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War reporter likes 'being a soldier'

By Ben Arnoldy

One of the books I brought with me is "My War," Andy Rooney's memoir of his time as a journalist during World War II. In it, Rooney tells of Hal Boyle, who at the time was reporting for the Associated Press. When people would say to Boyle, "You must meet a lot of interesting people in your business," he would respond, "Yeah, I do. And most of them are other newspapermen."

Boyle's observation certainly rings true for me in Kuwait.

Some members of the press, for instance, have tried to "blend in" - much to the chagrin of other journalists - and are decked out in full desert camouflage, with their names and news organization stitched onto their "uniforms." Another has packed a large American flag he plans to unfurl in Baghdad.

And journalists watch out for each other. The big scare here is missing the call-up. Faster than you can get your gas mask on, some crucial administrative detail is reversed or announced only to a few lucky bystanders. So, many of us compare notes and adhere to a loose ethic of "no journalist left behind."

But the waiting appears to be over. Many of those embedded with the ground forces left today. Those assigned to Air Force units are expected to leave tomorrow.

Among those joining the Marines today is George C. Wilson. Wilson has been a military writer for so long that he's known as the "dean" of the Pentagon press pool. Thirty-five years ago he hopped helicopters to cover the frontlines of Vietnam for the Washington Post.

It turns out that rushing ahead with Marines was not his first choice.

"Just for kicks, I asked to be embedded with an Iraqi outfit," Wilson says. "I said [to the Iraqi ambassador that] I want to spend some time to look through the end of the telescope of the Iraqi military."

Not surprisingly, the ambassador never called back. But Wilson was surprised that the National Journal - a publication that rarely sends its writers abroad - agreed to finance his going abroad for one last war.

"It's still exciting," he says. "I like being a soldier, seeing real things instead of [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld's portrait of what's going on in the world."

Wilson has seen Pentagon-press relations come full circle. In the early days of the Vietnam conflict, the Pentagon offered all-expenses-paid trips to reporters who would cover Southeast Asia. As the war expanded, the Pentagon no longer needed to encourage

editors to send reporters.

By the end of the war, the top brass had soured on the press, an attitude that prevailed through the '80s. When Wilson moved among soldiers in the 1980s, he had to combat a perception that the press had lost Vietnam. As Wilson sees it, the press merely relayed the unflattering truth of what the commanders in the field were telling them.

"I think Vietnam was one of the press's finest hours," he says. "They found out what was going on, they conveyed it to the people, people conveyed it to Congress, and Congress stopped the war by cutting off the money for it."

After shutting out the press during the first Gulf War, the pendulum seems to have swung back again. But, for Wilson, the jury's still out on whether embedding will be a success for journalism.

"It's going to be so tough to resist the story of how great these kids are and forget about what they are doing," he says. While there will be many journalists in Iraq not attached to military units, Wilson doubts the coverage will balance out "because we don't have anybody with the bad guys."

Editor's note: csmonitor.com reporter Ben Arnoldy is on assignment in Kuwait as part of the Pentagon's program "embedding" journalists with troops involved in the expected invasion of Iraq. His reporting is collected in the web special project Assignment: Kuwait (<http://www.csmonitor.com/specials/kuwait/>).

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