

The Army and Embedded Media



Lieutenant Colonel Tammy L. Miracle, U.S. Army

Center for Strategic & International Studies, Washington, D.C.

SOME ARMY LEADERS believe that denying media access to military action is a mistake. General Wesley K. Clark, U.S. Army, Retired, now a military analyst, believes that as a result of the “Vietnam mentality” the military made an error by restricting press coverage during the Persian Gulf war. “We had a 1st Armored Division tank battle that was just incredible, perhaps the biggest armored battle ever, but not a single image was reported or documented for history by the press,” Clark said.¹ One U.S. Army officer said about Afghanistan, “There was nobody there to tell the story of the youth of America going out and doing this great mission with such success in real tough terrain. It was a missed opportunity that I hope we don’t [repeat] in the future.”²

In Operation Iraqi Freedom, approximately 500 journalists, photographers, and news crews were embedded within U.S. and British military units; another 2,000 unilateral journalists were in Kuwait. In the planning stages of war, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Victoria Clarke told reporters they would have more access than had been available during the Persian Gulf war and in Afghanistan. She said, “It’s in our interest to let people see for themselves through the news media, the lies and deceptive tactics Saddam Hussein will use.”³ Clarke made this statement af-

In Operation Desert Storm, the Army shunned the news media, while the USMC fully accepted them. . . . John Fialka examined eight news media sources. He found that although the Army outnumbered the Marines by more than 200,000 soldiers, there were only 271 articles about the Army; there were 293 stories about the Marines. . . . Fialka writes that the USMC had a “flair for public relations that made the reporters wonder whether they came from the same country that produced the Army.”

ter U.S. journalists complained they were denied access to U.S. troops during the first few months of the campaign in Afghanistan.⁴ An embedded news media program ensures that the media receives every opportunity to observe actual combat operations.

U.S. Army public affairs officer (PAO) Colonel Melanie R. Reeder, who was deployed to Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom, said initial public affairs guidance was restrictive and passive because of host-nation sensitivities and limitations. Reeder said, “When the public affairs posture changed from passive to active,

it was difficult to catch up and get the media out in front with the troops.”⁵⁵ Reeder added that the eight embedded reporters in Operation Anaconda helped blaze the path for a large-scale, Secretary of Defense-dictated, embedded-media program in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Reeder, who participated in writing the public affairs chapter for the Center for Army Lessons Learned, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, which focuses on the coalition forces’ land component command public affairs mission in Afghanistan, said, “When journalists were provided access, the accurate story was told. When they were not provided with information, the result was speculation, misinformation, and inaccuracy.”⁵⁶

Unprecedented Media Access

Before Operation Iraqi Freedom, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeldt and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard B. Myers issued a directive that stated, “We must organize for and facilitate access of national and international media to our forces, including those engaged in ground operations. Our goal is to get it right from the start, not days or weeks into an operation. We will commit communications systems and trained joint public affairs teams to facilitate the international press getting a firsthand look at coalition operations.”⁵⁷ These policy changes profoundly affect the way PAOs operate. News crews, individual journalists, and photographers are assigned to specific combat units for days, weeks, or months.

In Operation Desert Storm, the Army shunned the news media, while the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) fully accepted them. In his book *Hotel Warriors Covering the Gulf War*, John Fialka writes that the USMC received too much coverage because it had a “flair for public relations that made the reporters

wonder whether they came from the same country that produced the Army.”⁵⁸

Thus far, news reports from Operation Iraqi Freedom reveal that the embedded media program is working. Embedded journalists have unprecedented

access to troops, and the U.S. public is seeing actual footage of Army actions in Iraq. After the sand settles, however, will embedded journalists complain that unit commanders inflicted too many rules that kept them from telling the real story? Embedded journalists have already noted that restrictions are sometimes placed on what they can report, but such limitations are liberal and based solely on operational security and force protection.

The level of cooperation between journalists and soldiers depends on the unit commander. Positive news coverage indicates that Army commanders are open and available to embedded journalists even on the battlefield. Possibly a new level of

trust will evolve between soldiers and journalists. This alone is history in the making.

Journalists who covered Operation Desert Storm were in Riyadh and Dhahran hotels while battles raged. Of the 1,600 media representatives in Saudi Arabia, only about 10 percent managed to produce stories that told the news and documented history. Still, the lack of media access during Operation Desert Storm was not entirely the Army’s fault. Saudi Arabian officials were reluctant to permit reporters to enter the country and were concerned about reporting that might offend cultural sensibilities.⁹

A New Level of Trust

Friction between the Army and the media is not new. Many Army leaders, and not just Vietnam-era leaders, painfully distrust the media and are cautious



CNN News correspondent Peter Arnett in Baghdad, Iraq, 1992.

Many Army leaders, and not just Vietnam-era leaders, painfully distrust the media. . . . In many cases, news media rush to deadline. Attribution, a fundamental part of news reporting, is often absent, and essential military terminology and critical facts are sometimes completely fabricated.

about what gets out to the press. One possible explanation for the Army's distrust of the news media is that journalists do not always take the time for accurate reporting. In many cases, news media rush to deadline. Attribution, a fundamental part of news reporting, is often absent, and essential military terminology and critical facts are sometimes incorrect. In some cases, stories are completely fabricated.

In July 1998, *Time* and CNN publicly apologized for running the Operation Tailwind story, which alleged that U.S. forces used nerve gas during the Vietnam war.¹⁰ April Oliver produced the CNN piece, and war correspondent Peter Arnett delivered it to the public. Oliver and Arnett also received bylines for the story in *Time*. The story claimed to have uncovered a top-secret, covert military operation in Laos whose objective was to assassinate U.S. defectors. Allegedly, the operation went awry and ground commanders employed sarin nerve gas to kill enemy soldiers as well as civilians. The following day, newspapers across the country spread the story.

The Department of Defense (DOD) initiated an extensive investigation. Research revealed no evidence of sarin use, nor was it a goal of Operation Tailwind to target U.S. defectors. The Center for Military History interviewed several individuals identified as possibly having firsthand knowledge of the operation, but none knew of the use of sarin or any other lethal chemical agent. The mission's only purpose was to attack installations on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to create a diversion for another operation.

In an attempt to prevent further damage, *Time* ran a letter from the editor apologizing to readers. Oliver was fired and producer Jack Smith resigned. Arnett, who was initially reprimanded for his role in the

story, was later fired because of relentless pressure from the Pentagon.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, Peter Arnett was once again fired, this time by NBC, for allegedly saying on state-run Iraqi television that

the allied war effort had failed because of Iraqi resistance. Tom Johnson, CNN News Group chairman and CEO, issued a statement saying Arnett's story could not be supported: "The fault lies with the editors, producers, reporters, and executives responsible for the program and its contents."¹¹ An embedded media might have negated such misinformation.

Another reason the Army might be reluctant to have embedded media while at war is the responsibility for protecting journalists. How does a soldier keep a "gung-ho" reporter from crossing the line into danger to get that Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph? What happens if a journalist is taken prisoner? Accord-

ing to the 1949 Geneva Convention, journalists accredited by an accompanying military force are considered part of the military entourage and must be treated as prisoners of war.¹² Also, they might be security risks, given what they might know.

Unlike FOX News reporter Colonel Oliver North, USMC, Retired, most journalists do not have a military understanding of war. Under current Pentagon guidelines, embedded journalists are not allowed to carry weapons, use a personal vehicle, or break away from the military unit.

During the first week of Operation Iraqi Freedom four journalists were killed, none of whom were part of the embedded media. In 2001, 37 journalists were killed; eight while covering the war in Afghanistan.¹³ The British newspaper *The Guardian* reported that the Taliban was offering \$50,000 to Afghans who killed Western journalists.¹⁴



Fox News correspondent Steve Harrigan in Afghanistan, 2001.

Colonel Reeder, who was deployed to Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom, said initial public affairs guidance was restrictive and passive because of host-nation sensitivities and limitations. . . , "When the public affairs posture changed from passive to active, it was difficult to catch up and get the media out in front with the troops."



US Army

The DOD news media boot camp helps embedded journalists develop a relationship with the military services and prepares them for the rigors of combat, including possible exposure to biological or chemical weapons. DOD should require all journalists who want to be embedded with troops to attend the boot camp. . . , [and] must position extremely competent soldiers to manage the embedded media program.

Bureau chiefs and network executives are often the first to cry for help when aggressive journalists find themselves in harm's way. In 1989, during the U.S. invasion of Panama, journalists were trapped in the Marriott hotel. The U.S. military rescued the journalists, but in the process three soldiers were seriously wounded, and a Spanish photographer was killed.

Before Operation Iraqi Freedom, 300 to 500 news organizations secured a place at the Al Rashid Hotel in Baghdad.¹⁵ In a pre-war briefing, Clarke said, "We can't make business decisions for [the media], but we can tell you how extraordinarily dangerous we think it is to have your people [in Baghdad]."¹⁶

Losing Autonomy?

Not all news organizations are elated about the Pentagon's loosening of restrictions on reporters. Some journalists have changed their initial opinions about the embedded media program. For example, before Operation Iraqi Freedom, CBS News anchorman Dan Rather said, "I have trepidations. There's a pretty fine line between being embedded and being entombed."¹⁷ Rather feared that the media would give up its independence in return for access to the front line. He said, "The best story in the world is not worth a damn unless you can get it

out."¹⁸ After the first major battle in Iraq, Rather said, "I repeat for emphasis, it wasn't perfect . . . ; in some cases [they] embedded people, but they didn't let them up with the far-forward units. But there's [little] to complain about, and there's a lot to applaud."¹⁹

Some news agencies think the embedded media process is a way for the military to control the news.²⁰ Before the war, journalists expressed concern that they might have to wait days to file a story because the transmission might give away troop locations. Others complained that units they were assigned to might not see action. Journalists also feared that by being embedded, the public would perceive them as being biased or "in bed" with the military. *Los Angeles Times* reporter John Hendren, who stayed with the 3d Infantry Division in Kuwait before the war, said, "When you're living in tents with these guys and eating what they eat and cleaning the dirt off the glasses, it's a whole different experience. You definitely have a concern about knowing people so well that you sympathize with them."²¹

Embedded journalists must make a conscious effort to write objectively. Responsible journalists know the difference. If the public believes embedding journalists is a way for the Pentagon to control the news rather than to report it, the Army will have gained nothing.

The USMC has used embedded media successfully for years. After the 1991 Persian Gulf war, Fialka examined eight news media sources. He found that although the Army outnumbered the Marine Corps by more than 200,000 soldiers, there were only 271 articles about the Army; there were 293 stories about the Marines. Fialka said, "If Ernie Pyle had managed to get in a Gulf War Marine pool, he would have risked being mobbed by officers vying to get him to cover their units. If he had been assigned to the Army pool, he would have found a substantial risk of getting lost, becoming unable to communicate, or being ejected or isolated by Vietnam-addled field commanders worried that journalists might get too close to the troops."²² The Army cannot be afraid to tell its story.

The successful media and public affairs program might now have successfully changed the Army's relationship with the media. Before the war with Iraq, it was reported that Saddam Hussein might commit atrocities against Shiite civilians and try to make it look as if U.S. troops had committed crimes.²³ The news media must ensure that the world sees the truth as displayed by professional,

dedicated U.S. soldiers. Today's uniformed men and women are the best in the world. They will tell a first-class story for the Army.

DOD Media Boot Camp

The DOD news media boot camp helps embedded journalists develop a relationship with the military services and prepares them for the rigors of combat, including possible exposure to biological or chemical weapons. DOD should require all journalists who want to be embedded with troops to attend the boot camp. The camp allows broadcast news crews to experiment with improved communications gear and satellite uplinks. The Pentagon must continue to make the training as realistic as possible. Few reporters are combat veterans or have had combat experience.

The Army must position extremely competent soldiers to manage the embedded media program to allay the type of criticism it received after Operation Desert Storm because of how it managed public affairs operations. According to Fialka, "We saw an Army public affairs system fashioned as a dead-end career for officers and staffed with a sprinkling of incompetents put there by media-wary generals, some of whom still blame the media for losing the Vietnam war."²⁴ In contrast, competent, dedicated PAOs have been responsible for media successes in Afghanistan. In addition, the Army must continue to rely on U.S. National Guard (USNG) and Reserve Component (RC) PAOs, who in many cases, are members of the civilian media and could be an asset in implementing the embedded media program.

In addition to the embedded media program, Army PAOs and escort officers must be equipped to support the hundreds of journalists who operate unilaterally during military operations. For the news media, Operation Iraqi Freedom was considered to be the first "real" digital war.²⁵ News crews have "lipstick cameras, satellite videophones, laptop video editing, and portable TV-transmission dishes."²⁶ PAOs must have the physical ability and resources to support high-tech news crews.

John Hendren, who stayed with the 3d Infantry Division in Kuwait before the war, said, "When you're living in tents with these guys and eating what they eat and cleaning the dirt off the glasses, it's a whole different experience. You definitely have a concern about knowing people so well that you sympathize with them." If the public believes embedding journalists is a way for the Pentagon to control the news rather than to report it, the Army will have gained nothing.

Army leaders must include media operations during the earliest stages of war planning. Logistics planners must include public affairs operations and post-conflict media support in the process. PAOs need sufficient means of transportation, communications gear, and competent personnel for escort duty.

Embedding the media brings the soldier closer to the American people and puts a face on battle. Cooperation between the media and the Army is essential for the program to be effective. Journalists must understand operational security and respect the unit commander's security concerns. Embedded journalists must follow the ground rules imposed on them for their safety and the safety of the troops. They must establish trust and credibility with the commander and learn to use the correct military terminology and acronyms.

During the war with Iraq, Americans received the news 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; they listened to it, read about it, watched it, or surfed for it on the Internet. The world has watched as embedded journalists interviewed soldiers, and officers and enlisted soldiers are showing the public that they are professional, trained, disciplined, and ready to risk their lives for their country. Embedding journalists into Army units provides an opportunity for the world to see the American soldier's capability and dedication to the mission. *MR*

NOTES

1. Walter Isaacson, "News From the Frontline," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 January 2003, Opinion sec.
2. Kerry Sanders, "Pentagon Recommends Boot Camp for Journalists Covering the War," *CNBC: The News with Brian Williams*, 10 February 2003.
3. Howard Kutz, "A Battle Plan for the '03 Campaign," *The Washington Post*, 20 January 2003, D1.
4. "Afghanistan: Report Says Pentagon Restricted Journalists' Access to War," *Radio Free Europe*, on-line at <www.rferl.org/inca/features/2002/08/05082002154516.asp>, 4 March 2003.
5. COL Melanie R. Reeder, interview by author, 2003, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. John J. Fialka, *Hotel Warriors Covering the Gulf War* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1992), 2.
9. Joint Publication (JP) 3-61, *Doctrine for Public Affairs in Joint Operations* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 14 May 1997), 1-3.
10. April Oliver and Peter Arnett, "Operation Tailwind," *Time* and CNN, 7 June 1998.
11. Allan Wolper, "CNN's CIA Connection: New Tailwind Controversy," *Editor & Publisher Inc.*, 132: 1-2.
12. Jennifer Harper, "Embedded Media Gets Mixed Reviews in Early Stages of the War," *The Washington Times*, 25 March 2003, Nation, A12.

13. For information about the Committee to Protect Journalists, see on-line at <www.cpj.org/>.
14. *The Guardian*. Reference information not provided.
15. Mathew Rose and Emily Nelson, "Media Will Put Reporters' Safety First," *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 March 2003, B1.
16. Victoria Clarke, pre-war briefing. Reference information not provided.
17. James T. Madore, "Journalists: Back to the Front; Some Skepticism Over 'Embedding' of Media," *Newsday*, 3 March 2003, A14.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Dan Rather, interview by Larry King, *CNN Larry King Live*, 14 April 2003.
20. Susan B. Glasser, "Media and Military Try Experiment in Openness," *The Washington Post*, 7 March 2003, A14.
21. Howard Kutz, "Media Weigh Costs, Fruits of 'Embedding,'" *The Washington Post*, 11 March 2003, A15.
22. Fialka, 7.
23. Walter Isaacson, "News from the Frontline," *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 January 2003, A19.
24. Fialka.
25. Emily Nelson, "TV Crews Plan to Employ a Range of High-Tech Gear Unavailable in 1991 Conflict," *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 March 2003, B1.
26. *Ibid.*