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The Scott Thomas Beauchamp saga: The fallibility of TNR's fact-checkers Bumped with new developments

By Michelle Malkin

Originally posted August 02, 2007 @ 18:58

Update 9:30pm Eastern: Dean Barnett boils it down:

"Once again, let me restate the obvious – TNR ran Scott Beauchamp's rubbish with obviously minimal (if any) fact checking. Their purpose to do so was to provide a "Troop's Eye" view of the war. The "troop" in question was a sociopath who mocks disfigured women and who is now a known fabulist.

Two other questions linger while we await the Army's more definitive report on the Beauchamp Diarists: First, the Army shut down FOB Falcon for media purposes about a week ago. Why did it take TNR so long to get this little editorial out there? Did it really take an extra week to get the Bradley expert and the forensic pathologist to express their opinions? Or was the delay a means to buy time for The New Republic to determine whether it can brass its way out of this mess?

Second, TNR now admits that they hired as their man in Baghdad a liar and uncritically published at least one of his lies, a lie that slandered every decent soldier in Iraq. Does anyone at TNR feel that such a misstep is grounds for tendering a resignation?"

Update 8:49pm Eastern. This is Camp Buehring in Kuwait. In response to one of the commenters below, Camp Buehring is a separate facility/staging area and different than the Ali Al Salem airbase (the transit base that Bryan and I were in January before heading to Baghdad). But they share similar traits, namely their remoteness and transitory nature. An active-duty Army reader e-mails:

"There is a good reason why Beauchamp chose Camp Buehring as the place to relocate his "disfigured woman" tale: it is a way station for units deploying into Iraq, and, besides a small cadre, very few people spend more than 2-3 weeks there, making it difficult for anyone to contradict him and the buddy who backs him up. It is silly, of course, since it means his cruelty towards his fellow man began before he heard his first shot, but most civilians would not know the transient nature of Buehring and it makes the water cloudier for those who wish to defend him."

Blogger Matt Sanchez is at FOB Falcon and e-mails:

"Michelle:

I spoke with the Army PAO, they confirmed that prior to the publication in The New Republic, the PAO had never spoken to anyone from that publications editorial staff.

It's difficult to imagine anyone could confuse a DFAC (dinning facility) in Kuwait, with one in Baghdad. I'd like to see the list of military experts TNR consulted prior to publishing the story.

I'm attaching pictures I took today of FOB Falcon. The DFAC has the Air Force band playing and the mood is upbeat despite today's really bad 130, dust-storm weather."

Milblogger Baldilocks takes apart the TNR statement. Read the whole thing. Here's her conclusion:

"Look, no one is saying that every person in the military is an angel. There are too many incidents—well-known and anecdotal—which would refute that supposition. But nearly every endeavor in the military is a team effort—especially in a

combat zone. And when one member misbehaves, it doesn't just reflect on that individual (unlike civilians), it reflect on the entire US Armed Forces and the country it represents—especially when it is deployed to a foreign country.

Not only does the military encourage its leaders to correct infractions which can harm its image and, therefore, its mission, it demands this of them. Which is why I could possibly believe that these incidents occurred had the men been placed in settings in which they could have plausibly been unsupervised/unobserved by commissioned officers and/or NCOs.

However I absolutely (still) do not believe that every single commissioned officer and NCO who would naturally be present in all cases stood by and let these things happen.

And nothing TNR has said today has convinced me otherwise.”

On their way out the door for their August holiday, TNR's editors have delivered another “statement” on the Scott Thomas Beauchamp controversy that is apparently meant to end the questions and scrutiny surrounding the Army private's Baghdad diaries.

After several huffy paragraphs demonstrating how all of Beauchamp's essays were “fact-checked before publication,” TNR's fact-checking editors admit that a fundamental error slipped past their layers and layers of safeguards:

“Beauchamp's essay consisted of three discrete anecdotes. In the first, Beauchamp recounted how he and a fellow soldier mocked a disfigured woman seated near them in a dining hall. Three soldiers with whom TNR has spoken have said they repeatedly saw the same facially disfigured woman. One was the soldier specifically mentioned in the Diarist. He told us: “We were really poking fun at her; it was just me and Scott, the day that I made that comment. We were pretty loud. She was sitting at the table behind me. We were at the end of the table. I believe that there were a few people a few feet to the right.”

The recollections of these three soldiers differ from Beauchamp's on one significant detail (the only fact in the piece that we have determined to be inaccurate): They say the conversation occurred at Camp Buehring, in Kuwait, prior to the unit's arrival in Iraq. When presented with this important discrepancy, Beauchamp acknowledged his error. We sincerely regret this mistake.”

Stunning. This wasn't just a spelling error or punctuation flub, mind you.

The Weekly Standard's Michael Goldfarb explains:

“So just to be clear, the first line of the original piece stated that Beauchamp “saw her nearly every time I went to dinner in the chow hall at my base in Iraq.” That turns out now to be a blatant lie—and one that Beauchamp stuck with after THE WEEKLY STANDARD first asked Foer to reveal the base at which this incident occurred. Further, TNR says in this new statement that “Shock Troops” “was about the morally and emotionally distorting effects of war.” But now we find out that Beauchamp hadn't even gotten to Iraq when this incident allegedly took place. He was, in fact, a morally stunted sadist before he ever set foot in Iraq.

After recounting this tale, Beauchamp asks a rhetorical question:

Am I a monster? I have never thought of myself as a cruel person....I was relieved to still be shocked by my own cruelty—to still be able to recognize that the things we soldiers found funny were not, in fact, funny.

Relieved that he was still shocked at his own cruelty? After his tour in Germany and the long flight to Kuwait? This whole essay was meant to demonstrate the damage war does to our own troops—but if this incident occurred at all, it only proves that Beauchamp was a vile creep to begin with.

The New Republic editors claim to have “granted Beauchamp a pseudonym so that he could write honestly and candidly about his emotions and experiences” in Iraq. The pseudonym seems to have had the opposite effect, enabling him to write dishonestly and less than candidly about the monstrous behavior displayed before he ever saw a shot fired in anger.

So we're back to where we started: Has anyone ever seen a badly disfigured woman at Camp Beuhring, or any other camp in the Middle East which might subsequently be revealed as the scene of the crime?”

Ace of Spades adds:

“Error? Mistake? He was off by an entire country and something like nine months?”

This is what TNR terms an “error,” a “mistake”? And when they “fact-checked” this beforehand, how did their “rigorous editing and fact-checking” miss the fact this took place in another country, before actual deployment?

I’m reminded of Steven Wright’s joke: “The other day I was... oh wait, that was someone else.”

Could happen to anyone, really. Common mistake.

What made this tall tale smell (and not “smell good,” per TNR’s standard of “fact-checking”) was that no one could figure out what the hell a badly disfigured woman — obviously a medical evacuation case — was doing wandering around a Forward Operating Base in the first place. A med-evac was there... why? In the thick of combat and high-tempo activity... why? What is FOB Falcon, a goddamned sanitarium/spa? Do they have lovely regenerative baths there?

It also didn’t help that no one — no one spoken to — could remember seeing such a woman on the base.

TNR calls this an “error.” As you like it.”

Stephen Spruiell adds: “That’s a rather significant detail to flub, given that the author’s intent was to illustrate the morally deadening effects of war.”

Read Ace for more deconstruction of what TNR considers iron-clad “corroboration” of Beauchamp’s other smelly anecdotes—and a pointed Shattered Glass reference.

The icing on the cake comes in the final paragraph of the TNR editors’ statement. They’d love to hang around and tell us more, but, uh, the damned Army is getting in the way:

“Although we place great weight on the corroborations we have received, we wished to know more. But, late last week, the Army began its own investigation, short-circuiting our efforts. Beauchamp had his cell-phone and computer taken away and is currently unable to speak to even his family. His fellow soldiers no longer feel comfortable communicating with reporters.”

Maybe, instead of shifting blame and heading for the hills (or the Hamptons or whatever), Franklin Foer and his minions would care to join Blackfive’s Laughing Wolf on an embed tour of FOB Falcon and meet the troops there face to face?

More reax:

Milblogger John Noonan: “I’m reserving judgment until the Army wraps up their investigation.”

Bryan Preston still wants to know: “Where is the stratified mass grave?”

Geoff at Junkyard Blog:

“So all of Beauchamp’s moral decay occurred before he ever saw combat. Before he entered the theater. Before the grind and inhumanity of war had its way with his tender soul.

This story was not about a cynical, war-weary soldier losing sight of humanity - it was about a newbie who had just finished training and was on his way to his first duty station. His behavior wasn’t a result of the hardships of the combat environment - it was a result of his being an innate asshole. A huge, insensitive, loutish asshole.

TNR sure knows how to pick ‘em.”