

Soldiers & the Press



U.S. Army Photo

A camera crew moves in to interview soldiers deployed in operation Desert Shield. Leaders cannot forget the impact the news media can have on their soldiers.

By MSG Ron Hatcher

"... impress upon the mind of every man the importance of the cause and what they are contending for."

— George Washington

"With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed."

— Abraham Lincoln

Washington and Lincoln made those remarks when it took days and weeks for news to cross oceans. Neither our first commander-in-chief nor our Civil War president could have anticipated modern communication technology, and how it would affect public opinion and soldier morale. We are still learning ourselves.

During Operation Just Cause in Panama, one battalion commander likened soldiers watching CNN to a football player returning a punt for a touchdown — then standing on the sideline to watch himself on the big-screen replay.

The point, of course, is that instant global communication is now the norm, but we are still not certain how it affects combat operations.

One thing is certain: Soldiers, long distrustful of reporters, can no longer afford to ignore them or the effects of their reports, either in theater or at home.

Gen. Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, drove the point home shortly after soldiers began deploying to Saudi Arabia in support of Operation Desert Shield. As the operation got under way, he dispatched a message saying, "... military actions in Grenada and Panama demonstrated that otherwise successful operations are not total successes unless the media aspects are properly handled."

Naturally, combat leaders have many other things to worry about while conducting tactical operations, but they cannot forget the impact the news media can have on the lives and effectiveness of their soldiers.

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To meet the information needs of a unit deployed to a tactical environment, commanders and NCOs must focus on two areas: command information and public information.

Command Information is internal communication, between the commander, his soldiers, family members and civilian employees. A good command information program makes good soldiers better soldiers. It reinforces training, while helping soldiers understand the mission and the commander's goals and expectations. It also provides two-way communications that gives the commander a feel for the attitudes and concerns within the unit.

Soldiers' information needs are seldom greater than when there is a change in routine operations. If expected to perform well in a deployment, soldiers need a lot of answers: Where they are going, why, for how long, and what they will face there. Soldiers also need to understand something about the culture, the language, the environment and the political climate of the region in which they will be operating. Most of all, they want to know that their families will be all right while they are away. Only when these information needs are satisfied do soldiers reach peak morale and performance.

The waiting spouse has dozens of concerns, from child care to continuing stability of the family finances. The assumption that the soldier has kept the spouse informed is often wrong. Families, too, have a need to know (within the limits of OPSEC) where the unit is going, why, and for how long.



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Commanders and first sergeants deployed for Operation Just Cause said command information in theater and at home station had a tremendous impact on morale. During Operation Desert Shield one soldier told a television reporter that even out-of-date newspapers were "like gold," being passed from soldier to soldier.

To enhance their effectiveness and credibility, unit leaders should conduct their command information efforts so that those who need to know are informed as quickly and with as much information as possible. NCOs often call this rumor control. Soldiers and families see it as openness and concern for their needs. Credibility requires balanced handling of the "good" and "bad" news that affect the military community. Leaders who withhold bad news damage their own credibility with soldiers, who then turn to other sources for information that may be inaccurate.

In those instances where the news is bad, the need for a quick and frank

response is even greater. This limits the length of time bad news is in the spotlight and squelches rumor.

Public information is external communications aimed at American citizens as well as international audiences. While NCOs tend to view public information as something outside their area of responsibilities and expertise, they, nevertheless, have an important role to play. Don't forget that many of the faces seen on television are young soldiers — and that their appearance and the message they convey will impact on millions of viewers.

One of the lessons learned after Operation Just Cause is that modern technology has blurred the line that used to separate public information from command information. The soldier who knows the facts before reading or hearing about them from outside news sources is better prepared to evaluate that information. And the soldier who knows his job and how it impacts on the mission is better prepared to respond

should news reporters show on the battlefield.

Technological advances have made the media more and more autonomous, allowing them to operate in any corner of the globe and show up in any sector of the battlefield. Satellite and computer technology gives them the independent ability to transmit their stories and images in the clear and in near-real time, either through the air or over telephone lines. These factors increase the chances for OPSEC violations or for other useful information to fall into the hands of the enemy. We must not forget that just as our soldiers and family members are tuned into satellite broadcasts, so are our enemies. It is well-known that Manuel Noriega and Saddam Hussein routinely monitored CNN and other networks, as did their staff officers and many of their soldiers and citizens.

An example of how a soldier's off-hand comments to the media could undermine the mission occurred during the Grenada operation. Talking to an

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unescorted TV crew, the soldier complained about the lack of military maps and of the unit's low morale. Fortunately, the opposing force in Grenada was not able to take advantage of the comment, but such information could be of great value to a more formidable enemy in a longer-duration conflict.

Similarly, days before the Jan. 15, 1991 deadline the United Nations gave Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, a soldier deployed to Operation Desert Shield said, "From the newspapers we receive, compiled by the military, the views and morale of the troops are given the rosy treatment. But any visit we've had from the press has been preceded by an order from our superiors. They tell us, 'If asked a question, refer them to the public affairs officer . . .' Is that the Ministry of Disinformation? The truth is our morale is not as high as they would have you think. We don't know why we are here."

The soldier's comments couldn't help but weaken American support at home and provide grist for the Iraqi propaganda mill because they were published worldwide by syndicated columnist Mike Royko.

Obviously, a little education and training might have stopped both of the above soldiers from speaking so freely. Neither soldier probably gave any thought to how his comments might fall into enemy hands within minutes or hours of being spoken because it's only been in the past few years that battlefields have been swarmed by media, toting the high-tech gear they have now.

Knowing the enemy is watching and listening can be turned to a commander's advantage. When the enemy sees American soldiers playing football in the sands of Saudi Arabia, sees how well equipped and trained the soldiers are, sees that the American public is behind the operation and hears the soldiers talking about how

confident they are, it goes a long way toward countering propaganda.

Operations in Grenada, Panama and the Persian Gulf have proven the need for effective public affairs. It is clear that soldiers must be kept informed, and that, if called upon, be able to respond to media inquiries in a professional manner within the bounds of propriety and operational security.

To do so, NCOs must better understand the value of an informed public and be able to train their soldiers accordingly. ■

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When Soldiers Meet the Press

Accommodating the media during contingency operations can be painless. It can, in fact, be a morale booster and enhance the mission.

Sergeants should train their soldiers so they know how to respond to questions without detracting from the mission or violating OPSEC.

Advances in communications technology and the nature of low- and mid-intensity conflict make it such that any soldier can be approached by members of the news media during combat. Sergeants should train their soldiers so they know how to respond to questions without detracting from the mission or violating OPSEC.

NCOs can use the "Five Knows" system to train their soldiers:

KNOW the role and purpose of the American press. They do a job vital to Democracy by keeping the public, your loved ones and other soldiers informed. For the most part, American reporters are on your side and want you to do well. Understand that their questions do not constitute harassment. Only when they persist after you decline an interview or to answer a particular question does it become harassment.

KNOW who you are talking to. Verify that media members in your AO are escorted by a Public Affairs Office representative or are registered by the Corps/Division Public Affairs Office. If registered, the media member should be wearing a press badge identifying the issuing command. If the media member is not registered or escorted, do not detain him, but refer him to the PAO and report him to your supervisor as soon as possible. Remember, not all reporters will be Americans. Some may even be from countries friendly with the enemy. Also remember that posing as journalists could be perfect cover for terrorists or spies.

KNOW who will hear you. Whatever you say could be in the hands of your enemy within minutes because of modern technology, which is not secure. Don't divulge any information that might violate OPSEC, to include your unit's strength, losses, destination, supply levels or equipment status. Even though you might be the lowest-ranking member of your unit or section, you have information useful to opposing forces. For instance, if you grumble about conditions or about being away from home, the enemy will find propaganda value in your comments. If, on the other hand, you express confidence, the enemy, your allies and the public will see your readiness and resolve. This is one reason you should take the time to talk to the media when you can.

KNOW your rights. It is your choice whether to speak to reporters, and you may do so without fear of repercussion or punishment. That is, of course, unless your leaders have decided doing so at the time would interfere with the mission. If you speak to reporters, be both professional and courteous in your responses. Remember that you can refuse to answer any question you feel is inappropriate, and you can request the camera or tape recorder be turned off at any time.

KNOW your limits. Don't attempt to talk about anything above your level. Don't try to answer questions about division, brigade, battalion or company matters. Keep your responses to subjects within your own area of responsibility and personal knowledge. Don't speculate, don't repeat rumors, and don't discuss casualty information. If you don't have the answer to a question, say so.

Finally, the media know and have assumed the risks of covering combat operations. You should not put your life in jeopardy trying to accommodate or protect them. It is not your job, for example, to carry a reporter's cameras or batteries. You have your own gear to carry. If the media is interfering with your mission, politely ask them to stay out of the way. If their lights hinder your vision, insist they be turned off. You are in charge of your own operation and safety. Also, refrain from taking chances you wouldn't normally take just because the cameras are "rolling."

With a little training, accommodating the media during contingency operations can be painless. It can, in fact, be a morale booster and actually enhance the mission. ■

MSG Ron Hatcher

