

A Guide for Small Unit Commanders on the Media Embed Program

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On March 19, 2003, the United States unleashed the military might it had amassed in the Gulf Region and began combat operations to overthrow the dangerous and brutal Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, in what was dubbed Operation Iraqi Freedom. Along with the coalition forces were 775 American and international journalists embedded with the armed forces to report on the operation.

Background

According to the Cantigny Conference Report of 2004, embedding journalists with Soldiers is not a new concept and has a long history that dates back to the Mexican-American War of 1846. However, since the Vietnam War, relations between the U.S. media and the military have been strained and a great deal of mistrust has marked the relationship between these two institutions. In most military operations since the Vietnam War no journalist has accompanied or been embedded with U.S. Soldiers during combat operations. During both the Grenada and Panama operations, reporters were consolidated in a Department of Defense (DOD) National Media Pool (DNMP) and kept away from the fighting. In the book *America's Team*, Frank Aukofer from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and Vice Admiral William Lawrence pointed out that even during Operation Desert Storm lingering concerns within the military, lack of adequate news-media planning, and the brevity of the combat phase prevented Gulf War coverage from being as good as it should have been. Media relations and advance planning improved dramatically during the Somalia and Haiti operations. In these operations, senior military commanders were closely involved in the public affairs planning



Corporal Theresa M. Medina

News reporters from various agencies conduct an interview with a Marine captain in Fallujah, Iraq, December 2, 2004.

process and the news media had few, if any, complaints about their treatment and access.

OIF Embed Program

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, all the lessons learned about military and media relations from the past 30 years were successfully applied in the embed program. Unfortunately, tactical unit commanders, the ones charged with making the program work, were not provided with detailed, practical instruction or guidance on how to implement this program.

On February 10, 2003, the U.S. military released an official message titled: "Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) on embedding media during possible future operations/deployments in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR)." The purpose for this message was to provide general guidance, policies, and procedures to both operational level military commanders and the media about the embedding process. This message outlined the respective general

responsibilities of senior commanders and media representatives. For example, embedded journalists were not authorized to use their own vehicles, and unit commanders were tasked to provide them with lift and logistical support to and from the battlefield so that the journalists could "tell our story in a timely manner."

In addition, the message specified categories of releasable information and set the ground rules to balance the right of the media to cover military operations with the military's necessity for operational security.

Although this message introduced the embed concept to military commanders and provided detailed guidance on

releasable information, the message did not discuss any of the specific unit requirements nor did it provide any guidelines to tactical unit commanders on how to implement the program. Tactical unit commanders at the battalion level and below were left on their own to implement the embed program with little practical guidance.

For the most part, the embed program was very successful. An Issue Paper prepared by the Center for Strategic Leadership (CSL) of the U.S. Army War College in October 2003 concluded that "this unique kind of reporting appears to have won the trust and confidence of the American public." Even now, although much has been written on the embed experience, there have been few lessons learned or tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) consolidated and disseminated to tactical unit commanders on how to prepare for and what to expect from an embed reporter. The following guide will attempt to fill this void by providing lessons learned from personal experiences and TTPs derived from various

reports, interviews, and workshops published since the end of major combat operations in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Guidance for Small Unit Leaders

As a small unit commander, first and foremost you must prepare your subordinate leaders and Soldiers for contact with the media. Schedule a briefing for your subordinate leaders to let them know that a reporter will accompany and live with the unit during the upcoming operation. Most mid-level leaders who have been in the Army for 10 to 15 years are not accustomed to the presence of journalists, hence this briefing is essential to prepare the subordinate leaders.

Explain the function of the reporter and the Constitutional guarantee for freedom of speech and of the press. Further explain the purpose of the imbedded journalist which is to provide impartial reports and inform the public and policy makers. These reports enable elected officials to have a dialogue on the current situation and make informed decisions. With an honest and straightforward briefing, junior leaders will be able to understand and accept the journalist traveling with them, and they will provide access and assistance as necessary. The key to success is command involvement and emphasis.

Next, the unit commander must brief all the Soldiers. Again, the purpose for this briefing is to inform the Soldiers that a journalist will be with them, and provide guidance on dealing with the reporter. The commander must articulate the two “golden rules” of dealing with reporters. The first rule is everything is “on the record;” i.e. don’t say anything that you don’t want mom and dad to read in the paper. The second rule is to “stay in your lane;” everyone should only comment on those topics of which they have firsthand knowledge. Do not speculate about anything which is outside of your area of expertise; rather refer the reporter to the appropriate expert who can provide the information.

The next TTP follows the first, and it is to introduce the journalist to the leaders and Soldiers in the unit. This introduction

can take place during a previously scheduled unit formation. The purpose for this introduction is to show the Soldiers that the reporter has support from the senior leadership in the unit and also for the Soldiers to see the journalist so that they can recognize him or her later while deployed. It is also important to familiarize the reporter with the officers and Soldiers who hold key positions in the unit, such as the operations officer, the company commanders, the various staff officers and the senior NCOs. Each of the aforementioned leaders should provide a brief job description and a delineation of responsibilities. This introduction and explanation of roles and functions will help the journalist put into perspective what each leader does and identify the subject matter expert to help clarify or amplify a story for future reference.

Another important lesson learned is to provide the embed reporter with a tour and briefing on the unit structure, tactics, and equipment capabilities. Unit commanders must realize that most journalists only have a very limited knowledge of military organizations, functions, and structures; hence it is imperative that the commander take the time to inform the reporter about his unit. This briefing will help the reporter to understand the unit and help make the reports more accurate. Rick Leventhal, a Fox News reporter who was embedded with the Marine 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance (LAR) during the opening days of OIF, mentioned during a telephonic interview that an initial tour of the unit, with an explanation of the functions and capabilities, would have been very beneficial to quickly put into perspective his experience with the unit. The Issue Paper by the Army War College likewise identified training for media representatives and knowledge between embeds and units as an area for further discussion.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, military officials decided that media embeds would not be allowed to use their own vehicles. This decision left ground unit commanders with the predicament of deciding where the embed reporter should ride. Accordingly, each unit handled the embed differently. Who can forget the reports from the NBC correspondent David Bloom as he broadcast from the top of an M88 heavy recovery vehicle? Yet, was this the best vehicle to ride in and report from? A recovery vehicle is normally found toward the rear of a unit formation with all the other maintenance and logistical assets and may not provide the journalist with the best vehicle to observe and report on combat operations. A practical policy TTP for unit commanders is to provide the media representative with various options for where he rides. One option is for the journalist to ride with the unit command sergeant major (CSM). A unit CSM normally circulates throughout the battlefield lending his experience and knowledge at critical areas. During combat operations, the CSM is usually far forward coordinating medical evacuations and critical resupply operations. By riding with the CSM, the journalist can get a very broad view of the operation and will normally be at the critical areas on the battlefield. In addition, the CSM regularly stops at the tactical operations center (TOC), which would give the reporter access to the latest tactical and operational information. At the TOC, he would also have access to electrical power sources for his equipment so that he can edit and file stories.

Another option is to circulate the journalist among the



Courtesy photos

A Soldier with the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, and Trent Gegax, an embedded reporter, pose for a photo with two Iraqi citizens.

subordinate units for periods of time. This option allows the journalist to live with various units and get a more intimate view of the tactical operations. Rick Leventhal mentioned that he rode with one specific Marine squad of the 3rd LAR through most of the operation. Although Leventhal developed strong bonds and respect for this specific crew, he acknowledges that his view of the operation was framed through the experiences and perspective of this one crew. Clearly there is no approved solution as to where a journalist should ride; however, the tactical commander must be “intimately” involved in the decisions about his embed reporter and he must help facilitate the journalist’s task to report on the operation.

The next technique is to start the embed process as early as possible. Unit commanders will not normally have control over the timing when the journalist joins the unit; however, if the commander is given the opportunity to influence the timing, then he should choose to start the embed program as early as possible. Although caring for a reporter takes precious time and resources, the more time the reporter spends with the unit the greater the chances for a positive experience. A previous Chief of Staff of the Army, General Dennis J. Reimer, had a motto that “Soldiers are our best credentials.” This saying conveys the message that the American Soldier is the best spokesperson for the Army because Soldiers are able to connect with the American public and tell the Army story. As the embedded journalist spends more time with the unit, he will better understand the Soldiers and begin to form a bond and make lasting relationships with Soldiers. These relationships will help the journalist provide balance and perspective to any given situation, and may even result in a more positive story about the unit and the operation. In addition, the more time the reporter spends with the unit, the better opportunity he will have to get to know the key leaders and the overall mission.

This last guiding principle is directed at the unit commander and stems from the author’s personal experience. As the commander it is imperative to remain neutral. It is also necessary to develop “thick skin.” You must be prepared to be personally criticized and to read a story that may not positively reflect on the unit. All good leaders develop a strong bond and an affinity for their Soldiers and unit. A natural tendency is to protect and defend your Soldiers against personal insults. It is extremely important not to overreact if a negative story about your unit is published. If this happens to you, take a step back and try to impartially assess the situation. First, ask yourself “does the story contain factual inconsistencies?” If this is the case, then calmly approach the journalist and point out the factual inconsistencies. Most reporters are professionals who try to be fair and accurate in their reports. If you point out the inaccuracies, most journalists will acknowledge the discrepancy and will either print a retraction or publish a new story with the correct information. On the other hand, if the story is factual but the journalist has published a negative report about the unit, then there is little that the commander can do to change



The author, LTC Philip Battaglia, greets Oliver North at the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division’s TOC in Tikrit, Iraq, in April 2003.

it. The commander needs to investigate the circumstances surrounding the incident in the story and develop a strategy to avoid future occurrences. The commander should make the reporter aware of the corrective actions and, if appropriate, any punitive measures taken (within the rights of privacy guidelines). The commander should use this opportunity, as well as others, to get the “good news” to the reporter in the hopes that he or she will publish a story. A headline reading “Commander Takes Swift Action To Remedy the Situation” could go a long way toward mitigating the negative impact of the original story. Your embedded reporter will usually tell you that he is filing a specific story. If you know that the story may be negative, first and foremost notify your chain of command and your public affairs officer. Secondly, make sure you make the reporter aware of your intended corrective actions prior to the submission of the story. Above all, do not confront the journalist and demand a new story or try to impede the submission. Don’t forget, the journalist has the right to report the news as he sees it.

In Operation Iraqi Freedom, the embedded media “reinvention” placed journalists, Soldiers, and Marines in the same environment. By all accounts this program was a success and as the CLS Issue Paper pointed out, “This unique kind of war reporting appears to have won the trust and confidence of the American public.” With such success and confidence it seems certain that this program will be reinstated in the next conflict. In the mean time, the military services need to capture the lessons learned from this program and incorporate these lessons into future training opportunities. This collection of lessons learned and techniques is one small step in the process that will prepare future tactical unit commanders to integrate and support the embed reporter that will inevitably accompany the unit into battle.

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