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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, RI

An Operational Commander's Guide to the Media

Michael McCartney
LCDR USN

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

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“...the only way in which the public learns anything at all about what is happening abroad is through the media.”¹

Throughout history, the media has played a critical role in a nation’s ability or inability to conduct armed conflict. The reporting cycle and the delivery of the information has undergone a dramatic transformation with the age of satellites and mini-uplink stations, yet the basic tenets of war reporting and its relationship with both the military and the national government are largely unchanged. The military and the government strongly desire to achieve the national objective while the media sees its role to both accurately report the conflict and tell the story such that it sparks reader interest.

This paper will briefly examine the last 150 years of war and the military-media relationship to see what impact that relationship has had on the nation’s ability to wage war. The examination will expose some of the key successes, failures, and consistencies throughout history concluding with a close look at the most recent war, Operation Iraqi Freedom and the advent of the “embedded reporter.” The Operational Commander is wise to review media relations and the successes and pitfalls of past conflicts, and to examine closely the results of Operation Iraqi Freedom so as to completely understand the media before developing a plan for media relations in a future operation.

There are two general categories of wars, those where national survival is at stake and those where national survival is not perceived to be at stake. As will be shown, where national survival is at stake, the media and the military are mutually supportive and are almost completely in step to ensure the military members and the civilians maintain their morale. In general, wars prior 1950 can be categorized as wars of national survival. With the creation of the United Nations and the advent of the cold war, each succeeding war *from the United States perspective*, has not been a war for national survival. Thus the media has been less likely to completely and unhesitatingly support the government’s national objective; this has often led to a more tenuous relationship between the media and the military. While many of the conflicts discussed have similarities in the media-military relationship, only a few specific points will be

highlighted in each conflict. Collectively the issues will paint the mosaic showing the experiences which shape the current media-military relationship.

The Crimean War (1854-1856) was a conflict which pitted the Tsar of Russia against Turkey, France, and England. Embroidered within the fabric of this war are threads of media actions that would become common in future wars. Oversimplification of complex issues, dramatic if not completely truthful phrasing, and a genuine desire to look after the troops were characteristics of the British media in this conflict. Editorials in *The Times* of London recommended war, and likely influenced Britain's decision to declare war. *The Times* editorial following the declaration of war clearly indicated national survival was at stake:

No alternative is left to us; the decision has been taken out of our hands; and, unless we would submit, with our allies, to crouch under the insolent dictatorship of a barbaric Power, and see the liberties of Europe disappear under the tramp of a Cossack, we have no other course.²

The national fervor, while a great morale booster for the troops leaving Britain, was of little help to the soldier when the realities of war and the poor to non-existent supply infrastructure began to take their toll. *The Times* war correspondent, William Russell, had a significant impact through his war reports by exposing the lack of supplies, medical care, food, and other basic needs for the army. Of the 18,058 casualties, only 1,761 were combat related while the rest can be attributed to poor living and medical conditions including 13,150 who died in the first nine months! Russell's letters catalyzed the home front forcing the government to move quickly to vastly improve the camp conditions. As a result, the mortality rate of the soldiers in Crimea in the subsequent two years of the war was lower than that in London.³

The American Civil War sheds light on issues relevant today: the insatiable demands of editors for stories, and with the telegraph, the advantages and limitations of a new technology. The rapid expansion of the United States before 1860 resulted in major cities dotting the country, each with up to five newspapers and most sending correspondents to the war – over 500 in total.

As editors saw it [under stress to expand circulation], it was vital to have as many “stories” as possible, the more dramatic the better. If there was difficulty in finding them, they must be fabricated, even if it meant elevating rumour or gossip into truth. Wilbur Storey of the *Chicago*

Times sent an order to one of his men: ‘Telegraph fully all news you can get and when there is no news send rumour.’^{4,5}

As articles could only be transmitted one at a time with a normal transmit time of 15-30 minutes; the telegraph forced a reporter to get his story quickly on the wire in order to “scoop” the other newspapers in his city. The deadlines and the telegraph also combined to give the correspondent a geographic constraint. The correspondents were not necessarily where the news was, but “the news” was often where the reporters were, within daily reach of the telegraph office.⁶ The demands for continuous reports left little time for the correspondents to find a story, flesh it out and report it accurately.

World War I and World War II are often pointed to as the pinnacles of the military-media relationship because the military and the media worked together seamlessly, with heavy censorship, to provide positive information about the war effort. In World War I, with the German advance continuing, the French and British counterattacked and in little more than three hours, gained an area 1200 by 2000 yards at the cost of 11,200 casualties. A disaster, yet the *The Illustrated London News* (2 October 1915) reported this battle under the heading:

‘The French and British Victories: Gains on the Western Front.’ It added: Sir John French, announcing the British advance, notified the following gains up to September 28: Enemy trenches captured on a front of over five miles, our troops penetrating the German lines in places to a distance of 4,000 yards, the area including the Western Outskirts of Hullock, the village of Loos, with mining works round, and Hill 70.⁷

The cold, raw number of casualties was never mentioned in the article for fear of its impact on British morale. In January 1942, the threat of Japanese invasion of Hawaii or the West Coast in conjunction with the German U-boat sinkings in the Atlantic galvanized America to a single-minded focus on defeat of the enemy. Unlike previous wars, most media on the front lines were recruited by the military and “embedded” throughout the front line units. The correspondents understood they worked for the army and the articles they produced were thoroughly censored before being used in magazines such as *Stars and Stripes*. As a model for war where national survival is at stake, the media-military relationship in both World Wars would be useful. However, the severe censorship employed in such wars would not be tolerated in lesser conflicts.

The Korean conflict highlights the problem of changing the rules of censorship during a war. Early on, correspondents had free access throughout the battle space and, though articles leaving Korea were routinely sent using military communications systems, the correspondents experienced little censorship in reporting. When the Chinese entered the war and drove the allied coalition back down the Korean peninsula, the resultant negative reporting sparked General MacArthur to impose strict censorship. The purpose of the shift was to soften the reports back home of coalition losses. Yet to the media, it was an attempt to cover up failure.

Most Vietnam veterans would suggest that the Vietnam War was lost because the media turned against the troops and the government. A careful examination of some of the key issues – lack of clearly identifiable military objectives, television’s impact on public opinion, and inaccurate government reporting – demonstrate that the media, military, and government all share responsibility for the loss.

First, the US objective and intermediate goals in Vietnam were not clearly articulated to the media or even to the combatants and thus, it was impossible for the media to assess for themselves whether we were “winning.” Without a front line, correspondents could not move up to the front and assess the situation by observation or interview. Therefore, the only news they received was from official briefings, rumors and occasional trips out with the troops via helicopter or patrol. Similar to the Civil War, the correspondents in Vietnam felt pressure to produce “news worthy” stories to justify expenses which often led to dramatization and generalization of a specific situation. A CBS story provides a good example:

The day’s operation ... wounded three women, killed one baby, wounded one marine, and netted these four prisoners. Four old men who could not answer questions put to them in English. Four old men who had no idea what an ID card was. Today’s operation is the frustration of Vietnam in miniature. There is little doubt that American fire power can win a military victory. But to a Vietnamese peasant whose home means a lifetime of back-breaking labour it will take more than presidential promises to convince him that we are on his side.⁸

This dramatic story clearly leads the reader to believe such events were typical, even though the truth was that the average reporter produced stories from quick trips outside Siagon and would have been unable to accurately generalize the war effort from this

specific scene. The story was where the reporter was rather than where the news actually was.⁹

As the war progresses, the official government releases and the media reporting diverged to opposite ends of the spectrum. The mismatch became an unrecoverable divide during the 1968 Tet Offensive. The President had previously stated publicly that he could “see the light at the end of the tunnel” in Vietnam. Yet only a few months later, the 1968 Tet Offensive was captured on film and broadcast to the American people. While to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars, the offensive was a military disaster, the televised broadcasts of firefights in the streets of Saigon, firefights on US Embassy grounds, and a picture of the Saigon police chief executing a suspected Viet Cong member in the middle of a street told a story quite contradictory to the President’s assertions. It is in accord with human nature to believe what is seen, in contrast to other conflicting information. Was the government lying? Perhaps not, but following the Tet Offensive, neither the media nor the public was willing to trust the government or military. Virtually overnight, the window through which the public saw the war became tinted with a negative bias that was unrecoverable.

Similar to the American experience in Vietnam, British involvement in Ireland was fraught with many similarities regarding the military-media relationship. The British learned two very important lessons. First, they quickly discovered that their commanders in the field were not very media savvy. To counter this, the British established a television/media center to train officers likely to provide official interviews with the skills necessary to accurately provide information without fear of being ambushed by the media. The second lesson was related to credibility:

Viewers, sitting at home, instinctively believed that, if a general appeared, he was almost certainly covering up; a colonel was probably protecting his regiment; a young officer was probably saying what he had been told to say; but, when a lance corporal appeared, of course he was telling the truth - after all, he’s just an ordinary bloke like one of us!”¹⁰

With this in mind the British altered their media guidelines for their troops. The change allowing them to answer media questions rather than be evasive proved very successful in maintaining the morale of the soldiers and support at home.

The Falklands War was the most recent war prior to OIF where correspondents were embedded with the military. There are two important lessons to learn from the Falklands experience. First, since embedded correspondents followed the troops continuously, they could capture the mood of the troops and find a way to make the experience relatable to the viewers at home. With several ships on the bottom of the ocean and the British advance bogged down, an embedded photographer took a picture of a soldier accepting a cup of tea from a Falkland Island family which shortly landed on the front page. As one correspondent astutely noted:

The photograph was a quintessential image of Britishness. The custom of tea drinking was projected as a hallmark of English culture, while the symbolic picket fence signaled ownership and domestication of this far-flung corner of empire, legitimizing the campaign to re-establish sovereignty over it.¹¹

The picture provided comfort to a nation troubled about the course of action being taken.

The second lesson concerned censorship. The censorship was draconian and enforceable since the Falklands were so remote that the only way correspondents could get to the battle was via the military and reports could only be passed via military satellite pathways. As a result, few stories returned to Britain and those received were entirely positive. With so little news, the editors felt forced to go elsewhere to fill the space and correspondents in Argentina occasionally filled the gap. The British Government considered such action treasonous, yet it did not recognize the need for a better flow of information.

The Grenada and Panama operations showed two different approaches by the U.S. Military for working with the media. Fresh in the minds of the senior commanders was Vietnam's failure and the contrasting success the British had controlling the media in the Falklands. Consequently, the U.S. Military excluded the media entirely from the Grenada operation. Several years later in Panama, a press pool was established, but the logistics were poorly executed and non-pool correspondents who flew into Panama independently "scooped" the pool correspondents. In both cases, the military-media relationship was dysfunctional, but because each military operation was successfully completed in a very short duration (72 hours for Grenada), media complaints to the

public were ignored. The consequences however, were the perpetuation of mistrust between the military and the media, and perhaps more importantly, the American people did not have the opportunity to see how capable and professional their military had become.

The most striking and important media event to come out of Desert Storm (Gulf War I) was not controlled or designed by the military. It is often said that Desert Storm “made” CNN. The unspoken corollary is that CNN remade the United States Military. The dramatic scenes from downtown Baghdad of incredibly accurate missiles and bombs shocked the world and gave those considering ill-will against America something else to think about. Several additional points provide valuable lessons, including; enemy use of a global media; the rising impact of the independent reporter with regard to operational security; and friendly and enemy casualties.

Saddam Hussein knew he would not be able to win a war against the coalition standing against him and he saw Israel and the international media as two prongs in his defense. The force against him was arrayed to the south yet one of his first actions was to launch Scud missiles at Israel, knowing the Israeli media would demand that their government join the coalition and fight back even though, as a potential consequence, it might split several critical Arab countries from the coalition. President Bush prevented that from happening.

Saddam’s second action was to use the international media in Baghdad to quickly broadcast destruction and death when a coalition bomb or missile errantly hit a civilian complex, in order to “arouse the sympathy of the world to the damage inflicted in his country by a superpower.”¹² For example, after a bomb hit a civilian air raid shelter, the *Jordanian Times* reported the attack as “a living testimony to the US-led alliance’s cruelty, cynicism and total disregard for human life in conducting this ugly and pointless war against Iraq.”¹³ Though Saddam’s tactics were unsuccessful, the military was forced to spend significant time explaining the occasional failure of precision weapons.

A press pool concept was instituted during Desert Storm which severely limited media access, embittering those without access and forcing them to report the war as independent correspondents or as they were more commonly called; “unilaterals.”

Without access, under pressure to produce stories, and in competition with those who had access, the unilaterals were more likely to dramatize the news information which often provided the public with a skewed perspective of 'real events'. More importantly, unilaterals were not bound by the censoring guidelines which forbid pool correspondents from reporting on future operations. As General Schwarzkopf moved his forces into position for the attack, the unilaterals reported the relative positions of coalition troops. While the Iraqi forces did not use these reports to prepare for an enveloping attack, the unilateral reports provided the Iraqis an opportunity to improve their defenses. Despite this, General Schwarzkopf did achieve tactical surprise.

The topic of military casualties in Desert Storm merits discussion. The following example highlights the danger of estimating potential casualties. The normal British policy was to deflect the question of casualties, however, once David Fairhall of the *Guardian* asked:

“What sort of casualties should the British be prepared for?”

“... It is inconceivable,” replied the brigadier, “that if two armies of the size that are facing each other here, went to war there would not be considerable casualties.”

“What sort of figures are we talking about? What percentage? Two? Ten? Twenty?”

“We are planning on 15 per cent,” interjected the Chief of Staff.

”15 per cent?” echoed a voice; “that’s over 1,500 men from your own brigade alone!”¹⁴

London’s *Evening Standard* headline proclaimed: ‘British Commander’s Warning as gulf forces go on alert: Prepare for a Bloodbath.’¹⁵ The British military spent considerable time and effort recovering from that remark.

As the battle was coming to a close, long lines of Iraqi troops were retreating from Kuwait. Coalition air power decimated the columns and the slaughter was shown live on CNN. As the troops had not surrendered, they were valid military targets whose destruction would limit Saddam’s future combat power. However, the outcry to halt the attacks was so significant that remaining Iraqi forces were allowed to return to Iraq uncontested. This was the first situation where destruction of enemy troops became a cause for public concern.

The Balkans conflict showed an almost identical exploitation of civilian casualties as was demonstrated in Desert Storm. The Balkans civil war had produced

such horrific pictures that NATO was compelled to intervene to act as a humanitarian force to stabilize the region. Unsuccessful as a passive police force, NATO resorted to offensive force to establish the conditions for stability and while most of the air strikes were accurate, occasionally a bomb would cause civilian casualties. The Serbian Leader, Slobodan Milosevic was quick to highlight these tragedies to the media and as a result, NATO spent significant time repairing its credibility as a professional military force when only a very small fraction of the bombs missed the targets. Milosevic used the media as a weapon – NATO needed public support to continue aerial attacks as part of the stabilization process and Milosevic was nearly able to eliminate that support.¹⁶

In the span of just over 150 years, media coverage of wars increased from fewer than ten correspondents in the Crimean War to over 7,000 on the ground in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Anticipating this onslaught of correspondents, the Operation Iraqi Freedom planners developed the most comprehensive media plan ever conceived for a major combat operation. The plan included daily briefings, an embedded media program, and a plan to handle the expected onslaught of unilateral correspondents.

Briefings were held both in the Pentagon and in the operational theater. The general media opinion was that the daily briefings were long on spin and short on substance. The reality, at least from one reporter's opinion was somewhat different. Most correspondents assigned to cover the Doha briefings anticipated that General Franks would pick up exactly where General Schwarzkopf left off 11 years before and they were excited. Instead, they quickly saw that Brigadier General Brooks would lead the briefings. Media Critic Michael Wolff continues:

... we [the correspondents] would be as close to the guy running this theater as the reporters in the first Gulf War were close to Schwarzkopf, who was a star. He was great. He made great television. I'm sure he gave no more information than we got this time around, but the difference now – and it's an important difference – is that even when you're not getting information from the guy who has the information to give, you're still getting information by the very fact that he's not giving it to you. Brooks was obviously just a messenger; he was just saying what he was told to say, so there was no way you could measure the quality of that. He was not making the decision not to tell us something. There was no reading him and he was basically expressionless for a reason: he knew nothing.¹⁷

This was one of the few significant mistakes of the media relationship in the war. The military identified a very sharp, professional officer with excellent military appearance and bearing in Brigadier General Brooks to give the briefings. However, he did not have the rank and decision making authority to be credible to the media. This does not imply that the briefings should be given by General Franks all the time, but his lack of regular participation left the media in Doha to feel less important, thus leading to Michael Wolff's most famous question to General Brooks: "I mean no disrespect, but what is the value proposition? Why are we here? Why should we stay? What is the value of what we're learning at this million-dollar press center?"¹⁸

The concept of an embedded media program was not new to the military or the media, having been performed previously in Desert Storm. But in Operation Iraqi Freedom, with 770 media personnel involved, the program was on a scale never before contemplated. But why did the military do it? The Weekly Standard's description sums up both the media concerns and the military's answer:

On October 30, 2002 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld ... [stated] If there was a war with Iraq, journalists would be with the troops. In Afghanistan, he said, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda showed great skill in news management. The best way to combat that was to have accurate, professional journalists on the ground to see the truth of what was going on. He said he had already had intelligence from Iraq that they were arranging things to mislead the press. Having people who are honest and professional see these things and be aware of that is useful. So I consider it not just the right thing to do but also a helpful thing.¹⁹

Now, with the advantage of hindsight, results of the embedded program were outstanding. From the military perspective, the public received truthful, timely, unbiased, and most importantly, believable reporting from eye-witness embedded reporters. Additional advantages included improving morale of the troops and the families at home, and better battlefield intelligence. Two of the military's chief challenges with the embed program were that minor problems reported by embeds were blown out of proportion by stateside media analysis and the altering of orders by relatively junior officers to achieve a specific media report. The media was appreciative of the vastly improved access. The chief criticisms of the embed program stemmed from the non-embedded media and included: the embed reports were biased towards the coalition; a general lack of a cohesive picture that would allow the public to follow the

war in a logical format; and from the embedded media, inconsistent censorship guidelines.

The believable and unbiased eye-witnesses, the embedded correspondents, could not say enough about the professionalism and training the young Army and Marine soldiers demonstrated in such harsh conditions. Those initial reports cemented a positive image in the minds of the American people which was carried through the war. Amid the good news stories, an occasional error was made and civilian lives were often lost, yet because the embedded reporter was there to see the event in context with the environment, the report, though sobering and unfortunate, was accepted by the American public as an error by soldiers trying to do their job in a difficult situation. The following example illustrates this point:

On the same day the ammo dump blew, I was involved in probably the worst nightmare for the Department of Defense concerning the embed process because I was right there when this civilian tragedy happened. The incident started when a civilian vehicle tried to come through the checkpoint and ignored the warning shots. [Several vehicles followed which also ignored the warning shots – however, the final two vehicles were an agricultural truck and a minibus filled with civilians.] The Marines opened fire on all the vehicles as they came through the checkpoint. They killed three children and two women on the bus. Because I had such an open relationship with the unit, they knew I was going to have to make this report. We were all in shock as we set up the videophone. It was a horrible scene but I couldn't hold back. I couldn't pull any punches. I had to say exactly what I saw and how bad it was. As it turned out, I think the full disclosure worked to the benefit of everyone. There was no need for other reporters to find out what really happened because I was there as an eyewitness. While I was giving the live report, the executive officer of the company and two of the platoon sergeants were standing on the other side of the camera watching me. After I finished the report, the executive officer walked up to me and said, "You were fair."²⁰

A second example, the unfortunate drowning death of two Marines along the Saddam Hussein Canal, demonstrates how the presence of the embedded media created additional stress on a unit commander and yet his presence averted a potential cover-up. *Washington Times* Chief Photographer Joe Eddins took pictures of a search for bodies being conducted by his unit but was asked to leave the area before he could learn the details. Upon returning to camp, he contacted associates working in the Pentagon to

discuss the situation. Quickly, very senior commanders were questioned about the deaths and subsequently initiated a top-down inquiry as to the circumstances surrounding the deaths. The on-scene commander, a junior field grade officer, under stress of the event, initially attempted to limit exposure of the tragedy by pushing the media back – leaving the impression with the media that he was trying to cover up the situation. The correspondent actually eliminated a potential cover-up situation by forcing rapid communications between commanders to adequately explain the event.²¹

The Embed program clearly improved the morale of the soldiers and their families. Contrary to what might be expected, the average military soldier enjoys interaction with the media. CBS White House Correspondent and Weekend Anchor John Roberts highlighted this point by reporting that the troops he was with wanted their families to see them on TV. Even the skeptics were won over after the first delivery of mail confirmed that every family was watching.²² The affect on the military families was even more pronounced and the correspondents often became conduits for the families and soldiers to communicate. GLOBE TV Executive Producer and ABC News and Nightline Correspondent Mike Cerre reported that he became the only reliable conduit through which families could communicate with their soldiers and consequently, whenever he was able to connect with a satellite, he would download a huge chain email and parcel it out to the troops and in return, he would allow the troops to build a reply using his laptop.²³

The military got one unexpected tactical advantage – better situational awareness of battlefield conditions; and one unspoken strategic advantage – informing future potential adversaries that the United States was a force to be reckoned with. An example of the tactical advantage was Marine Lieutenant General Conway’s control and redirection of his forces after he observed a live embedded report from his front line units.²⁴ The second strategic advantage is more difficult to directly link to a concrete example; however, it is reasonable to link Omar Kadafi’s decision to request United Nations inspector assistance in dismantling his nuclear weapons program on 19 December 2003 to the highly publicized capture of a disheveled looking Saddam Hussein from a “spider hole” in northern Iraqi, five days earlier.

The technology that allowed the stateside media to talk to embeds live occasionally created a crisis where none actually existed. One frequent example dealt with embedded media reports highlighting shortages of various supplies. Though not uncommon with an advancing army, one report would prompt stateside broadcasters to question other embeds and small shortages of various materials would snowball into a perceived logistical crisis threatening coalition failure and raising concerns at home. Military commanders spend considerable time investigating and then realistically reporting the significance of various minor shortages.

One junior commander's use of his embedded media to counter enemy propaganda exposed a second danger of the embedded media. The colonel commanding 2nd Brigade, 3rd Marine Division, was ordered to conduct a raid into Baghdad to test enemy defenses prior to the main assault. However, in execution and apparently without consulting superiors, he chose to stay in Baghdad so the embedded reports would counter the Iraqi Information Minister's assertion that no coalition forces were in Baghdad. Simultaneously, his base at the airport and his supply lines were attacked, severely threatening his units. Fortunately, the airport base and supply lines held. The unit commander allowed the presence of the media to become a factor in his decision to seize the initiative, expand his orders, and remain in the city to achieve a strategic aim that was beyond the scope of his responsibility.²⁵

Access, the lifeblood of the media, was almost unlimited within each embedded reporter's unit and the censorship guidelines from which he worked were straight forward and reasonable. Los Angeles Times Staff Writer David Zucchino wrote in his May 2, 2003 post-Iraq summary for the L.A. times:

I saw what the soldiers saw. And, like most of them, I emerged filthy, exhausted, and aware of what Winston Churchill meant when he said that "nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without effect." Most importantly, I wrote stories I could not have produced had I not been embedded – on the pivotal battle for Baghdad; the performance of US soldiers in combat; the crass opulence of Hussein's palaces; US airstrikes on an office tower in central Baghdad; souvenir – hunting by soldiers and reporters; and the discovery of more than \$750 million in cash in a neighborhood that had been the preserve of top Iraqi officials. Yet that same access could be suffocating and blinding. Often I was too close or confined to comprehend the war's broad sweep. I could not interview the survivors of Iraqi civilians killed by US soldiers or speak to

Iraqi fighters trying to kill Americans. I was not present when Americans died at the hands of fellow soldiers in what the military calls “frat,” for fratricide. I had no idea what ordinary Iraqis were experiencing. I was ignorant of Iraqi government decisions and US command strategy.²⁶

Mr. Zucchini’s experience was typical of the life of an embedded reporter. Embed restrictions, primarily staying with your unit, certainly limited some story lines; however, most were pleased with the wealth of information available from which to write.

Media personnel viewing the war from a distance expressed grave concern that the embeds had become biased and limited by censorship as indicated from this quote from an article in the Dissident Voice:

Jim Axelrod, embedded with the Third Infantry, discussed an intelligence briefing he sat in on and said, “We’ve been given orders.” Realizing the implications of what he said, he revised himself: “Soldiers have been given orders.” On that same day, Tom Brokaw began reporting on “how successful we were” in a battle before correcting himself: “how successful the United States was.”²⁷

San Francisco Chronicle Reporter John Koopman, embedded with Third Battalion, Fourth Marines, had a different view:

People talk about embedding’s limitations and how they felt restricted or too close to the unit, and I found the arguments ridiculous. The bottom line is if the military’s going to be open enough to say, “Look, you can come with us. We will let you see everything you want to see and cover the war from this close-up seat,” of course, it’s not a perfect environment; of course, you can say, “Well, gee, you know, we would like to do this; we would like to do that we would like to have more access; we would like to be able to talk to the enemy soldiers.” Well, you know what? That’s fine, but that’s unrealistic.²⁸

Mr. Koopman goes on to address censorship (a form of forced biased) with the following:

... my case, there was not a bit of censorship. I remember one day, it wasn’t until we were in Baghdad and we had a little time on our hands and I was sitting there talking to McCoy [the battalion commander] one night and he said, “You know, I never have read any of your stories.”²⁹

The censor rules stated that the reporter could not talk about troop locations, strength, and future operations. In effect, the censorship was self imposed because if the reporter

violated those rules, he was potentially putting himself in physical danger on the battlefield. Only a handful of the over 700 embeds were disembedded for violating the rules and none of the violations appeared to lead to the death of a coalition soldier.

In the first days of the war, news from the embedded media dominated all news channels. The sheer volume of reports from the 700 embeds overwhelmed the public and the state-side media's ability to create a concise image of the war. After the first several days of the conflict, viewers migrated from the 24 hour news channels to more consolidated mediums such as news papers and the evening news broadcasts. The challenge the consolidators faced was assimilating all the somewhat inconsistent data into a simple story line. The rapid movement of the Army and Marine Corps units towards Baghdad, and the media's lack of knowledge of military terms, fed the inconsistent reporting. For example, the port of Umm Qasr was declared "won" by the media 11 different times. The cause of the confusion was reporting by various embeds who each had a different definition of "won."³⁰ In general, the media got better at assimilating the daily 700 soda-straws of information as the war progressed.

The military was inconsistent in a few cases with the application of the embedded media guidelines. Most notably, Al Jazeera Correspondent Amr El-Kakhy was embedded with the Fifteenth Marine Expeditionary Unit. Mr. El-Kakhy reported numerous circumstances in which his requests were ignored and where he was excluded from briefings where other media embeds were in attendance. When asked why he was excluded from briefings, the answer was: "You know, guys, you are a station with a reputation."³¹ Ultimately, Mr. El-Kakhy decided to disembed out of frustration with regard to his access.

Unilateral correspondents were a distinct challenge for the military because they were uncontrolled, uncensored, and not located on the battlefield. Fortunately, the embedded media was a great counter to most reports a unilateral correspondent might produce. In almost every circumstance, an embedded reporter was on the scene with a unilateral correspondent and if the two separate reports were dramatically different, reporting credibility of the unilateral was marginalized. Of the 18 media personnel killed from March to September 2003, the majority were unilateral correspondents. They were killed by both coalition and Iraqi forces. The challenge, at least for coalition

forces, was identifying the correspondent. Unilateral correspondents frequently wore clothing and drove cars similar to the Iraqi people and Fedayeen. Even more, unilateral correspondents had to get to the front lines and move around on the battle field to be effective, and in trying to keep up with the fast paced advance, they occasionally found themselves in an unenviable position between the two military forces.

The media liked the unilateral option as a complement to the embedded correspondent because a unilateral correspondent had more autonomy in finding and researching individual stories and generally, the unilateral correspondent was able to give a better view and analysis of the overall war. The challenge for the unilateral correspondent was to get a story equally or more dramatic than the embedded reporter was providing.

Conclusions:

Throughout history the relationship between the military and the media has been a strained, symbiotic association marked by significant success and substantial failure. Advances in technology – be it the telegraph, radio, television, or satellite communications – have significantly altered the speed with which information moves from battlefield to the public, but it has not altered the very foundation of the relationship. The military has always viewed itself as an instrument of national policy embodying military skill and professionalism. The military must win the battle to be successful. The media recognizes that it (the media) is the window through which the American people learn about military actions. To be successful, the media must provide information that is informative, believable, interesting, and sales-worthy.

The degree of military and media alignment to the single national goal has been most directly linked to the scope of the war. The Civil War and the First and Second World Wars were all wars of national survival and the media were just as afraid as other civilians and U.S. combatants that success in war was the only way America would survive. The media accepted a significant amount of military censorship in reporting and concurrently provided information to the public with a very favorable slant towards American success. This same partnership could be loosely extended to the 2001 war in

Afghanistan. For the first time since Pearl Harbor, the average American felt threatened at home and the war in Afghanistan was directly linked to the terrorist attack only two months before. There were a few media voices of dissent but they were largely ignored and the war was conducted in a mutually supportive environment.

The wars since World War II – Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Desert Storm, the Balkans, and Operation Iraqi Freedom – have all been wars of national policy. In these conflicts, public support had to be earned and then sustained, both in the objectives of the campaign and in the manner in which it was conducted; they had to be seen as just and proportional.³² With the notable exception of Grenada, the government has been able to successfully convince the majority of the American people of the necessity for each conflict. Maintenance of that support can be problematic and is often inversely proportional to American casualties. Additionally, the ability of our military to clearly articulate the purpose, goals, and progress in the conflict and the demonstrated professionalism of our soldiers play an important role in public opinion. The conduct of our forces is absolutely critical and must stand up to a moral standard for compassion and deference towards civilians, and adherence to the law of warfare, that is much higher than that expected of the enemy.

The successful operational commander must understand the tendencies of the media and the pitfalls of the military. The media brings to the battlefield two traits which are enduring. First is a flair for dramatic story-telling with a desire to generalize from a specific action. The second is the effect deadlines and news volume requirements have in placing pressure on correspondents to produce news worthy stories. Ultimately, the bottom line for the media is just that – readership/viewership. The military strongly desires a media which will be understanding of operational security and supportive of the military in achieving the national objectives. However, several of the military's media policies have been contrary to good military-media relations, such as: changing the censorship rules (Korea); overly optimistic reporting (Vietnam); draconian censorship (Falklands, Grenada, and Panama); and ineffective briefings (Operation Iraqi Freedom).

The military must fully understand and prepare for enemy actions aimed at achieving its goals, such as: using the media to split coalitions (Desert Storm); and

highlighting civilian casualties (Vietnam, Desert Storm, the Balkans, and Operation Iraqi Freedom). As global reach of the media has continued to expand and as the American military has continued to shrink, the importance of the militaries of coalition countries, and their popular support, has become essential to the achievement of victory. Often the support of some countries in a coalition is tenuous. As the leader of a coalition, it is the U.S. Military's job to maintain the coalition through effective, professional operations even while the enemy is attempting to sabotage that popular support. In Operation Iraqi Freedom, Saddam Hussein was looking for a silver bullet to shake global opinion, much like Vietnam where a police chief's singular execution during Tet 1968 turned US public support against the war almost overnight.³³

The keys to success for the military internally are: to conduct the war professionally; doggedly investigate media exposed concerns such as supply shortages, and to ensure strategic decisions are made at the proper levels. For external success, the story of outstanding professionalism must be told and for that, the military must embrace the media. The embed program fills that objective perfectly by providing the media with an abundance of dramatic, front line and human interest stories that capture the public attention. The embed program provides the military with eye-witnesses throughout the battle space who will report each event, good or bad, in a timely fashion and within the context of the environment, thus mitigating the effect enemy propaganda and dramatic unilateral reporting has on American and coalition popular support. The military's fear that the embedded media cause a loss of operational security proved, with minor exceptions, to be unfounded.

The success of the embed program is best highlighted at the end of the war. Major combat operations were completed on 9 May 2003 and over the next thirty days, the embedded media strength dropped from 770 to less than forty. The embedded correspondents rapid departure created a reporting vacuum which was quickly filled by unilateral correspondents. A comparison of media reports shortly before and shortly after 9 May shows the stark contrast in reporting. Prior to 9 May, the embed reports dominating the news were consistent in providing fair reports of both good and bad situations. The news after 9 May rapidly turned critical of U.S. and coalition actions with little emphasis on positive events or the soldiers – typical of unilateral reporting

shown in previous conflicts. Consequently, American and Coalition public support began to waiver.

Recommendations for the Operational Commander.

The operational commander must include the media as an integral part of any planned operation or campaign. The following guidelines should be included in the media plan:

1. The level of media participation should be significant and should include daily briefings, support for unilateral correspondents, and a significant embedding program.
 - a. Daily briefings should be conducted at all times by a very high level officer (a recognized decision maker on the staff) and frequently the operational commander should personally give the briefings.
 - i. Briefings should be informative without significant effort to “spin” the information.
 - ii. Disclosure of friendly military casualty estimates should be avoided where possible.
 - b. Unilateral correspondents should be accommodated as much as possible without impacting mission accomplishment.
 - c. The embedded media program should be open to all aspects of military operations, understanding that most correspondents desire to be at or near the front lines.
 - i. The media embedded participants should be afforded an opportunity to attend a media boot camp to familiarize themselves with the military way of life and necessary actions to defend themselves in the battlefield (should the embed get lost, be involved in a WMD engagement, etc.).

- ii. The rules for disclosure of information to the embedded media must be, as Operation Iraqi Freedom was, predisposed to provide the requested information rather than to keep it classified.
 - iii. The embed program should be maintained as long as possible after major conflict operations are over. The stability phase of an operation often is more demanding of an impartial eye-witness.
- 2. The operational commander must provide detailed training to the officers and senior enlisted concerning the operation and operating with the media.
 - a. The soldiers must understand and should be able to articulate the reason they have been employed and the general plan for attaining the overall goal.
 - b. Full and timely disclosure to the embedded media must be fully understood and practiced by all levels of command.
 - c. Soldiers at all levels must be trained with respect to the military-media relationship. Officers should have extensive media training.
 - d. All soldiers and commanders must understand the unique challenges the unilateral correspondents bring to enemy identification on the battlefield.
- 3. The commander and subordinate commanders must understand the dynamic which embedded media brings, and its effect on command and control.
 - a. The commander must not make decisions based on how it will look in the media, but rather must continue to make decisions based on what is best and necessary to complete the operational assignment.
 - b. Subordinate commanders must not make independent decisions to change operational parameters or tasking so as to achieve a specific media effect without previously consulting with senior commanders.
 - c. The commanders must not hesitate to use live media broadcasts as a source of real-time intelligence to improve the decision making process.
 - d. The commander must recognize that some embedded reports highlighting minor problems will occasionally turn into crises at home.

While largely unavoidable, these issues must be fully and quickly investigated to reduce the snowball effect and its impact on the American public.

- e. The commander must make sure that all levels of the chain of command understand that, while events will unfold and likely be seen by the American public either at the same time or prior to the chain of command, this should not be a cause for additional oversight of the subordinate engaged in combat.
 - f. When bad news does occur, the on-site commander must make a report up the chain of command and allow the media to make similar full reports within the limits of the normal embedded guidelines. The adage that ‘bad news never gets better with age’ is even more true now with the advent of satellite phones and television.
4. And finally, treat the media like an inspection team. Work in such a manner that you have nothing to hide and they will have nothing to find. The United States Military is the most professional, most highly trained fighting force in the world. We want our story to be told.

End Notes

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- ² Editorial, *The Times* (London), 29 March 1854 quoted in Hudson and Stanier, 3-5.
- ³ Philip Warner, *The Crimean War – a Reappraisal*, (London, Barker, 1972), 212 quoted in Hudson and Stanier, 12.
- ⁴ Hudson and Stanier, 23.
- ⁵ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, (London, Purnell Book Services, 1975), 23. quoted in Hudson and Stanier, 23.
- ⁶ Brayton Harris, *Blue & Gray in Black & White* Newspapers in the Civil War, (Dulles, VA, Batsford Brassey, Inc.), 7.
- ⁷ *Illustrated London News*, 2 October 1915, pg 419 quoted in Hudson and Stanier, 49.
- ⁸ Braestrupp, *Big Story*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977), 6 quoted in Hudson and Stanier, 109.
- ⁹ Hudson and Stanier, 108-109.
- ¹⁰ Hudson and Stanier, 153.
- ¹¹ Ignatieff, Michael, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (London: Chatto and Windus), 189 quoted in Mark Connelly and David Welch, *War and the Media Reportage and Propaganda, 1900-2003*, (London, I.B. Tauris, 2005), 225.
- ¹² Hudson and Stanier, 222.
- ¹³ Philip Taylor, *War and the Media*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992), 188 quoted in Hudson and Stanier, 230.
- ¹⁴ Patrick Cordingley, *In the Eye of the Storm*, (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1996) quoted in Hudson and Stanier, 226.
- ¹⁵ Hudson and Stanier, 226.
- ¹⁶ Connelly and Welch, 277.
- ¹⁷ Michael Wolff, “Groundhog’s Day at CENTCOM’s Media Center,” interview by Bill Katavsky and Timothy Carlson, *Embedded The Media at War in Iraq*, (Guilford, CT, The Lyons Press, 2003), 41.
- ¹⁸ Michael Wolff, “Groundhog’s Day at CENTCOM’s Media Center,” interview by Katavsky and Carlson, 40.
- ¹⁹ Katavsky and Carlson, xiii.
- ²⁰ Mike Cerre, “It’s Déjà vu All Over Again,” interview by Katavsky and Carlson, 96.
- ²¹ Joe Eddins, “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” interview by Katavsky and Carlson, 68-69.
- ²² John Roberts, “Reporting from the Trenches,” interview by Katavsky and Carlson, 176.
- ²³ Mike Cerre, “It’s Déjà vu All Over Again,” interviewed by Katavsky and Carlson, 101.
- ²⁴ Bing West and Ray L. Smith, *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 2003), 226-227.
- ²⁵ David Zucchino, “The Thunder Run,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 Dec 2003, sec I, p. 18.
- ²⁶ David Zucchino, “Sorry, No Room Service at Saddam’s Presidential Palace,” interviewed by Katavsky and Carlson, 141-142.
- ²⁷ Robert Jensen, “Embedded Media give up Independence,” *Dissident Voice*, 8 Apr 2003 [journal online]; available from http://www.dissidentvoice.org/Articles3/Jensen_Embedded-Media.html; Internet; accessed 25 March 2005.
- ²⁸ John Koopman, “Once a Marine, Always a Marine,” interview by Katavsky and Carlson, 121.
- ²⁹ John Koopman, “Once a Marine, Always a Marine,” interview by Katavsky and Carlson, 121.
- ³⁰ Stephen Jukes, *Under Fire Untold Stories from the Front Line of the Iraq War*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ, Pearson Education, Inc., 2004), viii.
- ³¹ Amr El-Kakhy, “Trapped in the Media Crossfire,” interview by Katavsky and Carlson, 182.
- ³² Connelly and Welch, 267.
- ³³ *The New York Times*, 9 December 2002, p. A11 in Connelly & Welch, 208.

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