



## Class of '92 profile: Bill Murphy Jr.: In a Time of War

BY MEREDITH GUINNESS

Many journalists will tell you they chose their profession because they were inspired by reporter Bob Woodward, who, with his fellow reporter Carl Bernstein, broke the Watergate story for *The Washington Post*. Not nearly as many can say they've worked with the Pulitzer Prize winner.

And only one, Bill Murphy Jr. '92, is mentioned in the foreword of Woodward's 2006 best-seller *State of Denial*. "Honest, straight-forward and insistent on fairness and the truth, he is a natural reporter, winning the trust of a number of key sources," Woodward wrote of Murphy, his research assistant on the book. "Authors only rarely get such maturity, skill and wise counsel from one person. Without him, I never would have finished this book, which is as much his as mine."

In September, Murphy will celebrate the publication of his own book, *In a Time of War*, which began as a memo he wrote to Woodward about a pivotal 2002 commencement speech President Bush gave at West Point. Standing before a sea of freshly christened officers, Bush outlined a new foreign policy doctrine — one that would eventually lead to the war in Iraq. Murphy proposed tracking down some of those graduates and telling their stories — and his book was born.



Bill Murphy Jr. '92 (center) posing with Army privates in Baqubah, Iraq.

"It just struck me that he chose to give that speech not at a civilian college or in front of his political supporters, but to those who were going to soon be leading people into war," said Murphy, a lawyer and former Army Reserve officer who started his reporting career at the *New Haven Register*. "I wanted to track them down and write something personal."

Murphy worked on the book nights and weekends around his research job based in Woodward's Washington, D.C. home. With a brother in the Marines, he understood the stakes for his interview subjects — even more so when he traveled to Iraq to report for *The Washington Post* for about a month. He was with the 1st Cavalry Division and reported on several units, traveling to Baghdad, Tikrit, Baqubah, and the border of Syria. The experience informed his book, as did the estimated 200

people he interviewed to create his narrative.

"I could have written 15 books," Murphy said, "but I was looking for stories that represented the class as a whole and how you can go through things that are very hard or terrible and still be very proud of what you've done."

In his research, Murphy found quick-witted Lt. Todd Bryant, an armored platoon leader who faced fierce fighting in Iraq's Anbar province, a world away from his new wife; and Tricia LeRoux Birdsell, a medical platoon leader, who followed her mother into the military and kept a diary of her time in a medical aid station. "Nowhere is safe," she wrote one night. "Not even where you lay your head at night. But in the end, we cannot let the fear run our lives."

Murphy's ability to take on such a monumental — and emotional — project may stem from his years at Fairfield, where he was an English major. In interviewing men and women 10 years his junior, he remembered the close friendships that formed back in college and the man he was becoming in those four years. "Looking back at it, the classes I took, I think they were developing very critical thinkers," he said. "I won't claim I always did every reading assignment, but I learned to be skeptical without being overly cynical." ■