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On assignment in Afghanistan: Profile interview: Michelle Tan, Journalist

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On Assignment in Afghanistan



Profile Interview:

Michelle Tan

Journalist

Michelle Tan graduated from St. Cloud State University, Minnesota, with a BSc in Mass Communication in the summer of 2000. She started working as an intern at the *St. Cloud Times* in May 2000 and was employed as a full time education and military reporter in August. After her return from Afghanistan, she was assigned to the city government beat. Tan, who was awarded the Employee of the Year 2004 by *St. Cloud Times*, spoke with Eric Loo on her experience as an embedded reporter with the 367th engineer battalion in Bagram, Afghanistan and the daily grind of bearing 35 pounds of protective army gear in 80-degree desert dusty weather.

Loo: What led to your three-week assignment in Afghanistan?

Tan: The idea – or the dream – of a three-week assignment in Afghanistan came about early in 2004. The U.S. Army Reserve's 367th Engineer Battalion had been called to active duty, and the soldiers were preparing to leave for Fort McCoy in Wisconsin to mobilize for Afghanistan.

I'd been interested in overseas reporting for a while. Much of it was fueled by a failed attempt to go to Iraq with a professor at St. Cloud State University. This professor fled Iraq almost 30 years ago, and with the fall of Saddam Hussein, he dreamed about going home again. When this opportunity came up, I had been reporting military-related news for the paper, and discovered that I was really interested in and fascinated by this type of reporting.

When the trip to Iraq died, I didn't think I'd ever have the chance, while at the *St. Cloud Times*, to do something that extraordinary. But when the 367th left, and the more time we spent writing about them, I decided to focus on going to Afghanistan. This was something more attainable. We would be embedded with an actual military unit instead of running around on our own. It would be more affordable because we wouldn't have to pay for food or accommodations. Our bosses would be more supportive because it was safer than going to Iraq. It also had a wider impact, because this time we'd be writing about 560 Minnesota soldiers – many of them from St. Cloud.

Getting to Afghanistan wasn't easy. It took nine months of planning, pestering, lobbying, researching, stressing and pushing for us to get on that plane and fly off to what's been the greatest adventure of my life. It was definitely a dream assignment, and definitely worth the work.

Loo: With your experience at *St. Cloud Times* covering the education beat, how prepared were you for the frontline assignment?

Tan: Working at the *Times* definitely prepared me for the assignment. For one, the small size of our newsroom – 45 people in all – allowed me to pick up the military beat almost two years ago. If I was in a bigger newsroom, I probably wouldn't have had the chance to do it. I guess I was also lucky that none of the other reporters were as interested in military reporting as I was and still am.

Also, I've worked at the *Times* for almost five years. Everything I learned, I used in Afghanistan. I had to be independent of my editors. I had to make decisions about coverage. I had to be a reporter even though I ate, played, slept and worked with these soldiers for three weeks. I had to watch my time and report my hours. I worked with very little supervision. I believe that the relationship I have with my editors – one in particular I've worked for directly for four years – helped them have faith in me. It probably also enabled them to take a gamble by sending a then-24-year-old reporter on the most expensive and ambitious assignment the paper has undertaken.

Loo: To what extent did your undergraduate journalism education prepare you for reporting in Afghanistan?

Tan: Honestly, I learned so much more from working for a daily newspaper than sitting in a classroom. I graduated almost five years ago. I'm not saying I didn't



Afghan children crowd around Staff Sgt. Thomas Pawlak to see a photo he just took using his digital camera. The children were part of a 500-strong crowd that gathered in Charikar, Afghanistan, for a highly anticipated soccer game between coalition soldiers and Afghan players.

learn anything in college. It surely provided me with the foundation I needed to get a job and learn what I've learned.

Loo: And what is this “foundation” which you needed to get a job and learn what you have learned?

Tan: A large part of that “foundation” came from working at the *University Chronicle*, the college paper that was published twice a week. I spent a year at the paper as a senior staff writer and a summer as the assistant news editor. Working at the paper gave me the hands-on experience I needed beyond what I wrote for class. It also helped that quite a few of the instructors that I identified with worked for a daily newspaper. They were adjunct instructors who only taught part-time, but had a world of knowledge to offer me based on their experiences at a “real” newspaper. I believe that's so important, especially in the field I work in. It's all about experience and just doing the job.

Loo: With the benefit of hindsight, how could your undergraduate journalism education better prepare you for reporting in the frontline?

Tan: I think I would have liked to have taken more reporting classes, classes that explored all kinds of writing. I wrote a lot of hard news stories in college, and while I did have a feature writing class, I wish I had learned more about storytelling and narrative writing. I think I'm getting better at it, but it has all come down to practice. I also wish there were more opportunities at the college newspaper. I only spent two years at St. Cloud State before I graduated, so maybe more time would have been nice. But I've been writing non-stop since college and into my career, so I guess I can't complain.

Michelle Tan's article on Jan. 7, 2005 published by *Chipsquinn.org*, Freedom Forum based in Arlington - Virginia, is reproduced below with permission:

Afghanistan: An assignment and adventure of a lifetime

It's a world very few people can imagine.

It definitely blew my mind.

I was fortunate enough to spend three weeks in November in Afghanistan with the 560 soldiers of the U.S. Army Reserve's 367th Engineer Battalion. The battalion, which has its headquarters in St. Cloud, is halfway through its yearlong deployment at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan.

I'm a reporter for the *St. Cloud Times*, a 28,000-circulation daily in Minnesota. The dream of going to Afghanistan on assignment seemed impossible for a newspaper as small as the *Times*. But when the 367th was called to active duty, Photo Editor Dave Schwarz and I jumped at the chance to make the dream a possibility.

We lobbied our bosses. We pestered them. We spent months doing research and, most importantly, we built relationships with the soldiers. It was a rough ride. I came close to giving up many times during the nine months we spent preparing for the trip.

But everything fell into place. I can't tell you how amazing it was to get the final OK from our bosses.

On the morning of Nov. 4, I woke up restless. It was the day we were getting on a plane and taking the first true step of our journey. After fighting for this trip for so long, I was strangely unsure of myself. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing, and I worried intensely that I would let everyone down.

But when we arrived in Kabul, after traveling for 30 hours, my anxiety faded away. We had made it, and it was time to start the adventure.

And what an adventure it was.

Kabul itself was insane. I grew up in two countries outside America and I have traveled, but I have never seen anything like Kabul.

There are no stoplights or stop signs. Traffic laws don't exist there. Whoever has the biggest vehicle or the most guts wins.

Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, is dirty. The air chokes you as soon as you step out of the plane. You can feel the dust in your nose and in your throat. Dust hangs in the air and sticks to your face and hands. People walk around on muddy sidewalks. They step around open pools of sewage. Chunks of meat hang outside butcher shops, soaking up a smelly mixture of dust and dirt. Donkeys eat garbage off the streets as cars and minivans speed by. Pedestrians -- many of them young children -- cross the street in a haphazard fashion, narrowly avoiding speeding cars and bad drivers.

It was a relief when Dave and I found the compound where we were to meet the 367th for the 45-minute drive north to Bagram.

As Dave and I started to find our rhythm, as we got to know more soldiers and learned their routines, and as we got the chance to see more of Afghanistan, I continually was struck by the poverty of many of the country's people. But the people are strong and determined to make a better life for themselves.

We visited the U.S. hospital at Bagram, where I saw a girl who couldn't have been more than a year old. She was there because a rocket had landed in her family's home. I remember looking at her and thinking how small, frail and sad she looked. I almost couldn't hold back my tears.

I remember children who ran up to soldiers' vehicles. They would smile and flash the thumbs-up sign. But when you look into their eyes, you see something you don't see in the eyes of most American children: a certain age and sadness.

I also remember how uncomfortable I felt being a woman in Afghanistan. I'm thankful every day that I wasn't born in that country. The men and boys stared at me. One soldier warned me that some might try to touch my hair because they hadn't seen a woman without her head covered.

Dave and I had the opportunity to attend a soccer game in a town about 30 minutes from Bagram. It was a great assignment, but it also was the time when I felt most uncomfortable. The soccer game took place in the compound of a school. I watched the game with 500 men and boys and a handful of female soldiers. It was amazing how quickly a crowd would form. I was surrounded by groups of 50 men, and they stared at me. It was unnerving, and it got worse when they started asking the soldiers whether I was married. It definitely is a man's world.

Being in Afghanistan makes you appreciate what you have at home. It's a cliché, but it's true.

I spent a lot of time talking with soldiers. We talked about everything from family and friends to being able to go to McDonald's and being able to walk around without an M16 rifle. We talked about what they left behind to serve their country. We talked about how much they missed their kids. We talked about how their careers have suffered since they have been gone. We talked about how much has changed -- how their loved ones have changed -- since they left home months ago.

You quickly learn to trust and depend on the people around you when you're thrown into a situation like that. I would trust any one of the soldiers with my life. There is a bond, and camaraderie forms.

It was difficult for me to say goodbye. I think about the soldiers. I had dreams about them or about being at Bagram -- and not all the dreams were good dreams. I worry when I hear news from Afghanistan. I wonder how I would react if I heard one of the soldiers got hurt or killed.

I'll never think of Bagram and Afghanistan in the same way again.

Coming home was hard, not to mention the 41 hours we spent stuck in airports and on airplanes.

It was strange to get into a car without first putting on a flak vest and a Kevlar helmet. It was strange to leave home without hearing the sound of soldiers locking and loading their weapons. It was weird to travel somewhere without listening to a briefing about what to do if our vehicles are attacked or hit a landmine. I missed hearing fighter jets and helicopters flying overhead as I tried to fall asleep at night. I didn't need to walk with a flashlight because there were streetlights to light the night sky.

It was nice to be able to walk barefoot on the carpet in my apartment. It was great to be able to untie my shoelaces without having a cloud of dust blow into my face. It was awesome to be able to go to the bathroom without first walking across a compound strewn with ankle-breaking rocks. It was even nice to have stoplights. It was amazing to sleep in a real bed -- my own bed -- after spending three weeks sleeping on a canvas cot lined only with a sleeping bag.

As I enjoyed everything I had and settled back into my routine of watching trashy TV on VH1, I couldn't stop thinking about what I saw and experienced in Afghanistan.

It was the assignment of a lifetime. It opened my eyes to many things and made me evaluate what was important to me. And it made me sad to think about all the things I have taken for granted.

For me, the adjustment to being back in St. Cloud isn't complete. I still struggle with certain things. I know I need to move on and find my groove again, but I'm terrified that I'll forget how I feel right now, and I'm terrified that I'll forget this experience.

I guess only time will tell how this assignment has changed me. I wouldn't trade this experience for anything. If I had the chance to go back, I'd do it in a heartbeat.



St. Cloud Times reporter Michelle Tan with a group of Afghan boys and men before a soccer game in Charikar, Afghanistan.