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The military and the media

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In the first line of his autobiographical novel *Blood Makes the Grass Grow Green*, American soldier Johnny Rico makes a disclaimer of sorts: he wrote it under orders. At the funeral of one of their colleagues, he says his sergeant major told him and other members of C Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Infantry of the 25th Infantry (Light) Division that it was their duty to tell their own stories.

‘[He said] that there was a lot of negative publicity circulating out there about the Army and that each one of us has an Army story, and it was our responsibility to have it told,’ Rico explains, before presenting the reader with a raw, darkly funny glimpse into his time in Afghanistan—as he terms it, ‘a year in the desert with Team America’.¹

Rico concedes that his tale might not be quite what the sergeant major had in mind but jokes that absent more specific instructions, this was what he produced. ‘I write’, he says, ‘because I want to be a good soldier.’ Fictionalised in parts—he does not say which parts—Johnny Rico’s story rolls from expositions on loyalty, honour and authority into reflections on grinding disillusionment, sometimes from a vantage point that feels like the outer edges of sanity. The book is well and truly unvarnished. Even published as it was after Rico left the Army, it is hard to imagine

1 J. Rico, Prologue, *Blood Makes the Grass Grow Green*, Presidio Press, New York, 2007, p. xiii.

this kind of thing being written by an Australian soldier and certainly not at the urging of a superior. Here in Australia, the prevailing culture is the opposite.

The Australian Defence Force prefers a more polished presentation and, with its supporting department, has historically invested so much in varnish that it almost deserves its own budget line item. The instruction from Johnny Rico's sergeant major implies that the publicity around the US Army was negative because it was not the whole truth; not the real truth, the *soldier's* truth. In Australia, Defence's complaint historically seems to have been that any negative publicity via the nation's media stemmed from their failure to present its *official* version of the truth—the airbrushed, cheerleader version written in a world where nothing ever goes wrong and nobody should be either embarrassed or to blame. Defence would likely respond that the media only look for trouble, and when they do not find it, they make it.

Maybe in some cases that is true. But what is also true is that hostility and suspicion seek each other out, and if that is what greets journalists—if obfuscation and obstruction are the starting points for media–military relations—then it is likely to be what is returned. The relationship between Australia's defence apparatus and its media has improved considerably in recent years, thanks largely to the high tempo of operations and a commitment to embedding reporters with the ADF in the field. But there is still a way to go. Wherever the relationship falls short, some fault lies on both sides.

Chasing 'clicks' online to attract dispersed and flagging advertising revenue, media organisations are increasingly impatient with the nuances of policy and particularly of conflict. Some organisations look less for the whole story than for the most dramatic version of it to be produced in the shortest possible time. The daily newspaper deadline is giving way to minute-by-minute coverage, with stories updated and published as they develop. There is a new unofficial (and unflattering) motto in the online news world: you're never wrong for long. Each item, whether for print or broadcast, is less and less part of a curated whole news presentation than a stand-alone attracter of readers and viewers. This does not always help to build trusting relationships, including with Defence.

Another significant contributor to the mutual suspicion is the political culture that pays lip service to openness and the role of the ‘Fourth Estate’ in a democracy while working hard to keep as much as possible secret. As senior military officers themselves are increasingly concluding, using that method to try to win hearts and minds often has the opposite effect. Whenever Defence’s objective is seen to be controlling the message and avoiding scrutiny, the media will instinctively want to sidestep the control and amp up the scrutiny. If ADF personnel and Defence officials refuse to answer questions, journalists will fall back on that old rhetorical one: what do they have to hide?

In his book *Don't Mention the War* on Australian media–military relations during the Afghan conflict, Monash University historian Kevin Foster observes, correctly, that the Australian media have depended heavily on the ADF for news from Afghanistan, mostly through journalists being embedded in their ranks. The public has relied on the media for the same. Foster describes what he asserts has been the public’s ‘apparent ignorance’ of what was actually going on over there, calling it ‘a critical failure of coverage’. ‘The media have to bear their share of the responsibility for this failure,’ Foster says. ‘But one must also acknowledge that journalists cannot report on events that they cannot access.’²

This culture of secrecy comes from high up, beyond the top of Defence to the senior ranks of government—regardless of which side is in power. It is a shut-them-out culture that infects the military–media relationship and the quality of what Australians are told. Australia’s political system is much less steeped in accepting the public’s right to know than those of our biggest allies, especially the United States.

Australian military public affairs officer Colonel Jason Logue canvassed the process and history of embedding media with the Australian Defence Force on operations in his paper *Herding Cats*. Logue, then a lieutenant colonel, compared the Australian experience with those of counterparts from the United States and Britain, explaining how embedding had been part of the US military’s media strategy in previous conflicts. But in the opening stages of the war in Afghanistan after the attacks on US soil on 11 September 2001, the US Defense Department had deemed it too risky to take journalists to the battlefield. Journalistic integration was such

2 K. Foster, *Don't Mention the War—The Australian Defence Force, the Media and the Afghan Conflict*, Monash University Publishing, Clayton, Vic, 2013, pp. xiv–xv.

an accepted part of US operations that a Defense official had publicly apologised to members of the Pentagon press pool for their lack of access during the conflict's first phases.³

In Australia, the notion that a Defence Department official—or anyone from government—would offer a public apology to the media for locking it out is so beyond comprehension as to be laughable. Within government in Australia, there often seems little more than a theoretical respect for what media are there to do: hold the elected representatives and institutions accountable and be the eyes and ears of the Australian people. Where this generates tension on the ground, it is generally not the fault of military practitioners down the chain—for example, the good men and women assigned as liaison officers for media teams during operational embeds. They are, to borrow a phrase, just following orders. As it translates in the military arena, this culture means that access to information is not treated as an assumed right; it is considered a privilege. The lines between maintaining operational security—the standard reason given for refusing media access—and avoiding embarrassment and reputational damage are still too often blurred.

Where Australians are involved in combat controversies, the investigation process is slow, public disclosure seemingly reluctant, and redaction often extensive. Journalists' efforts to conduct their own investigations and publish or broadcast the results are met by obfuscation, objection and ultimately a phalanx of lawyers. This is especially the case where journalistic endeavours might contradict the official version of events or challenge the hero status of anyone whose image has been co-opted to tell a shinier story. Logue's study focused on the media embeds conducted in Afghanistan in 2011, when the system of offering journalistic access to that conflict was at peak effectiveness for both the military and the media.

Undertaking a media embed role is a compromise and sometimes an uncomfortable one. Journalists enter a theatre of operations completely reliant on the ADF for transport, security, food and accommodation, and access to the conflict and its personnel. For the military, the PR risk lies in welcoming scrutineers who are not part of the family and who will be focused on what the public does not already know; who are programmed to look first—although not only—for what might not be quite as described

3 Lieutenant Colonel J. Logue, *Herding Cats: The Evolution of the ADF's Embedding Program in Operational Areas*, Working Paper 141, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Canberra, 2013, p. 5.

back at headquarters and what might be going wrong. Everything that journalists publish and broadcast during media embed trips should be seen in that overall context. Few would jeopardise their situation by running a mid-level gotcha story while they were still away. But they do have to file *something* to justify the investment in time and money and the risk to personal safety of sending them there. That does not—and should not—preclude them from filing non-time-sensitive stories of greater import when they get home. But it can make for some less exciting and sometimes overblown on-the-spot reportage when circumstances do not provide the fire fights and other action that viewers, readers and bosses are expecting.

Difficult choices sometimes must also be made. As a correspondent for SBS Television, I undertook three media embed trips to Afghanistan in 2007, 2011 and 2012. The first time was as part of a highly managed group visit involving several media organisations, colloquially known as a ‘bus tour’. In the subsequent tours, we embedded separately. In those early days, the ADF leadership—or at least those running its communications strategy—appeared little interested in an intelligent or thoughtful media-led discussion about what Australia was doing in Afghanistan. It just wanted to show us its helicopters at Kandahar—replete with pilots who were not allowed to say anything about anything other than what they could do—and the trades training school it was operating on the base at Tarin Kowt. That school quickly became a running joke among embedded reporters in the years that followed, so regularly was it peddled as potential story fodder. Returning to the multinational base on each new visit, we were offered the same school tour and interviews with trainees. It was like *Groundhog Day* in camouflage.

That became symbolic of the ADF’s failure to understand its own communications responsibilities, not only to the journalists it was hosting but also to the people of Australia. Why did they need to be shown the same pictures and told the same story over and over? The answer is that they did not. The ADF was just serving up something designed to occupy reporters on the spot and stop them from looking for and finding some actual news. Treating journalists as propagandists only serves to generate the very hostility the ADF seeks to guard against.

While concluding that a more sophisticated and less guarded (some might say paranoid) approach is more successful, Logue’s study revealed an official benchmark that should be queried. He detailed a commissioned

analysis of the coverage embedded journalists produced during 2011 that showed ‘a strong correlation with the identified favourable messages of the ADF supporting its personnel, the military/personal conduct of ADF personnel as “beyond reproach” and that ADF operations were making progress towards strategic goals’.⁴

To define success as being the adoption of the ADF’s talking points suggests that the exercise is not about letting Australians know what is *actually* going on but what the ADF wants to be known and the image it seeks to project. In those circumstances, it is very easy for the line between restricting journalists’ activities for reasons of operational security and restricting them to limit embarrassment to become indistinct. The problem is that the tighter the hold the ADF seeks to exercise over the content of coverage, the more likely we journalists are to try to break free. If the objective is to avoid hostile coverage, what is the value in generating a hostile relationship?

Logue’s interviews with senior ADF officers overseeing Australia’s Afghan deployment from the Middle East Area of Operations in 2011 indicate that they appreciated the value of openness along with the risks. The Dubai-based joint task force commander at the time, then Major General and now Chief of the Defence Force General Angus Campbell, recognised both the obligation to inform and the operational value in doing so. ‘As Australians, we live in a democracy and in that democracy, media agencies play a key role that has been acknowledged by the government and population we serve,’ Campbell observed, noting the media coverage was often ‘underwhelming’ but would be worse if the ADF chose not to engage.

There is an expectation, a reasonable one in our society, to engage with media. We have no choice but to do so ... What Army and the defence force really does, within the agreed bounds of operations security constraints, is ‘media enabling’ to assist media access to report independent perspectives on military operations in a contested and dangerous environment. Put simply, war is sustained through public support which, in turn, is enabled through regular and consistent contact with the media. It is simply unreasonable to not engage because to not do so will damage the campaign.⁵

4 Ibid., p. 27.

5 Ibid., p. 44.

The commanding officer of Mentoring Task Force 2, the then Lieutenant Colonel Darren Huxley, described a ‘balancing game’ of inviting strangers into the house. ‘Obviously, in a liberal democracy it is absolutely correct for us to be open to scrutiny,’ Huxley said. ‘But it will never be easy to depart from a view that media embeds are generally looking for failure on which to report.’⁶ The commanding officer of the task force that followed, the then Lieutenant Colonel Chris Smith, summarised succinctly the obligations of both the military and the media, and the implications of working side by side in a war zone:

Military professionals ought to seek the truth no matter how awkward or uncomfortable it is and support the media in reporting that truth. If the truth is unfavourable then we should not be surprised by the unfavourable response of the public to such reports. Quite simply, if you want the media to report on success, be successful. If you are losing a war, then the media will try to identify why things are going wrong and report on the possibility of losing ... If your soldiers are poorly disciplined, racist or misogynistic then this truth will be revealed sooner or later. It’s all fairly simple. Work on getting real things right, invite the media in to see it and let them report what they see.⁷

Smith was the commanding officer at the time I undertook my 2011 embed. I reported some of what I saw but not all. In the final days of our visit, we stayed at Combat Outpost Mashal, in Uruzgan Province’s Baluchi Valley. I had asked to visit Mashal as it had been the scene of a fatal attack on an Australian soldier—the base’s cook, Lance Corporal Andrew Jones—by an Afghan colleague earlier that year. It would become the first of many such incidents.

I wanted to gauge the impact on the Australians who had been deployed soon after the attack and were living there alongside Afghan army personnel. On arrival something caught my eye—and raised an eyebrow—in the soldiers’ mess. The dining tables were laminated with pictures of naked women. There were no women living at the base and few passing through. I was tempted to highlight this in a news report as it did not seem to align with Defence’s policies on equality and respect. But I knew that if I did, the story I had gone to Mashal to report—about how young Australian soldiers were managing the stress of working with Afghan trainees who

6 Ibid., p. 45.

7 Ibid., p. 47.

might turn on them—could not be written. If I called them out on their sexist pictures, nobody would speak to me. Not then and possibly not in future. When I sat down to speak to a soldier at one of the tables, he apologised unprompted for the images, despite having had no role in putting them there.

Perhaps Chris Smith did not know about the pictures. More likely, he took a decision that there were bigger battles to fight. And so did I. Although the images were clearly visible in what we put to air, I chose not to draw particular attention to them. It is perhaps an example of what Logue describes as ‘self-censorship’.⁸ It is not a term that sits comfortably with any journalist, and others might criticise the decision I took. Some other feminists certainly would. But it was a choice I made with a longer-term investment in mind: the investment in relationships that would build trust and enable bigger, better and arguably more important stories to be told in future.

In his interview with Logue, Campbell singled out those same trust relationships as the by-product of embedding that had greatest value for all concerned. ‘From my perspective, the opportunity to inform and educate on our military operations is a key benefit of the media embed program,’ Campbell said. ‘In fact, it is this enhancement of the journalist’s understanding which endures well after the journalist has left the theatre that I believe is the most important aspect of the program.’⁹

In his book, Foster interprets Campbell’s comments more cynically, suggesting that they reveal an ‘unwanted propinquity with the fourth estate’.¹⁰ Foster correctly notes some failings in the embed system and the influence of restrictions on the standard of coverage.

The system remains vulnerable to individual whims in the field, as demonstrated in 2012 when my cameraman colleague Jeff Kehl and I were subjected to repeated sets of unnecessarily intensive vetting of images. This degree of vetting, undertaken by young officers seeking to exert their authority, had not been deemed necessary on previous, higher-tempo visits. We had filmed nothing out of bounds—by our third visit, we knew what was and was not allowed and had no interest in jeopardising anyone’s security, including our own—and these young officers were

8 Ibid., p. 33.

9 Ibid., p. 43.

10 Foster, *Don't Mention the War*, p. 33.

acting beyond their remit. But I would argue that Foster's analysis is missing some context that affected the nature and quality of reportage, including the implications for embedded journalists as Australia's role in the conflict changed.

Singling out some of my own in-country reports from 2012 for criticism, Foster observed that they included a descriptive feature story on bomb detection dogs and a piece on the use of blast-proof underwear. He did not ask why. The answer goes to the heart of the challenges embedding presents to both dispatcher and dispatched. For a television news journalist on a military embed at war, two imperatives come into direct conflict: the logistically heavy broadcast medium's requirement for anticipation and—wherever possible—advance planning and the situational requirement for spontaneity and maximum ability to change course at short notice.

Arriving in 2012, it became clear that the activities we had hoped to conduct were not going to be possible. It was not like the previous year, when we had stayed among Australian soldiers at Forward Operating Base Mirwais and Combat Outpost Mashal and been properly embedded in their routines. Then, we had joined them on foot patrols through the town of Chora and the valleys beyond.¹¹ In the shared compounds, we had access to Afghan soldiers and their commanders—albeit using ADF and ISAF interpreters—who were then working under coalition leadership. But by late 2012, the Afghan National Army was taking the lead on the ground. The Afghans decided who did what, who went where and whether anyone went anywhere at all. That had a material influence on what was possible as an embedded Australian journalist. At Forward Operating Base Hadrian, near Deh Rawood, the patrols we were to join were cancelled without explanation.

The Australians were preparing to pull back to the main base within a fortnight, before ending their mission in Uruzgan altogether, so operations were winding down. The so-called green-on-blue attacks had become so prolific that the forward bases had been segregated and relations were strained by suspicion, resentment and grief. Beyond reporting that situation—which we did—there were only two choices. We could be the network's chief political correspondent and cameraman who spent three

11 K. Middleton, 'Shadow of the Towers', Part II, *Dateline*, SBS, 11 September 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW12K3cFGcU&t=3s (retrieved 1 April 2020).

weeks away and produced next to nothing until we got home, or I could generate some ideas for fall-back, fill-in pieces that were not what we had hoped for but were also not entirely irrelevant. I chose the latter course.

I was not going to inspect the trades training school again, so we produced stories that might at least be interesting to viewers, if not exactly herald the unconditional surrender of the Taliban and cessation of international hostilities for all time. This is one of the risks of agreeing to embed: no control over what might happen outside the wire and little more over what the ADF—or Afghan National Army—will allow. In cases like this, the downside for media embeds is obvious, the longer-term upside less so.

What is harder to quantify is the impact on the depth and quality of reporting and analysis produced upon returning home and into the future. I am convinced that among non-specialist and specialist journalists alike, and despite those compromises, the media embed experience fosters a more sophisticated understanding of a conflict than does reporting from afar without it. It is in the interests of the ADF, journalists and the public to continue to foster those trust relationships. Thus far, the ADF has made an effort to do so. But, again, more could be done.

While fair criticism of media coverage is to be encouraged, Defence might contemplate the implications of discrediting the traditional news media generally. With the advent of the concept of ‘fake news’, the role of professional, credible media is more important than ever. Propaganda is no longer the sole purview of the security apparatus and all kinds of players—including whole states—are weaponising information in the non-military arena. The emergence of information-sharing social media platforms that empower individuals as ‘influencers’ and spawn ‘citizen journalists’ has meant that news consumers disillusioned with superficial trash from traditional sources or suspicious of commercial motives—or both—now feel like they have alternatives. They can bypass the regular news media and access information—if often echo-chamber opinion masquerading as fact—from other apparently independent sources. The eagerness to look to those alternatives and willingness to trust them, in some cases in preference to professional media, has created the perfect climate for disrupters-with-intent. Clever propagandists have been able to co-opt the credibility of some traditional media by mimicking their presentation.

Suddenly, it is harder to know what is real online and what is invented. The explosion in the use of social media means stories that look as if they come from reputable sources can have instantaneous, widespread distribution. As allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election demonstrate, this is a potentially dangerous development that threatens the operations of democracy and the institutions within it, including the military. While diversity of news sources is essential, so is credibility. Above all, so is fact.

Strengthening engagement and trust between the military and the media and ensuring that the truth is told should further the credibility of both parties in the eyes of a disillusioned public. Contrary to its PR mission as explained by Logue, the ADF should not strive to be described as beyond reproach. As Chris Smith suggested, it should strive to operate in ways that make reproach unnecessary. And we in the media should do the same.

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