

REPORTING LIVE FROM KANDAHAR

by Captain (N) Chris Henderson

“They were screaming for information three days ago; now they’re begging for mercy.”

– Colonel Tom Putt, Deputy Commander
Task Force Afghanistan, 5 March 2006

Introduction

Societies fight the way they are organized. In our Emerging Information Age, those who are quickest at dominating and exploiting the vast, unregulated arena of public information achieve victory. This emerging reality is forcing the field of public affairs into the centre of military operations and planning. While this might appear axiomatic, and not a little self-interested, the first two weeks of operations of the Canadian Forces (CF)-led Multi-National Brigade (South) in Kandahar, Afghanistan¹ starkly demonstrated the veracity of this claim and suggests it is time for changes to the way the CF conducts its media embedding program.

Discussion

In late February 2006, while Canadian Forces were conducting a relief in place of US troops and taking over from colleagues who had recently relocated the national operation from Kabul to Kandahar, they were fighting a rearguard action against ambivalent public opinion and waning support for the mission in Afghanistan.² Despite equivocal public support, Canadian media recognized the nascent mission as an important national story, and committed an unprecedented level of resources to covering Canadian military operations directly from Afghanistan. Among the media present at the 28 February task force change of command were the *Canadian Press*, *CBC Television and Radio News*, *CTV News*, *Global Television* and *The National Post*, while *The Toronto Star* had a reporter embedded with troops at a forward operating base north of Kandahar.

Press coverage of this magnitude appears superficially modest. However, the level of risk to the reporters, the cost to deploy them from Canada to Afghanistan for extended periods, and the number of people required – particularly for television news production, suggest that the overall investment was indicative of the importance media managers placed on covering the story. In comparison to previous Canadian media activities in Afghanistan – or other remote missions such as Bosnia, Cambodia, East Timor, Eritrea, Rwanda and Somalia, which saw much smaller numbers of Canadian journalists – the 2006 media deployment to Afghanistan is truly unprecedented. Furthermore,

the number of requests to embed media with the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan is increasing, as is the average duration of a reporter’s stay in theatre. Major national media, reporting in both official languages, are on the verge of committing their scarce resources to cover CF field operations in Afghanistan on a permanent basis.

An initial comparison of earlier embedding efforts with the current, evolving situation allows us to draw some preliminary conclusions about how the Canadian Forces media embedding system should be adapted. First, however, the current system needs to be described in the context of the widely recognized notion of media embedding, as it was practised by US forces during *Operation Iraqi Freedom* in 2003. Media embedding, as it is now widely understood, refers to the practice of placing journalists in the care of front line units. The reporters live, eat, sleep, and travel with the troops for an extended period of time. And when these troops enter combat, the journalists are there with them. Public affairs officers do not escort journalists, nor is journalists’ material screened prior to filing. Operational security is maintained through a judicious combination of mutually agreed guidelines (the breaching of which will result in removal from the program), the professional integrity of the journalists and security at source – whereby the soldiers are enjoined to be discreet in what they say to reporters, and to ‘stick to their lane.’

This system works well in combat situations that provide sufficient variety and action; the more static nature of complex peace support operations has heretofore been less conducive to ‘pure’ media embedding. The Canadian Forces have historically permitted media to visit operations, and they have enjoyed considerable access to the troops where they live and work. More commonly, however, visiting Canadian reporters have remained at central locations and relied on public affairs officers to arrange short-term visits, propose story ideas, set up interviews, and provide background and contextual information.

CF operational security has generally been maintained as described above, with the additional constraint that whenever an incident occurs involving loss of life or injury, a communications lockdown is imposed on the camp, including media, until the families of the affected soldiers are informed. The intent of communications lockdowns was originally to prevent soldiers from overwhelming limited communications systems during an incident and to

avoid the passage of unofficial information to family networks prior to the notification of next of kin. Similarly, lockdowns were imposed upon media in the original embedding rules to ensure adequate control over the release of official information.

It should be noted that with the deployment of advanced mobile communications technology by reporters into operational situations, these lockdowns are conducted on an 'honour' system. While many in the military would consider 'journalistic ethics' an oxymoron, the aggregate experience of public affairs officers over time, and, without question, during the first two weeks of *Operation Archer*, shows that embedded media have earned and deserve that level of trust.

While not strictly 'embedding' as described above, the term has nevertheless been adopted in Canadian Forces parlance to describe the current system of military-media relations in the field. In reality, the Canadian Forces' military-media relations approach is a hybrid of 'pure' embedding and unilateral reporting,³ with individual reporters carrying out both functions at various times depending on the availability of military operations to cover, and local security conditions being conducive to unilateral reporting. This approach carries with it some inherent difficulties that were witnessed in the first week of *Operation Archer*. In one instance (the rollover of a light armoured vehicle on 2 March 2006), local newswire 'stringers' were able to file initial stories that included information that required the public affairs officer to correct an erroneous report, while embedded reporters were constrained by the communications lockdown, and their professional adherence to the embedding agreement. In another case (the suicide attack on 3 March 2006), embedded reporters were in Kandahar City on their own, and were directed by a local 'fixer' to the scene of a suicide attack on a Canadian convoy. It is interesting to note that, while they could have filed from 'outside the wire' without restriction, they applied a considerable level of self-restraint, and waited until they returned to the camp to do so. Ironically, this media group subsequently found themselves prevented from immediately filing their story upon returning to the base.

These situations created a temporary increase in tension between the embedded media and military public affairs officers; however, considerable effort to confirm details and inform next of kin, and sufficient trust in the public affairs officers by the chain of command in allowing them the flexibility to correct erroneous 'external' reporting prior to the lifting of the communications lockdown, mitigated both the threat to the military-press relationship, and the potential for incorrect reporting.

The benefit to embedded reporters is manifested in the second 'wave' of reporting on incidents, where embedded journalists are privy to details, interviews with principals, and access to the chain of command that is completely beyond consideration for unilateral journalists 'outside the wire.' It must be noted as well that, being Canadian journalists reporting on national stories, this access was meaningful, whereas the more detailed follow-up stories were of little-to-no interest to the local newswire stringers.

During the 48 hours in which the two incidents cited above occurred, deployed public affairs officers analyzed the resultant media coverage and began to discuss changes to the current embedding system. Concurrently, a detailed report of an attack on a Canadian civil-military cooperation patrol that included the names of three soldiers who killed an Afghan insurgent, and the number of bullets shot into the man,⁴ accelerated the discussion of amendment of the embedding rules.

Embedding rules need to be comprehensive enough to guide journalists without the military having to resort to screening their material prior to filing, while providing a means to identify breaches of the guidelines, and to apply censure, if necessary. Additionally, military public affairs officers have to be flexible enough to identify problems and amend the guidelines accordingly, without applying extreme fluctuations or reversals in policy as the situation unfolds.

Recommendations

Our understanding of the structure and evolution of the current Canadian Forces embedding system, and lessons learned from its early application in *Operation Archer*, allow us to make the following recommendations to strengthen the system.

First and fundamentally, embedding journalists is a military-media relations strategy that must continue. Indeed, the program should be expanded within the limits of available resources. It is critical to note that these resources include in-theatre logistics and administrative support, particularly when it comes to having reporters live with troops at the sub-unit level. It also includes a sufficient number of properly trained, deployable public affairs officers to coordinate the system on the ground. While these points seem painfully self-evident, the scope of effort required to support journalists within military lines is frequently underestimated at best and not accounted for at worst. Furthermore, the deployment of public affairs officers is traditionally based upon the size of the unit(s) deploying, more than a result of careful analysis of the public affairs support work anticipated, based on the level of interest in the mission within the national media.

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Tension between embedded media and public affairs officers during a communications lockdown in which newswire stringers were filing stories underscored the need to grant public affairs officers the flexibility to mete out the details of an incident as it unfolds. This is in order to correct erroneous reporting prior to the suspension of a communications lockdown. In essence, this amounts to the application of the principles of mission command to public affairs officers. The necessity to inform next of kin provides a compelling argument.

The intent of the chain of command in this respect is to ensure that the families of soldiers killed or wounded do not find out about their loved ones' situation through the media. Public affairs officers understand this imperative well, and expend considerable energy to ensure it does not occur. The reality of our wired world, however, results in news of an incident invariably being broadcast before next of kin can be informed. While this results in considerable anxiety among the families of all deployed soldiers, it is an uncontrollable variable. The chain of command and public affairs officers must remain cognizant at all times of how unilateral journalists contribute to news coverage of Canadian Forces events, and the dynamic this creates for military-media relations in an embedding system.

Armed with the commander's intent, public affairs officers need the flexibility to correct erroneous reporting concurrent with the next of kin notification process. In a military environment in which junior leaders are entrusted with executing – indeed are expected to execute – the commander's intent for operations, public affairs officers must be afforded a similar level of trust, and held accountable for exercising their discretion to release details without constant reference to the commander for approval. As long as there are no names provided prior to confirmation of notification, this ensures the highest level of accuracy in media reporting, which, in turn, improves military-media relations – and thus the credibility of the institution.⁵

The application of mission command to public affairs is necessary, but not sufficient to improve the current media embedding system. That flexibility needs to be combined with amendments to the embedding guidelines by which reporters govern their actions and through which the military may censure violations. To be sure, there are generic guidelines that must be included. However, additional rules should be considered for theatre-specific situations.

The March 4 axe attack on Captain Trevor Greene brought two such amendments into focus. As described above, the attacker in that incident was shot dead by

Canadian Forces personnel. Following a request from media embedded at Kandahar Airfield, and thus physically removed from the soldiers involved, a teleconference call was conducted with the platoon commander, Captain Kevin Schamuhn. The interview was evocative, emotional and highly detailed, including the names of the soldiers who killed the assailant, the number of shots they fired, as well as a description of Capt Greene and his vital signs following the attack. This resulted in a decision to embargo certain elements of the interview, as they were deemed to put the involved soldiers at risk or to violate the privacy of an individual.⁶ This suggests an amendment to the embedding rules that would preclude the naming of soldiers involved in actions resulting in the death of enemy fighters and insurgents or friendly forces and/or the specific details of such an action that are precluded by the rest of the media embedding guidelines. Further analysis is needed to resolve this question if soldiers themselves wish to speak with the media.

This incident also underscored the necessity to insulate soldiers involved in combat operations from media contact in the immediate aftermath of that action. While there is no standard or recommended period of exclusion from a mental health perspective,⁷ media contact should be avoided at least until affected soldiers receive critical incident stress debriefing – should the chain of command deem such a debriefing necessary. If there is no critical incident stress debriefing, the chain of command must make an assessment of the soldiers' capacity to conduct media interviews while remaining within the bounds of operational security and propriety. Public affairs officers must be available to provide their advice to the chain of command, and assist in preparing interview subjects if appropriate. This additional rigour is not intended to override the extant CF policy governing public affairs, DAOD 2008. However, in situations involving death or injury, additional steps appear necessary to protect both the soldiers and operational security.

It must be noted that, in situations where media witness combat or serious incidents, there can be no expectation of control over the filing of eyewitness accounts beyond that normally exercised by virtue of the embedding agreement. Also, should the chain of command deem that it is not appropriate for media to interview affected soldiers, public affairs officers will work with the chain of command to provide an adequate level of information so that embedded journalists may report the events using secondary, official sources.

Based on early experience in *Operation Archer*, it is recommended that pre-deployment training be increased so that leaders are comprehensively briefed

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on the implications of media embedding on their operations and personnel. The whole chain of command (as opposed to just the force commander and unit commanding officers) needs to be empowered and provided with the knowledge to fulfil their public affairs responsibility locally. Furthermore, this training should be repeated periodically during the course of the deployment.

Conclusion

It bears stating that the impact of embedded media on operations can be easily underestimated, and adequate preparations for it overlooked. In fairness to those responsible for generating deploying task forces in recent years, the Canadian Forces have had insufficient experience with media embedding of this magnitude to apply lessons learned to pre-deployment training scenarios. It is incumbent upon public affairs officers

and the chain of command to capture these early experiences on *Operation Archer*, to continue to assess the effectiveness of military public affairs activities and particularly media embedding, and to use the information to improve the overall public affairs strategy of Canada's expeditionary forces.

Captain (N) Henderson is the Director Public Affairs Plans and Media Liaison within the Assistant Deputy Minister (Public Affairs) Group. This paper was written with inputs from Major Scott Lundy, Multi-National Brigade (South) Senior Public Affairs Officer, Major Marc Thériault, Canadian National Command Element Senior Public Affairs Officer, and Lieutenant (N) Mark MacIntyre, Deputy Public Affairs Officer at the National Command Element. Their public affairs team is breaking new ground in the field, and the author owes them a debt of gratitude for the support they provided and the forbearance they displayed.

NOTES

1. The operation is known within the Canadian Forces as *Operation Archer*. The mission is a continuation of CF military operations in support of the international campaign against terrorism known serially as *Operation Apollo*, *Operation Athena*, and now *Operation Archer*. It should be noted that the changes in operation name generally coincided with changes in composition of forces and/or the command and control structure in which they operated and/or geographic location.
2. Various polls conducted in January and February 2006 provided conflicting views on levels of support for the CF mission in Afghanistan and the combat role of CF personnel. For example, see "Majority opposed to Afghan mission," by Brian Laghi, *Globe and Mail*, 24 February 2006, p. A1; "52% of Canadians support operation: Kandahar deployment" by Mike Blanchfield, *National Post*, 4 March 2006, p. A13; "70% of Canadians Support Troops in Afghanistan," EKOS Research Associates news release, dated 1 March 2006.
3. For a concise explanation of various systems for organizing press-military relations, including 'embedded press' and 'unilaterals,' see: Paul and Kim, "Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context," RAND Corporation, 2004, pp. 64 – 68.
4. See "Ambush in Afghanistan" by Mitch Potter, *The Toronto Star*, Sunday, 5 March 2006, p. A1.
5. In the 3 March 2006 LAV 3 rollover incident, an Associated Press reporter contacted the Task Force Afghanistan public affairs office and advised the staff that she was going to report two deaths as a result of the accident. At that point there had been only one death, that of Corporal Paul Davis. The camp was under a communications lockdown at the time, and while embedded reporters had the correct story, they were precluded from filing the information. A judgment call was made to release the correct information to
6. AP that there had been only one death despite this being a technical breach of the policy, and a violation of the communications lockdown. That judgment call was subsequently supported by the chain of command and an incorrect report was averted. Tragically, Master Corporal Tim Wilson subsequently died of his wounds, bringing the accident's toll to two dead.
6. *Toronto Star* reporter Mitch Potter was embedded with the platoon at the time, although he was not at the *shura* in which the attack occurred. Access to the soldiers after the fact allowed Potter to prepare a detailed, compelling, and emotional article about the incident (*Ibid.*).
7. Discussion with Captain Marshall Hayes, D.O., USAF, Staff Psychiatrist, Task Force Med, 14th Cache, Kandahar, Afghanistan, 7 March 2006. Dr. Hayes's recommendation is that soldiers involved in critical incidents should not be exposed to media at all.