that offered great insurance and paid tons of money -- not as a student, preparing stories for nothing.

But for university president Hamilton, it's all about opportunities.

"This is part of being a reporter these days," he said. "This just isn't a story of what I did last summer. This is a tremendous, look-in-the-eye of this-is-your-profession."

Richard Mauer spent six weeks reporting in Iraq in 2007, including embedding with units of the 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry.

[Blog: UAF students in Iraq](#)

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