

Shoestring journo reports war on terror with just a backpack and notebook

by Matt Nippert

Five years ago, Jon Stephenson was just another journalism student at the Auckland University of Technology. Two years later he was in Pakistan, a place where even seasoned journalists like Daniel Pearle from the *Wall Street Journal* meet messy ends.

Fast forward to 2003, and Stephenson (41) was in the thick of the war in Iraq. He was present at the fall of Saddam's statue in Baghdad and was even in Basra when Prime Minister Helen Clark made a flying stop to visit New Zealand engineers.

Mr Stephenson, who is heading back to Iraq this month as New Zealand's sole foreign correspondent in the country, is a bit of a journalistic loner.

Carrying only "a small backpack, a digital notebook and a digital camera", he feels he is better able to cover the conflict than major networks weighed down with many staff and heavy equipment.

Mr Stephenson left his AUT journalism course to work for the *National Business Review* and then the *Independent*. But after September 11, he felt it was time to travel abroad and see world events close up.

"It's what really motivated me. Since 9-11 I've focussed largely on the so-called war on terror."

He is sceptical of "big media" coverage, which he says "tends to go after the superficial angles, treating people as a means to an end." Mr Stephenson prefers to stay low-key and keep clear of media scrums that surround press conferences and "staged" events.



GOODBYE SADDAM: Mr Stephenson (right) and Portuguese reporter Daniel Rosario, after the statue fell.

He cites the tearing down of Saddam Hussein's statue in Fardas Square on April 9 last year as an example of distorted coverage.

The image of a cheering, pro-Bush crowd, was reported by the major media networks as one of the defining moments of the conflict.

He says there was a perception that once the statue fell, the war was over.

This perception "is a myth", he says.

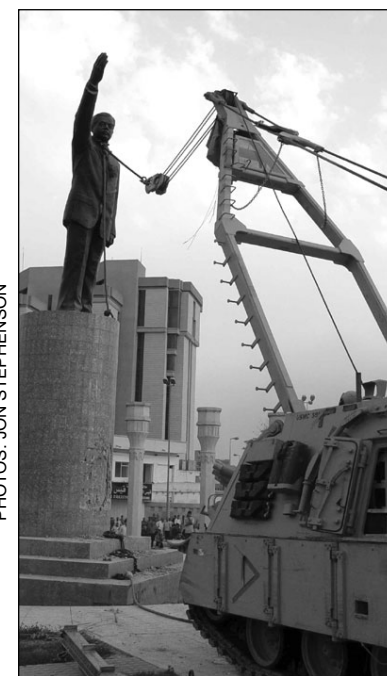
"There was heavy fighting for days after the statue was pulled." In his view, most Baghdad people were still in hiding and the "crowds" came from elsewhere.

"Some of Chalabi's [the US-appointed head of the Iraqi Governing Council] gang were bussed in. There were photos of some of his party in

Nasiriyah a few days earlier.

"It appears as though they were transported in with the assistance of the Americans. These people were briefed to approach the media and make certain comments like, 'Bush is good', and 'down with Saddam.'

"There's a journalist's proverb that says 'when conflicts get really dangerous, they don't get reported well'. Now



Saddam's statue falls in Baghdad.

is the time people really need to know what's going on in Iraq."

The danger leads many media organisations and corporations to hire bodyguards. Mr Stephenson doesn't employ any himself, preferring to conserve resources and keep a low profile. But he says New Zealanders considering going to Iraq to earn lucrative sums as "mercenaries" need to think carefully first.

"These people really need to ask themselves: Are they prepared to be seriously wounded or killed? They're all targets, people who work for the coalition are regarded as legitimate targets by the insurgents.

"Is it moral to be a hired gun?"

He says his family and friends are concerned about the danger he faces, but support his decision to travel into conflict zones. "I suppose it's natural they get pretty concerned.

"They trust I'll be sensible and take whatever precautions I can ... but there is no guarantee."

Players play with reality for low budget fame and fun

by Adam Stevenson

Sky One's new reality TV show *The Player* is New Zealand's most recent take on the ever-evolving reality format.

The Touchdown production which went to air last month "takes the game of scoring females to a whole new level", says assistant producer Lisa Goldapple.

The show has 15 bachelors vying for the top prize of being named New Zealand's number one player.

The winning contestant will also receive \$25,000 worth of prizes and a job at Touchdown working in reality TV.

To win, the boys have to impress none other than FHM model of the year Nicky Watson.

Tested through wacky and demanding challenges, the players have to show personality, charisma, a sense of humour and the ability to charm the ladies, all while slumming it in a hotel penthouse.

"It's a bit of fun," says contestant Logan Harris.

"Low budget fame, prizes and girls," says the 22-year-old bartender.

Mr Harris found there were advantages in having a camera on him 24/7.

"Bowling up to a hot chick without a camera crew? They'd be like, 'F*** you buddy.'"

Other players are aware of the attention they will get because of the show.

"It's gonna be damn hard," says Chad Cathcart, a 19-year-old university student. "People are going to judge us on the things we've done on the show even if they don't know us," he says.

"We put a lot of trust in the editing team," says Mr Harris.

"They could rape us if they wanted to with the editing, they could make us look shit."

Physiotherapy student and contestant Regan Wilkes (23) says: "You've just gotta be the same person you are around your mates."

Niki Harre, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Auckland, says viewers are fascinated by watching ordinary people.

She says it's almost like the thrill people get when they eavesdrop on a conversation or peep through a hole in the fence.

"Seeing people in real situations allows the public to see genuine interaction without actually being there."

Mrs Harre says people are as much learning as being entertained while watching reality television.

"Social interaction is how we form our views on social norms so a huge part of getting on with other people is



CAPTURING REALITY: Nicky Robinson gives Chad Cathcart some Player advice before the weekly eviction.

seeing what others do," she says.

Cameraman Nigel Kinnings says capturing genuine action is the key to providing good reality TV.

"There's the side when the guys are obviously acting for the camera, but there's times when I can be there to pick up little moments, little glances."

Despite the fact that they are being

filmed for TV, the contestants are adamant that having fun is essential and the reason they agreed to go on the show.

This has rubbed off on Nicky Watson, who now insists on being called by her maiden name of Robinson.

"It's heaps of fun, I've been kept in

hysterics," says Ms Robinson.

She describes the players as down-to-earth, fun-loving Kiwi boys who aren't taking life too seriously.

"Far too many people do," she says. Her good-hearted nature makes it hard for her to eliminate the players.

"I need a few wines before every elimination," she says.

