

newsReal

By Frank G. Real, Jr.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Chicopee, Mass., Journalist —Where The Action Is

Covering combat operations in Afghanistan as an embedded war correspondent with the U.S. Marines is just one assignment for Dan Lamothe, a Chicopee, Mass., award winning journalist. Lamothe, a senior writer for Military Times Newspapers, regularly covers the Pentagon and Capitol Hill for military issues.

Lamothe was at the White House Sept. 15 for the presentation of the Medal of Honor (MOH) to Marine Sgt. Dakota Meyer, 23, by President Barack Obama. But his stories about a belated MOH award for a soldier working at Meyer's side to help retrieve the bodies of fallen Marines and a Navy Corpsman ambushed in Eastern Afghanistan two years ago raised eyebrows at the senior command level.

Published stories by Lamothe and a report in the Wall Street Journal may have helped speed the MOH recommendation for former Army Capt. Will Swenson by Marine Gen. John Allen, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan.

“The second look came after rampant speculation as to why Swenson had not received an award for valor,” Lamothe wrote in a Sept. 15 story in Marine Corps Times.

Swenson worked alongside Marine Sgt. Meyer, who was a corporal when the action leading to his MOH award occurred. Swenson was at the White House for the Meyer ceremony.

Meyer, now a sergeant in the Individual Marine Reserve, told Lamothe: “I’ll put it this way. If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be alive today.”

Lamothe added: “Gen. John Allen took an interest in Capt. Swenson’s case for the MOH before my most recent stories that highlighted his lack of recognition. However, he did take an interest after a steady drumbeat of news about the battle of Ganjgal and Dakota Meyer’s case for the MOH. Sources tell me the coverage did prompt some strategic conversations behind the scenes in the Army and Marine Corps.”

In an action unrelated to the Dakota Meyer incident, Lamothe was embedded and went on patrol with a Marine combat team in May 2010. “Bullets were flying when the Marine unit was ambushed twice while I was out on patrol with them in Afghanistan,” recounts Lamothe, a 2000 graduate of Chicopee Comprehensive High School and a 2004 journalism graduate of the University of Massachusetts.

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“The first time was an eye opening experience, but the Marines and I on patrol that morning were fortunate enough to have a large canal nearby. It had only a few feet of water in it, but the trench was deep enough to put us well below the dirt road we’d been on as it was lit up by machine gun fire.”

He said adrenaline took over and his first thought was to get down and out of the way. “My secondary thoughts were more analytical: What are the Marines doing around me? What are they saying? What time is it? I’ll jot down so that I can use in stories later, but only if I’m behind cover and in a safe position to do so.”

Lamothe was embedded with the 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines, 2nd Marine Division in the “volatile” Marjah district on assignment for the Marine Corps Times. The battalion’s main base is Camp Lejeune, N.C. , when not deployed.

In April of this year, as the result of those May 2010 patrols, he received the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation’s Major Megan McClung Award for overseas dispatch writing for his coverage of combat operations in Afghanistan.

Lamothe joined The Springfield Republican newspaper in 2004 as a general assignment reporter, covering police and courts and the City of Agawam. In 2006, he moved to the Washington, D.C., area and obtained his master’s degree in journalism at the University of Maryland.

In September 2010, he was promoted to senior writer at Military Times and has been covering all military branches and interviewing senior officers, including Marine Corps Commandant James Amos.

Military Times is a division of Gannett Newspapers and publishes Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps Times, all civilian weekly newspapers. Lamothe’s assignments vary from covering military manpower, new military equipment, policy and the politics involved.

Lamothe was assigned to the Marine unit by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which is the NATO command in Afghanistan.

“ISAF controls all the combined military forces in the country,” according to a public affairs officer at headquarters Marine Corps. He added that civilian journalist have no official designation as War Correspondent,” Imbedded Journalists,” or “Combat Correspondents.”

“Our Marine journalists are called Combat Correspondents and many are assigned to units in Afghanistan. You can call the civilian journalists any thing you want.”

Lamothe said he had a week of training on what to expect in combat by a private company run by retired Royal (British) Marines. While on patrol he wore a helmet and full body armor, the same gear worn by the Marines. Journalists are considered a non-combatants but face enemy fire with the units when they are attacked.

“I was advised to listen carefully to whoever was running the patrol, typically a squad leader with a previous deployment under this belt. I believe that doing so not only kept me safer, but built a rapport with the Marines. They realize that you're trying to stay out of the way, and willing to take risks to understand what they do,” Lamothe said.

War correspondents stories are not censored as in World War II and Korea.

“We restrict as to what can be photographed for security reasons,” a public affairs spokesman, who had been assigned to embedded news people in Afghanistan, said. “Other than that, they can write what they want.”

He said his ability to file stories from the field is greatly enhanced by the new technology. “We have satellite phones and our laptops are also connected to our office by satellite.”

When asked what assignments Marines would be asked to undertake once the wars have come to an end and the size of the force is reduced, Lamothe said, “I’d expect Marines to deploy on theater security operations in Africa, South America, Eastern Europe and in the Pacific, among other assignments.”

Lamothe said he found most troops he encountered were cheerful and curious about his job.

“I think that it helps that I write for Marine Times, which is well read in the Corps, especially by the junior enlisted community.”

Lamothe said he feels the embed program is “invaluable in providing readers and the American public an accurate picture of what happens in combat. It offers journalists an opportunity to see troops in action, and troops an opportunity to share their hopes, fears, frustrations and proud moments in a way that could not otherwise be done. “

Because of his assignments, he has developed relationships with Marine public affair officers (PAO) and in Afghanistan they work to make sure embeds go well but when a reporter is out with a unit, there are no PAO’s around.

“I am assisted by PAO’s regularly as I cover stories out of the Pentagon. Marine Base Quantico and Washington. I’ve built a good relationship with them considering how frequently we work together.”

Lamothe is not sure if he will make return visit to the White House or if Swenson will receive the MOH but he expects another Afghanistan imbed sometime next year.

The Lamothe name is well known in Chicopee. His father, Donald , a supervisor at Hamilton Sundstrand in Windsor Lock, Conn., is a member of the Chicopee School Committee. His mother, Claudia, and two brothers, Andrew, a history teacher at Chicopee Comprehensive High School, and Tom, a data technologist for the Chicopee School Department, all live in the City.



Dan Lamothe At Home

Dan Lamothe enjoyed a recent week home with his Chicopee family.



In Afghanistan

Dan Lamothe wearing helmet and protective body armor while in the field with Marines.



On Assignment To White House Dan

Lamothe stops for a pose on the White House driveway while on assignment to cover the recent Sgt. Dakota Meyer Medal of Honor Ceremony there