

# Stripes broke Williams story, resisted feeding frenzy

BY ERNIE GATES

*Stars and Stripes ombudsman*

When the news becomes the news, it's usually bad news. Just ask Brian Williams.

Or should I say "Lyn' Brian," as the top-rated, respected and personable NBC News anchor is now called by tabloid headline writers and outraged tweeters, posters and commenters all over the Web? That transformation and a continuing media scandal-quest were set off by a diligently reported story in Stars and Stripes last week. Reporter Travis Tritten sought out and verified soldiers' accounts that blew holes in Williams' fresh claim to have been aboard a U.S. Army helicopter struck and forced down by rocket-propelled grenade and AK-47 fire in the opening days of the Iraq War.

I'll leave it to others to judge whether Williams "misremembering" that Chinook mission was a calculated lie, the self-glorifying effect of which amounts to stolen valor, or was an honest reporting mistake in 2003 inexplicably "embroidered" by time and memory. And I'll leave it to others to say whether the 6-month suspension NBC has imposed is sufficient, or he should quit or be fired outright.

But let me comment on the journalistic performance of Stars and Stripes' newsroom, which has been an example of solid reporting, editorial judgment, transparency — and impartiality,

especially resisting the rush of the "Chopper Whopper" feeding frenzy.

What got the story going was Editor Terry Leonard's reaction to an email tip from a reader he didn't know — the sort editors and reporters sift routinely. This one pointed to a post on the "NBC Nightly News" Facebook page, in which someone named Lance Reynolds disputed the war story Williams told on a Jan. 30 broadcast. The email included a link to a 2003 Stars and Stripes story about the Chinook being hit by an RPG, which quoted the flight engineer on that helicopter — a Sgt. Lance Reynolds.

That connection added credibility, so Leonard and Stripes Senior Managing Editor Bob Reid did what editors do: got a reporter to check it out.

Tritten, surrounded these days by suits on Stripes' Capitol Hill beat but experienced with the troops from years as a Stripes reporter in the Pacific, set about locating Reynolds and others involved in the Chinook incident. Tritten told me the five vets he talked with recalled the mission, play by play, in details that matched. From multiple accounts, including a commander's daily war journal, Tritten sorted out the events of that day. Confident in his understanding, he reached Williams, who admitted the error.

The initial story ran on Stripes.com that afternoon, Feb. 4, and Williams admitted his error and apologized on that night's broad-

cast. The story was picked up and followed aggressively by other news organizations around the world — reaching scandal velocity as it spread farther, faster, via social media.

That's when things got tricky, journalistically speaking. As the storm of reactions broke, as the mockery on social media multiplied and as calls for Williams' ouster swelled, the media spotlight turned on Stars and Stripes. First, giving credit where credit was due for breaking the story. Then, in the natural next turn in the endless news cycle, the global brands came calling and the talking head news shows wanted Tritten on the air. This can be intoxicating stuff — sudden celebrity as a byproduct of triggering a wave of outrage that was about to take down the country's top news anchor, someone watched nightly by millions. In lengthy on-camera interviews with CNN's Jake Tapper and Fox's Megyn Kelly, among others, reporter Tritten wisely resisted any temptation to turn pundit. Whatever his opinion might be of Williams and what NBC should do next, he stuck with the facts and relayed what veterans of the mission had told him — an informed, expert witness, not an opinion-monger.

Similarly, in a widely circulated "How they got the story" article in Columbia Journalism Review, Leonard told it straight, without editorializing or judging, but with a touch of humanity. "I'm kind of sad for Mr. Williams," Leonard told CJR. "I think he has a record

of really caring about troops, and then this happens. It is what it is."

That's a pretty good working definition of impartiality in news. You don't have to be cold to let the hard facts fall.

Producing its own version of "How we got the story," Stripes posted an interview with Tritten on Stripes.com. In addition to letting readers in on how the newsroom works — a good impulse toward transparency and trust — the video probably also answered a fair number of other news queries and preserved Tritten's time for more reporting.

As Williams teetered, the Stripes journalists stuck with their jobs, leaving end-zone dances and high-fives to the angry mobs on the Web. Follow-up coverage unraveled Williams' account that he was on a Chinook trailing the one hit by RPG fire, clarified that there were two separate missions, highlighted more of the accounts and reactions from troops aboard the Chinooks, and — as they kept being uncovered and served up by other news sources and independent Internet searchers — presented the archived excerpts of varying versions Williams told over the years.

After Williams took himself off the air and canceled what some thought would be his opportunity to elaborate on his explanation on David Letterman's show, Stripes published a transcript of Tritten's original interview with Williams and put the audio online for all to hear (and borrow,

cite or link). Again, the decision to share the raw material — the only interview Williams had done on the discrepancies in his war story — showed transparency in Stripes' newsgathering and good news judgment at the same time. And it kept Stripes at the front of the story.

I don't think it's an accident or a stroke of luck that Stars and Stripes got this story and got to the bottom of it. It shows Stripes' unique strength as a news organization connected to the troops — and trusted by the troops. Stripes listened, where possibly other editors and reporters hadn't. The newsroom took the veterans' challenge to Williams seriously and carefully followed that thread to sort out the conflicting accounts.

The prospect of catching the nation's top TV anchor in a broadcast lie had to be a lure. It would be for any reporter or editor. But that's why accurate reporting is a discipline, not an attitude. Tritten and his editors avoided being blinded by the allure or seduced by the fallout. They delivered facts that set this war story straight — facts their readers, especially the troops and veterans of that war, could trust.

After all, trust is what the Brian Williams story is really about.

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Got a question or suggestion for the ombudsman on what appears, or should appear, in Stars and Stripes? Send an email to [ombudsman@stripes.com](mailto:ombudsman@stripes.com), or phone 202-761-0587 in the States. For several links associated with this column, please go to Ernie Gates' blog. It can be found at [stripes.com/blogs](http://stripes.com/blogs)

