THE TIMES

Why I won't be going for a gong

By Burhan Wazir
Published at 12:00AM, March 8 2004

Since it was mainly curiosity that took me to Iraq, a medal for journalists from the Ministry of Defence is unnecessary

SOMEWHERE outside Basra last spring, while I was trying to scrub the Iraqi sand out of my blue shirts using only cold water and a bar of soap, a young soldier from the British Army sat down near me on a makeshift bench. "You guys will probably get a medal for coming here," he suggested. My shirts were rapidly disintegrating after six weeks of war, I noted. The soldier continued: "Yup, I think you guys will definitely get a medal. I mean, you guys are virtually part of the military now."

I remember flinching at his suggestion: I have always sought to avoid entry into any institution. So I felt slightly prickly again when the Ministry of Defence (MoD) recently published its qualifying criteria for a campaign medal recognising the services of journalists during Operation Telic — a period that is more cinematically etched on my mind as *Gulf War II: The Sand Strikes Back*. The Iraq Medal, made of cupronickel and bearing a crowned image of the Queen, will be made available to those who believe they qualify for it. About 150 journalists — all of whom were "embedded" with British troops — are eligible for the honour.

Journalists who have worked closely with the military in the cockpit of war are, of course, hardly a recent phenomenon. Historically, every now and then the lines of objectivity are pulverised by official gongs that arrive like incoming missiles. The writer and diplomat John Buchan, a fellow Scot, worked as a member of the British War Propaganda Bureau and as a war correspondent during the First World War. In fact, it was during the first few months of combat, while confined to bed and recovering from illness, that Buchan wrote his most famous novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

In June 1916, however, Buchan was recruited to draft communiqués for Sir Douglas Haig — then Commander in Chief of the British Expeditionary Force. For his work, Buchan received both the Victory Medal and the British War Medal. More recently, in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, a number of journalists were also awarded campaign medals.

Buchan — widely regarded as one of the finest thriller writers to emerge from the last century — obviously felt no sense of compromise when he decided to accept his gongs. His was a different era, though. I can't but help feel awkward about the situation. For most of my time in Iraq, I was careful not to be seen posing in the accoutrements of war. My gas mask was abandoned after two weeks, my chemical weapons suits were dumped, and I would remember never to wear anything that would have ordinary Iraqis view me as a member of the British military. I'm proud to admit, in fact, that I spent the entire war modelling an unvarying wardrobe made up solely of blue jeans, blue shirts and a grey jumper. I did wash them, of course. Occasionally.

Perhaps my stubborn refusal to bow to army conventions allowed me to get closer to the people I was most interested in: Iraqis. And since mainly curiosity — as well as a longstanding will to travel — saw me go to Iraq in the first place, a campaign medal from the MoD is almost farcical. As a friend remarked to me recently: "That's one line that shouldn't be crossed." One specialist in war medals, however, was more impressed when I rang her for a quick history lesson. "I'd jump at the chance to get a medal," she said.

THE REAL HEROES

WITH the benefit of hindsight, I can think of several people who actually deserve the Campaign Medal for Operation Telic. None of the following really qualify, of course. But I advocate that the Ministry of Defence should bend its normally inflexible rules and acknowledge some of the real heroes of the Second Gulf War:

The old man who, every morning at about 7am, drives a donkey cart laden with ripe tomatoes down the road from al-Zubayr to Basra's central market. His tomatoes — always thrown to passing strangers with a grin and a wave — never ceased to remind me that, even in times of near-incomprehensible hardship, Iraqis at large maintained a buoyant disposition.

Dr Adel Shal-am, the sympathetic young trainee doctor who so generously devoted eight hours of his time to show me around Basra General Hospital. As we sat in the hospital grounds, Shal-am shared my cigarettes and did his best to articulate the concerns of a generation of Iraqis who had come of age under the rule of "The Anointed One".

Private D (I have opted to change his name), the young Ghanaian soldier in the British Army who eagerly suggested a plan to end the siege of Basra. His faltering English meant that his strategy sounded all the more unique. "Mr Wazir," he said. "What you have in Basra is sideways business. Everything is back to front. There is a lot of skulduggery going on in that city, and we are wasting time. I can fix it easily. I will fly a plane over the city and drown it in napalm. Problem solved."

I reminded Private D that, as a journalist, I would feel compelled to take notes and report the fact that an incendiary substance had engulfed all the citizens of Basra. Private D had anticipated my answer. "You can write that," he said, grinning. "But we'll deny it. And that's that. It's how we do things in Ghana." The next day, I witnessed Private D delivering food and water to local civilians. He was warm, engaging and tender, and I watched him calmly offer advice to locals who were complaining of water shortages. "The Iraqis are good people," he told me, while passing out bags of cereal and rice. "But it will take them some time to learn how to cope with freedom."

All three of these individuals are, in their own ways, helping to shape modern post-Saddam Iraq. Theirs is not an easy task at all. And while last week's blasts in Karbala and Baghdad did their best to derail the constitutional process, transitional law for an American hand-over seems tantalisingly close.

The war is far from over, though. Iraq is slowly drowning in a reservoir of hostility which, unless plugged, could see the country descend into all-out civil war. In realisation of this fact alone, as well as the critical nature of the independent modern press, the MoD would do better if it abandoned this outdated custom.

What was acceptable to correspondents during the First World War has become a political impossibility.