

# STEPHEN LEWIS '05 IS BACK WITH A MEDAL

by Bruce B. VanDusen

Fourteen months ago, at age 25, Stephen Lewis was just getting back on the track he had sought for several years. He had left The College in 1994, but then re-enrolled in early 2001. He was getting a good start on a computer engineering major, had met an attractive young woman in his sophomore class, and was enjoying his main outside interest, the Army Reserves.

But then came 9/11. Three months later Lewis was at Bagram airfield, 24 miles north of Kabul, Afghanistan. He and his commanding officer, Major Matthew Weingast of West Windsor, were a two-man 15th Reconnaissance Detachment under orders to manage the intelligence effort that was part of the Bagram base security and the war on Al Qaeda.

This fall, he is back in the classes he had to put on hold last year. He and Amanda Schroll '05, an early childhood/technology education major, are even more serious about one another. And now Sergeant Lewis has a Bronze Star to show for what the Army calls his "exemplary" performance in "providing intelligence and targeting support to various conventional and unconventional interagency organizations operating in Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom."

He and Major Weingast were activated in late October 2001, and assigned to the Third Army for orientation at Ft. McPherson, GA. The Third Army was responsible for command and control operations in Afghanistan and, with its advance units, the Lewis and Weingast detachment flew first to Kuwait for three weeks of further preparation. By December 11,

they were in Bagram, an abandoned and decrepit former Russian air base that the U.N. Coalition Forces were using as their primary base in Afghanistan.

Weingast and Lewis were responsible for assessing any possible threats to the base and keeping the Bagram commanders fully aware of the threat level. In addition, as actual or suspected opponents of the Coalition Forces were captured and held in custody, they had charge of a crew of about 20 interrogators used to gather information that might help a succession of military task forces conduct effective operations.

In the beginning he slept in a two-story barracks-like building nicknamed "Motel 6," that needed serious repair, but at least provided a roof. "We slept on the cement floor for a few nights, until we got some cots moved in," he said. By comparison with other options in a country that had undergone 20 years of murderous shellings and bombings, it could have been a lot worse. After about four months, the various officers and enlisted men living there were delighted to move out—and into tents.

Lewis said Major Weingast, with whom he had worked in the Reserves for two years, was his "best friend." In a place where the threat of attack was constant and everyone carried a sidearm or rifle at all times, respect had little to do with rank.

"The job was extremely demanding," Lewis said. He met regularly with a group of interpreters, whom he described as "very intelligent, well-educated men, most with college educations. One I recall has an engineering degree from the University of



# TCNJ GOES TO WAR



# THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY (TRAIN) AND WAIT

by Capt. Christopher B. Silvern '99 USMC

*“Some people give time, some people give money, some their skills and connections, some literally give their life’s blood. But everyone has something to give.”*  
—Barbara Bush

In keeping with the words of Barbara Bush, I decided my contribution would be a few years of my postgraduate life as an active duty Marine Corps officer. Looking back, I believe I chose the right path. Although it required many sacrifices, both personal and professional, it also left me with an immense sense of pride, not to mention the adventure of a lifetime.

I had been on active duty as a Marine officer for almost two years when the events of 9/11 shook the nation and awoke America to the understanding that many people around the world seek to do us harm because of who we are and the liberties we enjoy.

My father, an FBI agent, had suggested I look into the Marine Corps’ Officer Selection Program after my freshman year at college. After two summers of training at Quantico, VA, I graduated from TCNJ as a second lieutenant. That November I began the basic military training every officer receives, followed by special schools to be an adjutant (administrative officer), a legal affairs officer,

Washington. They all knew four or five languages, including English. They mostly were from Kabul, had families there, and came out to the base to work for seven to 10 days, and then took a day off to go back to the city. Of course we paid them well, but they were really great—fantastic workers who always went above and beyond,” he said.

He spoke with genuine warmth about the Afghan people he met, stressing their hard work, difficult living conditions, and generosity. “Often I have seen people out in a field, walking barefoot behind a donkey that’s pulling a small plow, turning over the dirt for some crop. They are a really tough, strong people,” Sgt. Lewis said.

There were many 16 to 18 hour days, a lot of computer work, and constant briefings of commanders and visiting members of Congress, and even occasional motorized patrols off the base. The latter gave him a chance to visit nearby villages and military outposts, to keep in touch with the local people, and pick up any indications of difficulty. “The base commanders always wanted to know if there was anyone out there making waves,” he said.

During his six months at Bagram, Lewis became close friends with Muhammad Sufa, an older Afghan who was the primary liaison with his interpreters. “Often,” he said, “we would sit and have tea after a long day and talk about our families and our lives. I guess people all over the world are really the same.”

The wreckage of the communities and suffering of the population there have made a major impression on him.

“It sure puts your life into perspective,” he said. “It makes me appreciate this country so much. The biggest thing I’ve gotten out of this is the need to take time to appreciate family and loved ones. It’s to appreciate time—time to spend with people, to be able to enjoy their company and relax with them.”

Soon after arriving, Lewis had access to the Internet and e-mail, so was able to keep in close and frequent contact with people at home. He worked virtually every day, not counting a few when, like

virtually everyone there, he was hit with dysentery. He was able to take one four-day pass, which he used to visit Turkey.

As to the details of what he and Maj. Weingast actually did to carry out their security mission—whether they intercepted enemy communications, paid off informants, followed suspects, or used other tools of the intelligence trade—Lewis was uncommunicative. “I get asked that from time to time,” he said, “and I just say ‘intelligence work,’ that’s all.”

He is modest about the work, and particularly about his medal. He said the Bronze Star given both to him and Major Weingast by Lt. Gen. P.T. Mikaloshak, the commander of the Third Army, probably had to do with the length of their duty in Bagram. Not only were they among the first on the scene, but while they stayed on the job there, many other military units came and went, each apparently well pleased with their work.

Now deeply into his course work again, Lewis said he hopes to graduate in three years and then, “I’m going to chase the American dream. Since I was young, I always wanted to do something with the military, and this was not such a bad experience. But I guess I don’t want to spend my whole life preparing to go to war. I want to marry and have kids. I want to go to their baseball practices. I want to teach the kids to surf,” adding with a smile, “and have a really boring life.”

*Bruce VanDusen*  
is editor of TCNJ Magazine



## HOW SPEC-4 LEWIS BECAME A SERGEANT

We landed on the ground at Bagram in December at 0’dark 30, trudged our way to Motel 6, the whole time being told to stay on the hardpack because of all the landmines in the area, and slept on the concrete floor with just a wool Army blanket. We were too tired to open our sleeping bags.

I was still a specialist (E-4) when we landed. We woke to a crisp winter morning and went outside to meet with some of the command. Our base commander, a Colonel Kissel, turned to me and said, “Lewis, you’re a sergeant now.”

I said “Okay, sir,” and went on with my business. And that was that.  
*Sgt. Stephen Lewis*



and an anti-terrorism instructor. Eventually I was ordered to Camp Pendleton, CA, where I became the adjutant and legal officer for the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, 1st Marine Division, which was beginning a new round of combat training.

Soon my battalion became part of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), a force consisting of about 3,000 Marines and sailors on three ships that together are capable of a wide variety of sea, land, and air operations. By December, 2001, the 13th MEU—now ready for everything from amphibious assaults on beaches to long-range helicopter raids and the tactical recovery of personnel—was steaming out of San Diego Bay and heading west across the Pacific. In the post 9/11 emergency, our orders came six weeks before our scheduled deployment, but our Marines were ready. The early departure gave our higher commanders and the President viable options if they wanted more forces in the Arabian Gulf (a new name for what most maps call the Persian Gulf). However, because we had no specific missions at that time, we began to plan for our scheduled deployment exercises.

Our first stop was the big island of Hawaii, at the U.S. Army's Pohakuloa Training Area 7,000 feet above sea level. It's at the foot



of snowcapped Mauna Loa and looks like the surface of the moon. There we practiced an essential combat skill, calling in distant artillery fire on nearby targets, and also did a lot of live fire with various small-caliber weapons. After five days, we had a fresh sense of confidence. We left feeling ready for whatever the future might hold.

It was an exciting time for me. As the adjutant, I was accountable for nearly 1,200 Marines and sailors, and as force protection officer I was tasked with coordinating the protection of the battalion landing team (BLT).

Over the next month, I saw a lot of time on my ship, the U.S.S. Bonhomme Richard, a flat-decked vessel that carries a variety of helicopters and air-cushioned landing craft. Ship life is not in the least exciting; for the Marine infantrymen there is no opportunity for training and almost nothing else to do. In my own case, I was plenty busy with a myriad of tasks to support the personnel on our three ships. For officers, life on ship is tolerable; company grade officers like me had three or four lieutenants or captains per room. We ate at tables with plates and silverware. Enlisted personnel lived below decks under the bow, sleeping 60 to 90 in a room with “coffin racks” for beds and about 6 inches of headroom between bunks. Their mess is cafeteria style and they have access to a game room and videos, but there's little privacy.

Christmas on the ship was a lonely experience, even though I knew my family was thinking about and praying for me. Many of those aboard had missed holidays and important dates before, but that didn't make it any easier.

Our next port was Singapore for a five-day working liberty stop. That meant we would work during the day and once we accomplished our tasks we were free. Work included jungle patrolling and adventure training with the Singapore army. During this period, I coordinated our force protection plan and maintained accountability of our people; that is, I made sure we kept track of everyone even while they enjoyed their well-deserved respite. I had liberty almost every day and celebrated New Year's Eve in Clarke Quay. The day we left, however, we learned of a credible terrorist threat in the city, targeting American service members and our ships.

The news of terrorists so close heightened everyone's presence of mind and determination. Our orders now were to proceed to the Arabian Gulf for continued support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Everyone knew it would be a long time before we had another liberty—in fact, probably not until we headed home.

In January, we were briefed on the activities of one of our sister battalions in Afghanistan near Camp Rhino. I happened to know the platoon commander of the combined anti-armor team in that battalion. He was doing what Marines train for their whole careers and by chance he was doing it on his first deployment. The 15th MEU, already in Afghanistan, was proving the Marine Corps to be an extremely versatile force capable of any mission. With the use of heavy lift Air Force aircraft, they found they had enough legs to get themselves on the deck to face the Taliban. I was among many

## I FIND THAT MANY GREAT CITIES AROUND THE GLOBE ARE BASICALLY THE SAME. IT IS THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE THERE WHO DEFINE OUR DIFFERENCES.

officers who had no doubt we would relieve them in Afghanistan.

In February, however, we were briefed by the commander of Task Force 58. Despite our hope to get some payback for 9/11, he told us that the extreme cowardice and weakness of the Taliban had convinced the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) to focus its attention elsewhere in its area. It was the same temperament and moral fiber displayed by the attackers on 9/11. So, with the same intensity it had going into Afghanistan, the 15th MEU went back to its ships to pursue other missions. We would not be going into Afghanistan.

Instead, we soon headed back into the Indian Ocean and down the east coast of Africa for Exercise Edged Mallet, a brief training period with the Kenyan army. This was part of CENTCOM's effort to encourage nations in that region to join our global war on terrorism. As adjutant, I went ashore to maintain accountability of our forces throughout the exercise. We were spread out over large, thickly vegetated areas, which made mine a challenging task. In addition, I helped supervise our force protection platoons, which included daily convoy missions to nearby villages so we could provide locals with medical and dental treatment. It gave me a chance to discover

## THEY CARRY ON BECAUSE THEY REALIZE THAT FREEDOM AND LIBERTY DO NOT COME CHEAPLY.

some local wildlife: giant land snails, foot-long millipedes, hippos, Cape buffalo, giraffes, baboons, and gazelles.

We trained with an infantry company from the 15th Kenyan Rifles, practicing short- and long-range squad and platoon jungle patrolling, live fire with every small arms weapon system we possess, close air support using AH-1W Cobra helicopters and AV-8B Harrier jets, company live-fire helicopter raids, and TOW weapon system live fire. Overall, the exercise was a huge success as we showed a great U.S. presence only 50 miles from Somalia, whose citizens and militias took the lives of 19 U.S. soldiers in 1993. While the events at Mogadishu have faded in the memories of some Americans, we were too close to disregard any possible threat.

By February 20, we were back at sea, “cutting squares” (circling within designated squares of geographic coordinates) and waiting for any orders that might come. Commanders and staff more actively planned for possible evacuation operations in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, and for possible humanitarian assistance operations. Life at this point was very boring, relieved only by the arrival of 30- to 60-day-old mail about every two weeks. What kept us going was planning and carrying out more training exercises and responding to calls for brief force protection missions in southern Pakistan.

In March, we started to plan our next training event, Exercise Eastern Maverick in Qatar. Its purpose was similar to that of Edged Mallet. We conducted live fire training with the Qatari military, this time in a desert

environment. Because it was a smaller exercise, I sent only a detachment of Marines to support the main effort ashore while I coordinated from aboard ship.

Meanwhile, the commanders continued to plan for any non-combatant evacuation operation or other real-world situation that could spark up in a country such as Pakistan. We focused on such key cities as Karachi, Lahore, and Pasni. During the 10-day hiatus between exercises, our battalion took on several missions to protect C-130s aircraft that were supplying Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan. Each mission lasted from one day to several days in Pasni, on the south coast of Pakistan. They weren't glamorous assignments, but my Marines were happy to oblige, as it got them off the ship.

Operation Sea Soldier kicked off with numerous live fire and maneuver ranges being built in the desert nation of Oman. The Omanis were great hosts and welcomed many ideas to improve their training.

While the other two ships in our group were training in Oman, the Bonhomme Richard pulled into port in Bahrain for repairs, supplies, and liberty. On arrival, we were briefed on a higher-than-normal local threat and were restricted to on-base liberty only. Nevertheless, the Navy found a way to let local vendors show up and sell their Persian rugs and gold jewelry at bargain prices.

By then it was April, and we awaited orders to head home. Since we had deployed six weeks early, missing both Christmas and New Year's Eve with family and friends, everyone was anxious to begin the one-month

journey home. However, our scheduled date came and went and we were ordered to stay in the area for an unspecified period. Many among us were disheartened as we saw Special Forces units handle Taliban fighters in Afghanistan once again. In our eyes, it was a mission the previous MEU proved it could handle and one for which we had trained hard. However, the chance never presented itself, and we left the Arabian Gulf two weeks later.

After being at sea for six months or so, my Marines were elated to hear we would stop for liberty in Thailand, Australia, and Hawaii. Thailand was everything I thought it would be, with its white sandy beaches, great nightlife, and wonderful outdoor activities. I was intrigued as well by Thai culture, religion, and art. I received my SCUBA diver certifications as an open water diver (planning ahead for Australia), visited Buddhist temples, rode elephants in the jungle, surfed, and shopped.

Two weeks later, we pulled into Townsville, on Australia's northeast coast, known for great saltwater sports, the Great Barrier Reef, and sport fishing. The people were warm, friendly, and genuinely grateful for what we were trying to do.

Our last stop before San Diego was Oahu, Hawaii. It was special because my father came out from New Jersey to meet me and to take advantage of the Navy's Tiger Cruise. This program allowed me to invite a friend or family member to sail home with me. It gave my dad a great opportunity to see how a forward deployed unit works and it gave us our first serious time together in over two years. In mid-June, we docked in San Diego, where my mother was waiting for us.

Shortly before pulling into home port, I was notified that I was selected to be commanding officer of the Marine detachment at Newport Naval Station in Rhode Island. I reported there in mid-July, just as I was promoted to captain. Finally I am doing what I joined the Corps for in the first place—commanding a unit of Marines. I'm responsible for close to 250 personnel, many of them students at various Naval schools here on Narragansett Bay.

On my way home to New Jersey from San Diego, I drove across the country for my second time, stopping at the Hoover Dam, Grand Canyon, Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial, Cadillac Ranch, Graceland, and other great American landmarks. This trip and my travels with the Marines have opened my eyes. I find that many great cities around the globe are basically the same. It is the people who live there who define our differences. Many of them are like us; all they want is happiness for their families and their children, but so many of them are denied that opportunity by their governments, their cultures, or even a few powerful men. I believe it is the responsibility of our country, the greatest in the world, to try to give these people the chance for happiness that they have been denied.

I will close by saying that every day, in the least likely times and places, young servicemen and women make sacrifices to protect our nation's interests and ensure our security. Many of them are not paid a lot, their jobs are not enjoyable, and they make great personal and professional sacrifices to accomplish their mission. They carry on because they realize that freedom and liberty do not come cheaply.

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