

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH AIR FORCE TECHNICAL
SERGEANT KEN RAIMONDI AND AIR FORCE TECHNICAL SERGEANT NATHAN GALLAHAN
SUBJECT: "30 DAYS THROUGH AFGHANISTAN" PHOTOJOURNALISM BLOG PROJECT TIME:
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PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense
for Public Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the
Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable for Friday, March 26th, 2010.
My name is Petty Officer William Selby with the Office of the Secretary
of Defense Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line: Please remember to clearly
state your name and blog organization in advance of your question.
Respect our guests' time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest -- guests are U.S. Air Force Tech Sergeants Ken
Raimondi and Nathan Gallahan.

With that, Tech Sergeants, if you have opening statements, you
can go ahead with those. SGT. GALLAHAN: Hi, this is Tech Sergeant
Nathan Gallahan. I was a blogger and photographer for the "30 Days
Through Afghanistan" ISAF project that began February 8th and ran through
March -- (audio break).

SGT. RAIMONDI: My name is Tech Sergeant Ken Raimondi. I was a
blogger on the project.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that. And we'll go ahead and get
started, then.

Maggie, you were first, so you can go ahead and shoot away with
any questions you may have, and then we'll go to Tech Sergeant Hanson and
Shalil (sp) and do the same.

Q Very good. Morning, gentlemen.

SGT. GALLAHAN: Good morning.

SGT. RAIMONDI: Good morning.

Q I very much enjoyed your project. I want you to know, if you ever come to Boston, I will spring for the heated clam chowder, since you guys almost killed me with that one.

SGT. GALLAHAN: (Laughs.)

SGT. RAIMONDI: (Laughs.)

Q I want to know, what was the -- what was the thing that surprised you the most when you were going through? What was it you didn't know going in that totally blew you away?

SGT. GALLAHAN: Well, I've had a few moments. I admit that the first thought out of my mind when you asked that was that nothing really surprised, just because we have been east and west. But then as Ken was answering, I kind of realized the most surprising aspect of the 30 Days project for me was the fact that we ever even did 30 days through Afghanistan.

From the inception of the idea, Ken and I both figured that it would just automatically be disapproved and it would be filed away, and that -- when we approached our leadership, we went into that -- those initial meetings preaching exactly what we wanted to do. And just right from the get-go, they said, "We're doing this. Let's get going and let's get on the -- let's get going and get the project done." And so that was extremely surprising for me.

SGT. RAIMONDI: And this is Tech Sergeant Raimondi. Just to follow that up, what was -- what was surprising for us is that, you know, we had a lot of weight on our shoulders, because we were reporting whatever we saw the same day, and there was no approval chain. What we saw we talked about -- meaning that if we saw something, you know, bad, we were going to talk about it; if we saw something good, we were going to talk about it, to use generic terms.

But just -- you know, a line from Nate's blog, you know, we really did see 90 percent hope and 10 percent -- and I don't think we even saw horror; we saw --

SGT. GALLAHAN: (Laughs.) (Inaudible.)

SGT. RAIMONDI: We didn't see anything like that, but I mean, you know, we know there are stories out there. But, I mean, really the whole 35 days through, we saw almost endless, you know, opportunity and good spirits out there. And it was really a morale booster for us about the whole mission, really.

SGT. GALLAHAN: It really was. You know, the "10 percent horror" line -- like Ken was saying, we never much saw horror or -- with our own eyes, but I remember we were in the south talking to the chief master sergeant, and they have the -- what do they call them when they go out to the runway to see off casualties?

SGT. RAIMONDI: Oh, the ramp ceremonies.

SGT. GALLAHAN: Right, the -- and he had been to 117 ramp ceremonies in the time he had been there. And it was just frustrating, really. It just -- knowing that there are people out there that have seen that many ramp ceremonies and knowing that it's -- really is affecting their lives -- that, you know, there really is 10-percent horror, that's for sure.

But there's so much hope. That's -- I agree with Ken, that's -- it was very surprising.

Q Very good. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay. And Tech Sergeant Hanson, you can go ahead.

Q Hey, hey, guys. First of all, I want to say great job on your blog. I know you guys probably had a difficult time trying to get that out every day, and I was hoping you could describe some of those difficulties.

You know, you're traveling every day, and sometimes you got stuck at places, but what was the most difficult part of communicating your product back to people like you're -- you had meant to do? What difficulties did you face?

SGT. RAIMONDI: Yeah, this is -- this is Raimondi. The hardest thing for me on the video site -- I guess it's two-fold. One, I've never had to create a video story every day for 35 straight days. (Chuckles.) So that was -- that was very trying, both on equipment and, you know, my will. You know, you have a lot of late nights.

But the second thing and what was really a big challenge was finding even enough Internet access to upload directly to our site, because every night we had to FTP directly, you know, the video product and the blogs to that website.

Now, the blogs and the photos were a little bit easier to get up, but the videos were always kind of a monster. And so often enough we'd land into an area and the first thing we had to do was find Internet access.

But before you do that, you have to meet and greet everybody and establish all your point of contacts. And you know, all of that takes time. And we're -- you know, almost every night when we would travel and we'd land some place, we wouldn't even start working that night until nine, 10 o'clock at night, because it would take all day just to meet people and find the places to work and find where we're going to upload our product. So that was a -- that was a huge challenge.

Q Okay, thank you.

And what about the blogger? How about you? What was your most difficult --

SGT. GALLAHAN: (Inaudible) -- for me, there were some days where -- you know, because I'm very passionate for photography, and there were a lot of times when we'd be stuck in location trying to move, whether it was out east or even south, and we'd be there for four days on the FOB and trying to come up with things to take photos of. And it kind of beat me up a little bit, because, as a photo journalist, you're always out to take pictures of action shots and people working and highlighting people and what they're doing.

And going into this 30-days project, I remember Bill Mattheson (ph) commented on a -- on a photo I shot of a bus stop down in Kandahar. And you know, originally, I was wondering whether or not that was even a good photo. But he was really surprised by it, so I just kind of adopted the tourist-photographer mentality where I was just trying to document the things I was seeing and living and using the photography as an avenue of education on the everyday lives of service members throughout Afghanistan. So I guess one of the most challenging things for me in the photographer's sense was just shifting gears from being a photojournalist to more being a tourist.

And in regards to the -- in regards to the blogging, that just comes naturally to me. So I wouldn't say the blogging aspect is necessarily challenging in any regard, because there's so many people in this country that have so much to say and there's so much to talk about that I could have spent, you know, 10 years blogging every day and could have found something new to talk about. So the blog in itself wasn't necessarily that challenging for me.

Q Okay, great. Thank you so much.

PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM SELBY: And Maggie, you can go ahead with your follow-ups.

Q What was the response of the -- I know that you saw our allies over there. What was their higher-ups' response to the fact that our military was letting you do this. Did they think it was a good idea? Did they want you to go away?

SGT. GALLAHAN: We -- as we -- as we progressed through, you know, there were some worries. But as soon as we got face time with our allies, everybody was gung ho for it. Everybody was really excited, especially after they started seeing the products and what we were doing. They were -- they were happy to have us out there and to contribute to the overarching story.

You know, this was an overall ISAF project, so it was well coordinated in advance that they all understood kind of the blanket ideals of what were trying to do.

But it wasn't until Ken and I really had face-to-face time with the points of contact -- on the ground, out in the middle of nowhere --

that they kind of really adopted it and understood what it was we were looking for.

SGT. RAIMONDI: It was a hard concept to get across, mainly because it is so out of the norm, but just to take one example.

When we were first kind of getting our feet wet with this project and creating it, the German public affairs officer from up north happened to be down here. And we showed him the project. And his reaction just was amazing.

He was so excited about it. And he was just like, this is an awesome thing. Wow, you guys came up with this. You know, where did this come from? This is awesome.

And so, and that was kind of a good boost for us, because we didn't know what the reaction really was going to be going out to all these, you know, different areas, with all the different ISAF partners.

So yeah, overall though very positive.

Q Very good, thanks.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Tech Sergeant Hanson.

Q Yes. Hi again.

Well, first of all, I want to say that usually there's a few more people on the line to ask questions. And I can tell you, they're missing out today. I think that you guys have something here that maybe people haven't caught onto yet, as far as your products that you produced over the last 30 days.

So hopefully with our blogs, we'll get more attention to what I think is a well-deserved blog spot. And I think you guys did a fantastic job. And I hope that with us out there blogging about it, more people will go and read what you've produced, because I think it's fabulous.

My next question is, your mission was to maybe get the word out more about the ISAF. And I want to know, do you feel like you've met that mission? Or were you hoping for a little bit more? Or do you think you have what you got and you did exactly as you had hoped and maybe even better?

SGT. GALLAHAN: Well, I don't -- I don't know about Ken. But I'm pretty sure I can speak for both of us to say that 30 days, 35 days for the project at this level wasn't long enough.

There's so much happening in this country. We -- I don't believe I ever had a chance to talk about law-enforcement professionals and their contributions in this country.

They're out there, USAID and these other -- all these. There are just so many elements, so much complexity, that you could really

spend months and months and months, if not years, talking about all the complexities of this country.

So do I feel that I personally met the mission that I hope to do? Looking back, I did the best -- I did the best that we possibly could, in the time frame that we had. But I really wish I had more time to continue to tell all these various aspects.

Because I really think that once average citizens of the worldwide community start understanding that, yes, there's politics surrounding Afghanistan, but the core of what all of these nations are doing is genuinely a good thing -- we're really doing something really special here -- I would love the opportunity to continue to try to tell the entire story of Afghanistan, so people can make their own judgments and feelings on that, what they're learning.

SGT. RAIMONDI: Yeah, the story -- I totally agree with what Nate just said. But the story of Afghanistan is so complex.

I remember early in our journey, somebody had posted the "30 Days through" teaser somewhere. They said, you know, expect this to be kind of a novice's guide to counterinsurgency.

And honestly if that was -- if that's the mission then yes, I think we did that. I think we gave a very ripe overview of some of the things that are happening here.

But again with 30 days and the complexities of travel and all the things we were trying to cover, it is definitely barely even skimming the surface of what's happening here.

So I think we met the goal of doing that, of showing people a piece of Afghanistan that maybe they haven't seen.

But yeah, I don't think we were able to get much deeper than that, and hopefully in the future somebody's able to do that.

Q Okay. Thank you. Now you are stationed over there, correct?

SGT. RAIMONDI: Yes. Yeah, we're stationed at ISAF Joint Command in Kabul. We've been here both since October.

Q Since October. So are you getting ready to go home?

SGT. GALLAHAN: In a very short time, yes.

Q Okay. So I guess there will have to be a part two from the next crew that comes. So you've set -- you've set the bar high for them.

SGT. : (Chuckles.)

SGT. : Well, we appreciate that.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that. And Maggie, do you have any follow-up questions?

Q Well, first off, I'd like to echo the praise you're getting. I loved it, and I thought you did a great job, and it's, you know, cutting-edge to have you guys do that, and I'm glad people said yes.

What kind of feedback are you getting from the civilian world? I know there are comments on your blog. Do you -- do you think you're really reaching people and giving them an insider's view?

SGT. RAIMONDI: Yeah. We reached people; there's no doubt about that. As to the scope and magnitude, you know, who knows?

But it's obvious the people who have followed this journey were touched by it. And that is, to me, the biggest success out of this whole thing.

The people who followed us -- some of them had children stationed over here. Some of them were, you know, in training at (ROK B ?). It was just a wide scope of people, and the ones that followed it really learned something, and they kind of -- their comments fueled us throughout this entire journey. And do I hope in the future that it gets to be a little bit bigger? Yes. Keep in mind, you know, we kind of created and brainstormed this project in January and were to leave in February. So we didn't have a whole lot of spin-up time to get the word out there. But no doubt, the people who followed this journey were definitely touched by it, and the comments I will never forget.

Q Okay.

SGT. GALLAHAN: Yeah, I echo those sentiments that the comments and feedback -- and you know, a majority of them were from Americans, the -- you know, their families and things over here. But some of the most absolutely heartwarming, touching comments came from -- (well, it's on the Challenge of a Lifetime blog ?). There was a lady on there from Pakistan who talked about how beautiful Afghanistan was when she was a child -- she had gone to the border -- and, you know, how much it meant that, you know -- and there people commenting about how much it meant to them that we were sharing the culture and how beautiful the Afghan people are.

And you know, Ken hit it on the head when he said that the comments fueled us. They really did. That real -- real-time feedback -- I can't tell you how many times I sat there refreshing the web page after I just posted a blog five minutes ago, looking to see if anybody commented. (Laughter.)

Were we happy with the scoop? I mean, it just goes back to my overreaching nature, where, you know, would I have been happy if 5 million active followers would comment and then we have 3,000 comments on

each blog and all this? Oh, yeah. I mean, that would have been -- that would have been great.

Would it have been great if our success will reach out beyond the military community, (we'd been more vast ?)? Yes.

We did a good job of marketing to the military community, you know, with -- (at mil support ?) they put a -- you know, they had us on their website every day for 35 days straight.

It would have been nice to touch the absolute disconnected from the military population more so, but I think, with a project like this, you can't go into it expecting absolute perfect results on the very -- the first project ever. This just opens the doors for future people to come through with huge successes. And that's what I really hope that a project of this nature does, is it just opens the doors for ISAF and the rest of the military communities around the world to see that the -- that first-person journalism versus -- you know, I mean the blogging and first-person journalism, whatever you want to coin it -- really can add to the military story in the conflicts and counterinsurgencies like Afghanistan.

Q Okay, do you have second for a couple of questions that are coming up on Twitter?

SGT. GALLAHAN: Of course.

SGT. RAIMONDI: Yeah, we have all night.

Q (Laughs.) Okay. The e-mail blogger Bouhammer, he's sitting in an airport somewhere and can't get on line, so he just sent me a question: Did they really feel at the start that they could get everywhere they wanted in 30 days with the surge going on? What were your expectations?

SGT. RAIMONDI: Honestly, not really. We kind of hoped. We knew that travel was going to be a huge part of the story, but because of our deployment window, a month was really all we could do. And we knew that would be part of the story. But did we think we'd make it in 30 days? It was a goal -- (laughs) -- but we had a feeling that travel, you know, could certainly be an issue.

SGT. GALLAHAN: We had the -- we had the gears rolling for understanding that this may take longer than 30 days before the project ever started.

Q Okay. And the other question is, looking back, what would you have done differently in how you approached this project?

SGT. GALLAHAN: The -- well, the one thing that I would have done differently is started planning earlier. We did a lot of -- I mean, we really put this program together or this project together very, very quickly. Had we had more time to put the project together, to actually travel through the -- (inaudible) -- make eye contact with points of

contact and say this and this is what we want to do, things would have been a lot easier throughout the travels. And so I think really the planning -- the planning phase could have been lengthened to allow more time for that kind of -- (inaudible).

Q Very good.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: All right, gentlemen. And thank you to the bloggers for your questions, and thank you to the tech sergeants for your answers. If you have any closing statements, you can go ahead with those now. SGT. RAIMONDI: Yeah. Again, I just want to say that this was an honor for Nate and I -- and I know I speak for him on this, too -- to even have an opportunity to do something like this. Again, when we pitched this, it was a pipe-dream, and it was like -- you know, it was a conversation we had on the bus that we never thought would really come to reality. And again, we're thankful for the leadership and for the moment in time that we had here to make this possible.

And on a side note: Maggie, my family's from Oxford, Mass, so I might take you up on that offer on Boston. (Laughs.)

Q (Laughs.) Good deal.

SGT. GALLAHAN: Well, and for me, I just really hope that this project really could bring the light to people's lives that, you know -- (inaudible) -- I know that it has. And it was truly an exceptional experience of my military career that I'll -- that I'll never forget. And I really, truly hope that it opens doors for future military journalists to utilize a different method in telling a true, unbiased story of the various conflicts and things happening across the world.

You know, a lot of people use the word "new," or "groundbreaking" or whatnot, but I don't necessarily see it as that, because I believe that this is the foundation, this is the history of military journalism -- kind of revealing its face once again after 50 years of not being seen. This type of journalism, whether you call it blogging, first-person journalism, or 1940s journalism, has been seen before. And I really believe that if the -- if the Department of Defense and the military public-affairs community adopt it, that our ability to kind of tell a true and unbiased account of what's happening will, you know, really get a lot better.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Roger that. And thank you very much, Tech Sergeant Raimondi and also Tech Sergeant Gallahan.

Today's program will be available online on the bloggers roundtable link on dodlive.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents such as their bios and the audio file and print transcripts.

Again, thank you very much to our blogger participants and Tech Sergeant Raimondi and Tech Sergeant Gallahan.

This concludes our roundtable. Feel free to hang up.

Q Thank you.

SGT. GALLAHAN: Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much, by the way. I really enjoyed all your blogs, just as a -- on a personal note.

SGT. RAIMONDI: Oh, thank you. SGT. GALLAHAN: Appreciate that.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Yeah.

END.