

# The Regional Reporter

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MAY 2004



## Regionals can go global

*Traveling to Iraq  
not as difficult as  
you might expect*

SNG Washington Bureau Chief Edward Felker stands next to a fuel convoy in January in southern Iraq.

**Editor's note:** For regional reporters in Washington, the war in Iraq is often covered from afar, usually from the committee rooms and legislative chambers on Capitol Hill, but that doesn't need to be the case. Ed Felker has visited Iraq twice during the past four months. Ed is the bureau chief for the Small Newspapers Group, a chain of newspapers with dailies in Illinois, Indiana and Minnesota. An example of his work from Iraq can be found at <http://www.qconline.com/archives/qco/sections.cgi?!id!181603>

By ED FELKER  
Small Newspapers Group

During my second trip to Iraq this year, I got a curious e-mail from a public affairs officer with the Army. It seems a reporter wanted to accompany a local commander to Kuwait, and the officer wanted to know what it took for me to get to Iraq and to get my stories. It sounded like he expected a Power Point briefing.

Anything but. My answer was simple. First, take your passport and go get a visa from the Kuwaiti or Jordanian embassy here in Washington.

Second, buy a plane ticket. Off you go.

OK, maybe it's not that simple. Getting to your interviews after landing in the Middle East takes a few more steps, but not many, and none very difficult. The logistics can be surprisingly manageable, even with the recent troubles in Fallujah and Najaf.

If you think you want to go, by all means, consider doing so. The personal and professional satisfaction of getting the local story in such a remote and dangerous place will last forever. And you will hammer the competition.

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## RESTIVE REGIONS

**Bart Sullivan** is the new regional reporter for the Memphis Commercial Appeal after spending the past 11 years with the paper in Memphis. He replaces **James W. "Woody" Brosnan**, who now covers Washington for the Birmingham, Ala., Post-Herald and Albuquerque, N.M., Tribune.

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT

By JAKE THOMPSON ■ Omaha World-Herald

# More associating, less reporting at happy hour

## *Seminar offers convention tips, ideas*

CREDENTIALS FOR WWII MEMORIAL EVENT MAY BE TOUGH TICKET

Dear Regionals:

**H**ello to all. Several things are in the wings I want to share. First, the RRA board, in an effort to boost consumption of motivational spirits and RRA's membership, is planning to host an RRA Happy Hour later this month or in June in the National Press Club. The event will be on a Monday evening. We'll offer snacks and a free drink (beer or wine or sparkling water) to RRA members and guests, hoping to give members a chance to chat with each other in a non-news setting and perhaps bring new people to the organization. A date is not set yet, but I'll send out an email soon. Please think of guests to bring.

Second, the National Press Foundation is planning to hold seminar probably on Tuesday, June 1, for RRA members and some others on covering the presidential conventions. They're lining up several veteran convention reporters and editors who will discuss story ideas for those who might be going to Boston or New York this summer, and offer suggestions for those stuck in DC who might want to write advance stories. Even for those who have covered previous conventions, this should be a helpful refresher that could trigger ideas well ahead of the chaotic

events. I'll be sending an email out soon with all the details, including how to sign up.

Third, the World War II Memorial has opened on The Mall and planners are working on a huge event for Memorial Day. If you don't have press credentials, you could contact Caroline Wolter of the PR firm Burston-Marsteller PR, which is handling the issue for the American Battle Monuments Commission. I've heard it may be difficult to get them now, so please put in your requests soon. Her number: 202-614-4256.

Join!

Finally, many of you have paid your 2004 membership dues of \$20. We will be sending out an email letting you know we have received it and to thank you. For those who haven't, please go to RRA's Web site, **RRA.org**, print out the page at the "Join" button, fill it out and mail it to us. We appreciate your support, which will enable the organization to continue trying to help you do your job here in Washington.

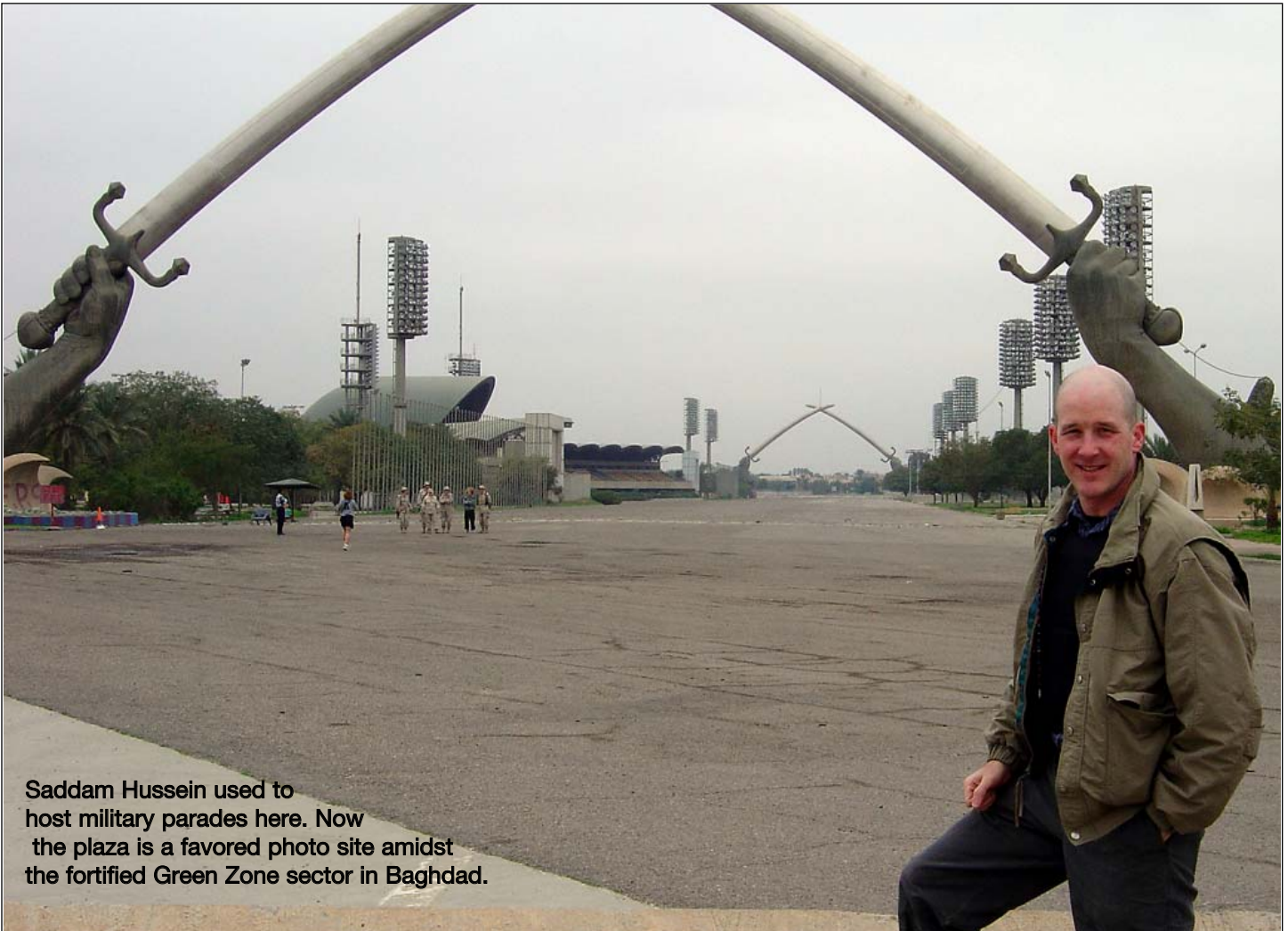
Thank you all,  
**Jake Thompson**

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Find us on the Web:  
**[www.rra.org](http://www.rra.org)**



**Saddam Hussein used to host military parades here. Now the plaza is a favored photo site amidst the fortified Green Zone sector in Baghdad.**

## IRAQ

Continued from Page 1

I visited Kuwait and Iraq during the month of January. I returned for 17 days in March. My objective: Write about and photograph local soldiers and civilian employees working in the two countries. When preparing for those trips, my first task back in the states was to identify those units and the second was to request access and living arrangements.

Generally, you need to get approval for your visit from the field commanders of the units you want to monitor. They will then have to clear it with their higher command, so be patient, even if they are amenable. This process can take a few days, or even a couple weeks, so don't hold them to a strict deadline. Send gentle e-mail reminders, and sometimes call them if they have a cell phone, just to express your interest more directly. Believe me, they want you there.

Next comes transportation decisions. In January, I flew into Kuwait for about \$1,400 round trip. I then rented a car, booked a hotel and began visiting local Army employ-

ees at their base. After a week, I asked to move onto the base, and the Army agreed, which eliminated my commute and some staggering hotel and food expenses.

The Army assigned a staffer to accompany me for 11 days in Iraq. I met with employees from the Rock Island Arsenal, a local guard unit and local Army Corps of Engineers employees working in Baghdad. We traveled with Army supply convoys in an SUV. The downside was being tied to my Army staffer. He was liable for my safety, and could not take me into civilian areas outside of an armed convoy without risking his job. So, I didn't spend any time with Iraqi civilians on this trip.

I went back to Iraq in March because I simply was unable in January to visit all the units from the region I cover. This time, I flew into Amman, Jordan for about \$800 round trip and joined with Marcus Stern of Copley News Service and a photographer for the trip into Baghdad. We

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## IRAQ

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used a private ground transportation company that charged \$400 each way per van load. The company has since suspended taking reporters to Baghdad. However, another option is to take a Royal Jordanian roundrip from Amman to Baghdad for about \$1,100 round trip.

In Baghdad, I followed a local Army Reserve Unit. I went on missions with them and ate with them in their chow hall. I filed stories and photographs via the Army's very slow Internet system or through a high-speed Internet cafe that charged me \$3 an hour. After about 10 days of following the military, I hired an interpreter for \$100 a day and spent three days conducting interviews and taking photos around Sulimaniyah and Kirkuk, which is in the Kurdish-controlled north-east section of Iraq.

My interpreter sorted out taxi drivers and interview subjects, no small service when you could be kidnapped or handed over to insurgents. I also visited the nearby town of Halabja, where Saddam gassed up to death 5,000 Kurds in 1988. I went to the new memorial museum there and interviewed survivors.

Throughout, I depended on a Thuraya satellite phone for communication within Iraq and back to the states. I also took my own flak vest, which I rented from another bureau here in Washington. I also took my own helmet. The military demands that reporters traveling with it wear body armor in vehicles and outside bases. I never wore the

armor when traveling on my own. Nor did I carry a weapon, much to the shock of soldiers who thought I was insane.

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**When traveling with the military, the risk was obvious. On my own, the danger of being kidnapped, shot or being involved in a traffic accident was always there.**

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I was aware at every moment I was in a dangerous place. When traveling with the military, the risk was obvious. On my own, the danger of being kidnapped, shot or being involved in a traffic accident was always there. I tried to stay in non-descript hotel to lower the chances of being near a car bombing. I also tried to stay on the move in case my presence was relayed to potential kidnappers.

Upon my return to the states, I found myself exhausted mentally. Take time off when you return, and don't expect to hit your stride quickly. To wrap up, the biggest key to traveling to Iraq was commitment to the

assignment and flexibility once there. The troops are incredibly grateful to get attention from their home town news, and there is no better way to get the real story than visiting with them.

Finally, one perceived drawback from going to Iraq is cost. But it wasn't nearly as much as one might expect. The total was a little more than \$10,000, not bad for 47 days in Kuwait and Iraq.

Good luck and let me know if you plan to go at [sng@nationalpress.com](mailto:sng@nationalpress.com).

## Applications now being accepted for the Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowships

The National Press Foundation is accepting applications for the 2004-2005 Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowships until 5 p.m. on June 1.

The fellowships have been extremely popular among regional reporters, and despite some cutbacks of late, the program is in its 18th year. It is a monthly series of one-day seminars in which reporters learn the basics of regional reporting from Washington, and it is open to reporters who are already based here or soon will be assigned here.

Paul Miller fellows learn from veteran colleagues, officials and experts about how to mine the nation's capital for local stories.

Fifteen reporters will be selected competitively. Supervisors must agree to allow reporters to attend seminars, and reporters must attend.

To apply, send a letter stating why you wish to attend, a letter of support from your supervisor, a brief bio and three clips or tape. Applications will not be returned. They should be sent to National Press Foundation, Paul Miller Fellowships, 1211 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 310, Washington, D.C. 20036. The e-mail address is [npf@nationalpress.org](mailto:npf@nationalpress.org), and the fax number is (202) 530-2855. Call Nolan Walters for information at (202) 663-7283.

# Briefing will offer tips on covering conventions

Covering national political conventions as a regional reporter is a great opportunity but a big challenge as well. By the time the conventions start, the candidates are already obvious. The events do not generate the news they once did.

But that does not mean there isn't any news. Regional reporters can find plenty of angles on their local delegations and other stories, too. But how? The National Press Foundation is hosting a briefing for the Regional Reporters Association on June 1 to help answer that question.

Scheduled to appear are Frank Baker, who managed the Associated Press' regional coverage of the conventions in 2000; James R. Carroll, who has covered every convention

since 1984 as a regional reporter; and Larry Arnold, a former regional reporter at the '96 and 2000 conventions now covering Justice for Bloomberg News.

Plenty of time will be set aside for questions, and as with all NPF seminars, everything is on the record. A continental breakfast will be served beginning at 9 a.m.

The seminar is free and on the record. Seating is limited, however, so reservations are a must.

To claim a spot, contact the National Press Foundation at <mailto:npf@natpress.org>. 202-663-7285. Give your name, organization, contact number and email. The National Press Foundation office is at 1211 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 310, about two blocks north of the Mayflower Hotel.

## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Please fill in the following information and return it with your \$20 dues payment to: The Regional Reporters Association, Ben Franklin Station, P.O. Box 254 Washington, DC 20054-0254

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State: \_\_\_\_\_

Office Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: \_\_\_\_\_

New applicant  Renewal

Please list the publications or stations that you work for, including city and state:

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