
Going Dutch or Candidly Canadian? What the ADF Might Learn from its Allies' Media Operations Practices in Afghanistan

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The Primacy Of Perception

These are inauspicious times to be promoting greater openness and cooperation in relations between the government, the military and the media. The blanket secrecy around Operation Sovereign Borders not only represents a fundamental abrogation of the government's responsibility to keep its citizens informed about the nature, purposes and implementation of its policies, it also sets a dreadful and potentially damaging example for other government departments of how to conduct one's relations with the media. The prominent role afforded Lieutenant General Angus Campbell in the early days of the operation was the most obvious reflection of the fact that many of the Immigration Minister's practices and directions had their origins in the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) interactions with the fourth estate during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, where its costiveness with information was legendary.¹ If imitation is the highest form of flattery, the government's information campaign around asylum seekers reflected its esteem for the ADF's information management practices over the preceding years. Yet the ADF would do well to consider the consequences of its antagonistic relations with the media and how well placed this has left it to face the emerging threats from non-state actors and conventional forces.

In the face of former Immigration Minister Scott Morrison's refusal to comment on any "on-water matters" during his infrequent Operation Sovereign Borders briefings, it is hard to believe that it is scarcely ten years since US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Victoria Clarke, issued Public Affairs Guidance to the US military as it prepared to invade Iraq that put at its heart the media's right to access, move within and report from the area of operations and the military's duty to facilitate that access. Clarke's instructions were

¹ For more on this see Tom Hyland, 'Funny Old War: The News from the ADF', in Kevin Foster (ed.), *What Are We Doing in Afghanistan? The Military and the Media at War* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009), pp. 102-18; Ian McPhedran, 'War! What War?', in Kevin Foster (ed.), *What Are We Doing in Afghanistan? The Military and the Media at War* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009), pp. 65-74.

underpinned by ten-years of bitter experience, highlighted by serious reverses in Somalia and the Balkans and the realisation this had bred within the US military that independent media coverage of its operations was vital to ensure public support for and success in them:

We need to tell the factual story—good or bad—before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions, as they most certainly will continue to do. Our people in the field need to tell our story—only commanders can ensure the media get to the story alongside the troops. We must organize for and facilitate access of national and international media to our forces, including those forces engaged in ground operations, with the goal of doing so right from the start.²

This is brave stuff and its message about the value of openness in the face of an enemy determined to contest the information space is especially important in the wake of the Australian experience in Afghanistan. Here the Taliban not only proved itself to be a resourceful and resilient foe on the battlefield, its information operations showed surprising sophistication as it successfully communicated its message to a diverse array of audiences. The illiterate villagers and farmers who constituted a significant portion of the Taliban's domestic audience were intimidated into conformity with night letters, or *shabanamah*, while in urban areas the more literate population was cowed by DVDs, delivered to specific targets or sold cheaply in local bazaars, that demonstrated the bloody reprisals exacted against those who worked with or supported the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). At the same time the Taliban ran a "global information campaign" directed at "two entirely different audiences: their supporters and their enemy's supporters, that is, global jihadis and the publics of the countries engaged in Afghanistan".³ Though its influence on public opinion in the ISAF countries is yet to be definitively determined, this campaign was certainly effective in publicising civilian casualties, regularly forcing ISAF onto the back foot to justify, explain or deny Taliban allegations that it was indifferent to casualties among the local civilian populace.

The experience in Afghanistan evidently struck a chord in Defence Headquarters at Russell. The *Future Land Warfare Report 2014* acknowledged the likely centrality of information operations in future conflicts:

Contemporary trends suggest future conflict will increasingly involve multiple diverse actors all competing for the allegiances and/or acquiescence of targeted populations. Consequently, the outcome of conflict will be influenced

² Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, *Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) on Embedding Media During Possible Future Operations/Deployments in the U.S. Central Commands (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR)* (Washington: Department of Defense, 2003), A.2. For more on the United States' bitter lessons see Thomas Rid, *War and Media Operations: The US Military and the Press from Vietnam to Iraq* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 89-108.

³ Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker, *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), p. 178.

by the perceptions of these populations rather than solely the results of battlefield action.⁴

The key to geographical dominance resides in mastery of the human terrain. Recent events in Iraq offer a graphic demonstration that these trends are being realised on the ground. When fighters from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Isis) overran large portions of north-western Iraq, including the country's second city, Mosul, in early June 2014 it was less force of arms that carried them to victory than a canny information campaign. Isis's "regressive goal ... to return to the ultra-conservative traditions that—they claim—the earliest Muslims lived by" was advanced by "a hypermodern propaganda machine that sees Isis's sadistic attacks promoted by a slick social media operation, a specially designed app—and well-made videos".⁵ The app, Dawn of Glad Tidings, demonstrates a particular awareness of the role of Twitter as a disseminator and aggregator of opinion. The app enables Isis

to use [its Twitter followers'] accounts to send out centrally written updates. Released simultaneously, the messages swamp social media, giving Isis a far larger online reach than their own accounts would otherwise allow. The Dawn app pumps out news of Isis advances, gory images or frightening videos ...—creating the impression of a rampant and unstoppable force.⁶

According to Abu Bakr al-Janabi, an Iraqi supporter of Isis with an inside knowledge of its media operations, the Iraqi troops defending Mosul fled because the fate of those who opposed Isis had been graphically illustrated through tweets and videos that said "look what will happen to you if you cross our path. And it actually worked: a lot of soldiers deserted when they saw the black banners of Isis."⁷ The resulting fear that Isis was about to storm Baghdad was "borne out of their social media campaign, not reality", claimed the *Guardian's* Middle East correspondent, Martin Chulov, as "They don't have the manpower to do that."⁸

It is not only non-state actors who are busy realising the battlefield advantages afforded by command of the information environment. A Pentagon report warned that in pursuing a "three warfares" strategy combining "legal warfare," "media warfare" and "psychological warfare", China's rapid development of its information operations capability posed a real threat to the United States and its allies in the East and South China Seas.⁹ Given these developments it is evident that in future conflicts, in the face of determined and well-targeted information operations assault from well-resourced and sophisticated

⁴ Modernisation and Strategic Planning Division – Australian Army Headquarters, *Future Land Warfare Report 2014* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2014), p. 4.

⁵ Patrick Kingsley, 'Who is behind Isis's Terrifying Online Propaganda Operation?', *The Guardian*, 24 June 2014, p. 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ J. Garnaut, 'Pentagon Report Reveals Chinese Strategy has US Rattled', *The Age*, 11 April 2014, p. 10.

opponents, a steady stream of cheerful press releases from Defence media ops, of the kind that characterised official Australian communications during the war in Afghanistan will not be nearly enough to keep the domestic population on-message, informed or on side.¹⁰ The ADF will need to upgrade its information operations assets, to radically re-think their purposes and applications and to re-visit the training of its personnel. While it hopes that its development of social media strategies will herald a new, more direct relationship with the Australian public, this remains to be tested. On the evidence to date, social media affords greater advantages to insurgent groups rather than their counter-insurgency adversaries.¹¹ While the ADF comes to grips with the implications of this it needs to reconfigure its relations with the mainstream media. Notably, the Iraqi Government's response to the panic unleashed by Isis propaganda and the approach of its fighters to the outer suburbs of Baghdad was a live, television/radio broadcast by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki calling the country to arms and reassuring the public. Though some may scoff at the proposition, a time will come when the ADF will need the media desperately, when, as in the case of Iraq, only the mainstream media will have the reach, the penetration and the authority needed to project the official line. With such an eventuality in mind this is an appropriate moment to appraise the current state of relations between the military and the media in Australia and to determine what lessons for the future the ADF can take from its interactions with the fourth estate in Afghanistan. For purposes of illustration I will compare and contrast the ADF's dealings with the media with those of two of Australia's coalition allies in Afghanistan, the Dutch and the Canadian militaries who, for similar reasons and by parallel means recast their relations with their media during the conflict and benefitted from the new arrangements.

'Media Hosting'—The ADF and The Fourth Estate

What can we determine about the nature and effects of Australian media-military relations from the evidence of its conduct in Afghanistan? The ADF itself has conceded that its media management policy for the greater part of its deployment in Afghanistan was unnecessarily restrictive. In the first instance just how one attained a place on an embed was shrouded in mystery. There were, until 2010, no clear guidelines about how one applied for an embed and the grounds determining who was selected. It was not until late 2011 that the ADF called for Expressions of Interest from media personnel interested in embedding with the troops in Afghanistan. Prior to 2009 the only way for reporters to access Australian forces in Uruzgan was via the 'Bus Tours' run by the ADF. The programme was closely managed by ADF Public Affairs (PA) and was roundly despised by the media who chafed at the

¹⁰ For more on this see Kevin Foster, *Don't Mention the War: The Australian Defence Force, the Media and the Afghan Conflict* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013), pp. 86-97.

¹¹ See Rid and Hecker, *War 2.0*, pp. 1-12.

restrictions on their freedom of movement.¹² ADF PA “fixed” the reporters’ itineraries “well in advance” and once they were on base “chaperoned” them “every step of the way”.¹³ Little was left to chance. As SBS’s former Political Editor Karen Middleton noted, the ADF’s determination to minimise the scope for surprises or negative publicity ensured that as a journalist with the ADF in Afghanistan, while “You can’t be sure what will happen during your allotted time in country or what kind of stories you will be able to do ... You can be absolutely certain you will be subject to considerable restriction.”¹⁴ Though the ADF regarded the bus tours as a key means of promoting the successes of its mission in Afghanistan, a review of the ADF’s embedding program acknowledged that it had persisted with them longer than was necessary and, in the long run, they had damaged relations with the media and tarnished Defence’s credibility: “The decision to operate this way made sense during the initial phases of the conflicts with their heavy Special Forces presence, but once large bodies of conventional troops were on the ground, Defence’s on-going justification became untenable.”¹⁵

The ADF’s first, tentative foray into embedding media in a 2009 trial did little to enhance relations with the fourth estate. Indeed, given the way the trial ran and the media’s responses to it, it is a surprise that a formal program ever eventuated. In an open letter to then Defence Minister, Senator John Faulkner, one of the three participants in the trial, News Limited’s Ian McPhedran, offered a scathing assessment of its premises and conduct:

From the outset it should be noted that the word ‘embedding’ is not the correct term to describe what the Australian Defence Force is offering to the Australian media in Afghanistan.

True embedding, as practiced by US and British forces, involves journalists agreeing to a set of well-defined and binding ground rules and then being attached to a military unit without an escort officer. The level of access

¹² The shortcomings of the bus tours have been dealt with comprehensively elsewhere by Australian journalists, Karen Middleton, Chris Masters, Tom Hyland, Sean Hobbs, Ian McPhedran and an array of others whose principal complaints focus on access—highly restrictive; freedom of movement—minimal; exposure to military PR—relentless; and control over copy—negligible. See Karen Middleton, ‘Who’s Telling the Story? The Military and the Media’, in P. Dennis and J. Grey (eds), *The Military, the Media and Information Warfare* (Canberra: Australian Military History Publications, 2009), pp. 147-57; Karen Middleton, *An Unwinnable War: Australia in Afghanistan* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2011); Chris Masters, ‘The Media’s Left and Right of Arc’, in Kevin Foster (ed.), *The Information Battlefield: Representing Australians at War* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011), pp. 33-40; Chris Masters, *Uncommon Soldier: Brave, Compassionate and Tough, The Making of Australia’s Modern Digger* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2012); Hyland, ‘Funny Old War’, pp. 102-18; Sean Hobbs, ‘How to Build a Pergola: With the ADF in Afghanistan’, in Kevin Foster (ed.), *What Are We Doing in Afghanistan? The Military and the Media at War* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009), pp. 89-101; McPhedran, ‘War! What War?’, pp. 65-74.

¹³ Hobbs, ‘How to Build a Pergola’, p. 92.

¹⁴ Middleton, ‘Who’s Telling the Story?’ p. 152.

¹⁵ Jason Logue, *Herding Cats: The Evolution of the ADF’s Media Embedding Program in Operational Areas* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre [Working Paper No. 141], 2013), pp. 13-14.

granted to the journalist becomes a matter between the commanding officer and the journalist.

The ADF model should be called 'media hosting'.¹⁶

In particular, McPhedran took aim at the ADF's determination to employ the journalists as conduits for military propaganda and the promotion of their mission:

Having military personnel trying to sell stories about schools or bridges or hospitals, when the real story is out in the 'green zone' with the infantry patrols, simply wastes valuable time and generates major frustrations. The best stories from the visit came from the three foot patrols that we were permitted to accompany ...

The 'soft' PR stories about diggers doing good works have a place and that place is the Army News newspaper or on the defence website, it is not in the pages of major metropolitan newspapers. We would never dare suggest where the CO should place his troops, so we shouldn't be told how to do our job or what is a good story.¹⁷

By 2009, Ian McPhedran noted, the ADF's restrictions on media reporting had grown so onerous that "there is more value in Australian reporters seeking help from British or American or Dutch or Romanian forces on operations than there is from the Australians".¹⁸

A Lack of 'Editorial Commitment'

Yet the "lack of evidence based coverage" of what Australian forces were doing in Afghanistan was "not only down to the ADF being obstructive".¹⁹ Media organisations were themselves reluctant to invest the resources necessary to ensure solid coverage of events in Afghanistan. They were, admittedly, distracted by the biggest crisis in the industry's modern history, the collapse of their traditional funding model, and the decimation of newsrooms that it brought. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that in the five years between 2006 and 2011 the newspaper industry shed almost 13 per cent of its workforce.²⁰ The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the main trade union for media employees, estimated that over the winter of 2012, one in seven journalism jobs disappeared.²¹ Foreign bureaux were closed down, specialist reporters with international and defence experience took

¹⁶ Ian McPhedran, "Embedding" Trial Report', 9 September 2009, <www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0935_report.pdf> [Accessed 8 August 2014], p. 1. For a parallel report of this information see I. McPhedran, 'Defence Coy on Embedding Media', *The Australian*, 14 September 2009, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁸ McPhedran, 'War! What War?', p. 71.

¹⁹ Masters, 'The Media's Left and Right of Arc', p. 37.

²⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Graphic Designer: The Most Popular Cultural Occupation', *Employment in Culture, Australia 2011*, Media Release, 20 December 2012.

²¹ See 'News Limited Redundancies Should Be the Last', Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 4 September 2012, <www.alliance.org.au/news-limited-redundancies-should-be-the-last> [Accessed 8 August 2014].

redundancy packages and their expertise was lost.²² Already “one of the toughest assignments on the media horizon”, the straitened economies of the funding crisis ensured that the truth about what was happening in Afghanistan was “harder than usual to come by”.²³ However, the media’s failures in Afghanistan could not be attributed to financial pressures alone. As the conflict unfolded it became increasingly apparent to journalists that among the newspapers and broadcasters they served, “editorial commitment” to reporting the war was “weak” and there was “no appetite for sustained and detailed coverage except when there was an extraordinary event”.²⁴ In some cases media organisations refused to meet the full costs of transporting or insuring reporters who went to cover the war, while in others they balked at the bonuses and allowances to which their employees were entitled.²⁵

More damningly, over the course of Australia’s commitment in Afghanistan the media signally failed to make even the most basic investment in the human or physical resources needed to ensure that the public had access to sustained and detailed coverage of the nation’s longest ever military deployment. For more than nine years no Australian media outlet committed a permanent correspondent to Afghanistan. Though this situation was finally rectified in January 2011, when the ABC opened a Kabul bureau headed by Sally Sara, when her posting ended twelve months later and she returned to Australia the national broadcaster promptly mothballed the office. Without a resident, well-informed specialist, coverage of the war was left to an array of differently qualified reporters who mostly dropped into Afghanistan on brief embeds, went where they were taken, saw what they were shown, and left the country, and their readers, little wiser about the conflict than they were before. As a consequence of these arrangements the greater portion of the reporting from Afghanistan struggled to illuminate the conflict’s complex origins, geography and alliances. If the public was ill informed about the basic facts of the war in Afghanistan it owed its ignorance as much to the Australian media’s hindrance of its own reporters as it did to the ADF’s efforts to obstruct or censor them.

²² Early in 2013 Crikey reported that *The Australian* was soon to close its London, Washington and Tokyo bureaux, while Fairfax was also looking to close its London bureau having mothballed its Kabul office. See Matthew Knott, ‘Foreign Bureau Get the Chop as News, Fairfax Cut Costs’, *Crikey*, 9 January 2013, <media.crikey.com.au/dm/newsletter/dailymail_e034edb700ec5d29edf45c4d76b17320.html#article_22103> [Accessed 8 August 2014].

²³ Masters, *Uncommon Soldier*, p. 207.

²⁴ Masters, ‘The Media’s Left and Right of Arc’, p. 37; Tom Hyland, interview with author, 19 December 2012.

²⁵ Chris Masters recalled that while the Australian Defence Force applied a maximum threat level to Afghanistan, thereby entitling its personnel to an extra \$141.36 per day, tax free, when he notified his superiors that he and his film crew would be travelling to Uruzgan to make a documentary “the ABC asked that we take a reduced travel allowance, advancing the rationale that we would have no use for it”. Masters, *Uncommon Soldier*, p. 219.

Missed Opportunities

There were also vocal complaints about the paucity of coverage from within the ADF itself, a disgruntlement that ran from the top to the bottom of the organisation. Former Chief of Army, Peter Leahy, regretted the multiple missed opportunities to promote the ADF and its personnel. As a result of the failure to better publicise what the military was doing in Afghanistan, he lamented the fact that “the nation is being denied its heroes, and its heroes are being denied their heroism”.²⁶ During his time as the Commander of Joint Task Force 633, Major General John Cantwell was exasperated by his own organisation’s failure to celebrate its men and women:

I approve scores of media updates, make or release dozens of newsy videos, provide commentary on our challenges and progress, and look for every opportunity to tell the Australian people what our troops are doing, and how well they’re doing it. Most of these messages sink without a trace in the Defence and parliamentary precincts of Canberra. I get more mileage from the story of sending home a long-lost and rediscovered explosive-detection dog, Sarbie, than from all of my other media engagements combined. In general, the work of our service men and women seems to be invisible in the Australian media. It’s partly the fault of the press, but largely due to the draconian control of information by the Department of Defence Public Affairs Office and the Defence Minister’s office.²⁷

Some mid-ranking officers with command responsibility in Afghanistan likewise believed that Defence’s reluctance to engage with the media was impeding the necessary publicisation of the military’s work in Afghanistan and proactively sought to engage with them. The Commanding Officer of Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force 1, Lieutenant Colonel Shane Gabriel, believed that it was important for the fourth estate to bear witness from the front lines: “The media has a right to be there. We have nothing to hide.”²⁸ At Patrol Base Wali the Commanding Officer, Major Jason Groat, made it clear to visiting reporters that “We are welcome inside at any time and have an open invitation to every daily briefing.”²⁹ At the other end of the rank scale, as the war dragged on soldiers were increasingly frustrated by the Australian public’s apparent ignorance of, if not indifference to their efforts in Afghanistan. By 2010 James Brown noted that many in the ranks were “starting to ask why there isn’t more public debate on Australia’s Afghan strategy”.³⁰ When Chris Masters arrived Afghanistan in the same year he was

²⁶ Peter Leahy, ‘The Government, the Military and the Media’, in Kevin Foster (ed.), *The Information Battlefield: Representing Australians at War* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011), p. 10.

²⁷ John Cantwell with Greg Bearup, *Exit Wounds: One Australian’s War on Terror* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2012), p. 326.

²⁸ Masters, *Uncommon Soldier*, p. 200.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

³⁰ James Brown, ‘And then there’s their Battle at Home’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 2010, p. 10.

surprised by “the trace of anger I heard when soldiers spoke of a failure to understand what they are doing back at home”.³¹

A Climate of Suspicion?

There is no escaping the fact that, in large measure, the ADF’s mistrust of and often adversarial posture towards the media underlay the public’s ignorance about what its men and women were doing in Afghanistan. When Fairfax’s Chief Correspondent, Paul McGeough, and photographer Kate Geraghty travelled to Tarin Kot in January 2013 to report on the latter days of the ADF’s mission in Uruzgan, they were “met on the tarmac by several Australian military officers” who told them “You have no permission to be here.” Determined to avoid the routine restrictions imposed on reporters by the ADF, McGeough and Geraghty had decided to seek accreditation for their assignment from an Afghan agency and had travelled to Uruzgan independent of the ADF. When the ADF discovered this, McGeough alleges, it set out to “derail the Fairfax assignment”, and so “block independent reporting in the province”, by holding a meeting with spokesmen “from a raft of government agencies in southern Afghanistan” where the Afghans were pressured to withdraw any assistance they may already have offered the Fairfax journalists. Farid Ayil, a spokesman for the Uruzgan Chief of Police, Matiullah Khan, corroborated McGeough’s account, claiming that “The [ADF] guy went around the table getting everyone to say they had refused.” When it became clear that the Chief of Police had determined to host the journalists, the unnamed ADF officer “demanded to know why we were taking you” and presented “a litany of reasons” to back his arguments for excluding the reporters: “the Fairfax team was in Oruzgan to ‘write wrong stories’; it had travelled to Tarin Kowt ‘without permission’; and it had entered Afghanistan ‘without a letter from the Australian government.’”³² Though the journalists had not written a word or taken a single photograph in Uruzgan to this point, in the eyes of the unnamed officer their intention to work beyond ADF oversight was evidence of an inherent hostility towards the military and a legitimate basis for excluding them. This approach to its relations with the fourth estate may have enabled the ADF to get on with its tasks in Afghanistan in relative peace, but it also ensured that what they did remained mostly unseen and so unappreciated by their countrymen and women.

When, in 2011, a formal embedding program was finally instituted, greater numbers of reporters were able to travel to and report from Afghanistan than had previously been the case. When he studied the reporting from this period Lieutenant Colonel Jason Logue found that while “the overall trend of Australian media reporting concerning operations in Afghanistan was favourable ... the coverage sourced from media embed participants, a relatively small percentage of overall coverage, was of considerably higher

³¹ Masters, *Uncommon Soldier*, p. xviii.

³² Paul McGeough, ‘How the ADF Tried to Control the Real Story of Oruzgan’, *The Saturday Age*, 16 March 2013, p. 9.

favourability than reporting from afar”.³³ Better still, not only was the embeds’ reporting favourable, it “showed a strong correlation with the identified favourable messages”, the positive narrative about the war that the ADF so assiduously promoted, namely “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”.³⁴ One can only assume that on the basis of this evidence the ADF will deploy embedded media to future conflicts with far greater alacrity. Yet while the favourable reporting was an obvious PR plus for the military, there was no evidence that it left the public any better informed about what was happening in Uruzgan. Indeed, whatever the public’s approval of what the troops were doing, opinion polling indicates that this had little impact on broader measures of support for the war, which consistently trended downwards from 2009 onwards.³⁵

This brings us back to the government whose aversion to transparency around military matters has long and deep roots. In Australia, relations between the Department of Defence, the ADF, politicians, the media and the public have never been easy.³⁶ In 2000, public comment arrangements in the Department of Defence were brought into line with other government portfolios when the uniformed leadership were “forced ... to cede to the Minister, and executive government as a whole, much more power over defence public information”.³⁷ However, the reforms intended to re-assert the accountability of the armed forces to their civilian governors played into the hands of unscrupulous politicians. The assertions by senior government ministers, including the Defence Minister, Peter Reith, during the Children Overboard Affair in October 2001, that asylum seekers had thrown their children into the sea in an effort to secure rescue and passage to Australia, outraged the military. Though the Royal Australian Navy had evidence that this was not the case all comment regarding the incident had to come through the Minister’s office and so they were not allowed to present it.³⁸ This experience badly “strained the relationship between Defence and successive ministers”, irreparably damaged whatever trust had built up between the military and the government and, in the opinion of former Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon, “produced a more risk averse culture and a determination [in the ADF] to put up barriers

³³ Logue, *Herding Cats*, p. 26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁵ For more on this see Foster, *Don’t Mention the War*, pp. 104-21.

³⁶ See Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, *Witnesses to War: The History of Australian Combat Reporting* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2011); John Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors: Censorship and Propaganda in World War II* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984); Ian Jackson, “‘Duplication, Rivalry and Friction’: The Australian Army, the Government and the Press during the Second World War”, in Foster, *The Information Battlefield*, pp. 74-85; Trish Payne, *War and Words: The Australian Press and the Vietnam War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2007); Foster, *Don’t Mention the War*.

³⁷ Brian Humphreys, ‘The Australian Defence Force’s Media Strategy: What it is and Why, and Why it Needs to Change’, in Foster, *What Are We Doing in Afghanistan?* p. 41.

³⁸ For more on the Children Overboard affair see Senate Select Committee, *Report into a Certain Maritime Incident* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2002); and David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2002).

between both politicians and media organisations”.³⁹ The conviction among the ADF’s senior commanders that some of the politicians they served were without principle, “that ‘public information’ was a dirty word” and that that they should keep out of it, resulted in the establishment of a “thicket of procedures and clearance requirements” around interactions with the media and the public.⁴⁰ By 2009 “self-serving obfuscation” had become an “ingrained habit” in Defence and an editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that, “To outsiders—who include the public, the media, and most members of Parliament—the Defence Department has become increasingly tight with even routine information over recent decades.”⁴¹ This “tightness” reflected both a literal and a figurative closing of the uniformed ranks in the face of perceived enemies, among whom the ADF numbered not only hostile powers, but also the politicians tasked with their management. Politicians and public servants deputed to manage members of the armed forces regularly ran into a wall of resentment and resistance. Another former Defence Minister, Dr Brendan Nelson, suggested it was “fair to say that at times the uniformed side of Defence finds it difficult to respond to directives that come from civilians in the form of the government and minister of the day”.⁴²

Averse, as any government is, to bad news, wedded to a “forward defence” rationale for the conflict that became increasingly untenable as the sponsors and agents of terrorism moved to Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Syria, the government employed every lever of power at its disposal to slow the flow of information from Afghanistan to a carefully monitored trickle. Accordingly with regards to the extent to which the reporting from and about Afghanistan informed and helped foster links between the public and the armed forces, broadened and deepened the public’s understanding of why the ADF was there and what it might reasonably achieve, and afforded a degree of historical and political context for the conflict, it is not unreasonable to pronounce the coverage of Australia’s war in Afghanistan an abject failure. For the greater part of the war the media were prevented from doing their job, and when they were able to do it they received little backing or encouragement from their own editors or proprietors; the public was detached from events that seemed far away and of scarcely passing interest; the troops were increasingly disenchanted by apparent public ignorance of what they were doing; and the government, desperate to avoid the political fallout from bad news, doggedly stuck to an outmoded defence of the commitment and refused every entreaty to pressure the military to afford greater access for the fourth estate.

³⁹ Deborah Snow and Cynthia Banham, ‘Calling Shots in Defence’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 28-March 1 2009, p. 7; Cynthia Banham and Jonathan Pearlman, ‘It’s War: Minister Takes Aim at Defence’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February-1 March 2009, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Humphreys, ‘The Australian Defence Force’s Media Strategy’, p. 43.

⁴¹ Snow and Banham, ‘Calling Shots in Defence’, p. 7. Editorial, ‘Need-not-to-Know Doctrine’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 February 2009, p. 12.

⁴² Cynthia Banham and Deborah Snow, ‘They Don’t Follow Orders: Nelson Opens Fire on Top Brass’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 2009, p. 1.

The Netherlands — Informing the Public While Rehabilitating the Military

Given the fractious nature of military-media relations in Australia, what lessons can the ADF take from the media-management practices of its ISAF allies in Canada and the Netherlands? Dutch and Canadian reporting of the war certainly was not perfect and there were many flashpoints between the military, the media and government. What distinguished the Dutch and Canadian experience from that of the Australians was the commitment at the highest levels of government, the military and the media to the creation of a macro political/bureaucratic environment that, for a period of time, both facilitated and reinforced open communications within and between the State, its institutions and its people. As a consequence while the Dutch and Canadian publics enjoyed relatively open and comprehensive coverage of their nations at war, Australians were left to ponder what the ADF was doing in Afghanistan and why its personnel continued to die there.

The Dutch Coalition Government was an ambivalent participant in the ISAF mission from the outset, faithfully reflecting the widely divergent views within Dutch society about the propriety and efficacy of military intervention in Afghanistan.⁴³ When the Dutch deployed their forces to Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom their every move was closely scrutinised by the responsible authorities and the deployment and use of assets was subject to detailed political oversight. In January 2004 when the Dutch Government acceded to an ISAF request to augment the firepower of the Kabul Multi-National Brigade (KMNB) by sending six AH-64D Apache helicopters, it directed the *Ministerie van Defensie* (MvD) to post "liaison officers to the staff of the KMNB and to the ISAF headquarters to evaluate the deployment of the helicopters against the mandate and the rules of engagement".⁴⁴ When the Dutch returned to Afghanistan in 2006 the opposition Labour Party was only persuaded to support the engagement when assured that the troops were leading a "reconstruction mission".⁴⁵ The resulting deployment, Task Force Uruzgan, was uniquely a joint command shared between an Army Colonel and a political advisor. The Dutch commitment in Afghanistan thus proceeded against the backcloth of the full and free flow of information from the war zone.

The Dutch media were afforded largely unfettered access to the area of operations from the earliest days of the 2006 deployment. The MvD offered Dutch reporters free transport to Afghanistan from the military airbase at

⁴³ A dispute about the extension of the Dutch commitment in Afghanistan brought down the Dutch Government in 2010.

⁴⁴ Netherlands Institute of Military History, *International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Mission Overview* (The Hague: Ministry of Defence, 2009), p. 9. See <[www.defensie.nl/english/nimh/history/international_operations/mission_overview/48178809/international_security_assistance_force_\(isaf\)](http://www.defensie.nl/english/nimh/history/international_operations/mission_overview/48178809/international_security_assistance_force_(isaf))> [Accessed 14 February 2013].

⁴⁵ Joseph T. Jockel, 'The Dutch Army in Afghanistan', *The Dorchester Review*, 20 October 2011, <www.dorchesterreview.ca/2011/10/20/the-dutch-army-in-afghanistan/> [Accessed 11 August 2014].

Eindhoven, free accommodation and personal safety equipment, and made available three embed places of two weeks duration on a rolling basis. Once in Uruzgan Dutch reporters were free to go wherever they wished on base, and to visit Provincial Reconstruction projects and accompany Dutch military patrols off it, subject to local conditions and the Commander's approval. There was, technically, a requirement that a Public Information Officer (PIO) accompany the reporter at all times and that all interviews were on the record, but Dutch journalists indicated that this regulation was rarely, if not barely, observed. Dutch reporters were also free to disembark from the military, to leave the base to cover accessible stories in civilian areas before re-embedding and returning to the security of the base. The main bone of contention between Dutch reporters and the MvD was over control of content. The MvD, like the British, insisted on and enforced a process of universal copy review. All material had to be submitted to a PIO to ensure that there were no inadvertent breaches of operational security. Journalists adopted a range of positions on this: some accepted it as a reasonable condition of privileged access, some welcomed the clear parameters it brought, while others virulently opposed the principle that their copy was not their own.

Not only were the Dutch military keen to be deployed to Afghanistan they welcomed the media coverage it brought. In part this was because the military were desperate to restore their reputation and rebuild their relations with politicians and the public. These had been shattered by the catastrophe at Srebrenica in July 1995 when 8000 Bosnian men and boys had been carried off and massacred after Serb forces overwhelmed the Dutch troops deputed to protect them. Liora Sion has noted that prior to the events in Bosnia, the Dutch armed forces already suffered from "low status" at home.⁴⁶ What happened at Srebrenica suggested to the weekly newspaper, *HP De Tijd*, that Dutch forces were "too sweet and innocent for war", and that their actions there had "diminished the status of the military even further" to the point where it became "a threatened organization".⁴⁷ The invitation to contribute troops first to Iraq, from 2003 to 2005, and then to Afghanistan in 2006 presented the Dutch military with the opportunity to move on from Srebrenica, to win back the confidence of the politicians and the respect of the public. Yet in order to affect this the military had to demonstrate its professional prowess and its moral bona fides to the widest possible audience at home, and it could only do that by forging a new relationship with the media. As the former Head of Operations in the Directorate of Information and Communications in the MvD, Robin Middel noted, for the first time the Dutch armed forces had to "open up for the public and make sure that they know what you are doing".⁴⁸

If keeping the public informed about what its armed forces were doing was a positive PR strategy for the military it was a moral and political responsibility

⁴⁶ Liora Sion, "'Too Sweet and Innocent for War?' Dutch Peacekeepers and the Use of Violence", *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2005), p. 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 4, 2.

⁴⁸ Commander Robin Middel, interview with author, 23 September 2010.

for the MvD and a vital means of ensuring public support for the mission. As its Director of Communication, Dr Joop Veen, noted,

The chance that Dutch soldiers would be killed or would be badly hurt was very real ... We knew that beforehand and we said to ourselves if we don't make visible from the beginning of the mission what the military are doing over there, then you have a gap between the perceptions here in the Netherlands and what is happening over there.⁴⁹

Determined to avoid such a gap, the MvD promoted and enforced a greater openness towards the military than had existed before. The resulting policy was intended to convince the public that the military was not only a force for good but a force to be reckoned with—a force ready to fight and die in defence of Dutch values and thus a force that the Dutch people could be proud to own.

Joop Veen noted that the policy was intended to garner public support for the mission and the troops conducting it:

We thought that by making visible that mission, automatically as it were, there would be support not only for the military over there—'We are standing behind you'—but also for the purpose of the mission. That the average Dutch citizen will say that mission is very useful because it has results. It has effects.⁵⁰

While Veen conceded that the strategy failed to positively impact popular support for the mission it certainly helped rehabilitate the armed forces in the eyes of the people. Peter ter Velde, the Defence correspondent for the Netherlands most popular broadcaster, NOS, argued that as a result of the MvD's more open media policy and the reporting it facilitated, the Dutch public's perceptions of the military were "much improved ... Afghanistan ... showed that they could fight, that they could win battles ... So that ... the view in general of the public about [the] military has changed ... in a positive way and they became more like part of society, more than they were before Afghanistan".⁵¹

Canada —'The Afghanistan Solution'

Like the Dutch, Canadians have long held an ambivalent view of their military, its place in the nation's history and its role in the formation of its identity. The prime minister in the inter-war years, Mackenzie King, cultivated what Kim Richard Nossal has called "an attitude of indifference towards the Canadian military as an institution important for the building of the nation".⁵² In the decades after the Second World War this perception was little changed as "more and more Canadians came to the view that the primary mission of the armed forces was peacekeeping, that Canadians were an 'unmilitary people'

⁴⁹ Dr Joop Veen, interview with author, 21 June 2012.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Peter ter Velde, interview with author, 23 September 2010.

⁵² Kim Richard Nossal, 'The Unavoidable Shadow of Past Wars: Obsequies for Casualties of the Afghanistan Mission in Australia and Canada', *Australasian Canadian Studies*, vol. 26. no. 1 (2008), p. 91.

and that Canada was a 'peaceable kingdom.'⁵³ By the late 1980s, years of political indifference had left the Canadian Forces a depleted and disillusioned organisation, cut off from its political masters and the people it ostensibly served: "the public's attitude seemed to be that we had all volunteered, so if we didn't like it, we could leave".⁵⁴ Little effort was expended on the cultivation of closer relations between the armed forces and the media. Indeed, up until the deployment to Afghanistan in 2002 the media had spent decades "ignoring defence issues that were not scandal related".⁵⁵ In mid-1993 just such a scandal erupted and indifference to Canada's forces was transformed into open hostility. On 16 March 1993, a Somali teenager, Shidane Arone, was apprehended by US soldiers and handed over to members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment participating in the UN mission to Somalia. Incensed by constant thefts from their camp at Belet Huen, and convinced that Arone had been bent on such a purpose, over the course of the evening a small group of Canadian soldiers tortured and beat the young Somali to death. The subsequent arrest and prosecution of the men involved appalled the public. When Defence and the military sought to shift blame for the episode the scandal deepened and the last vestiges of respect for the armed forces were replaced by "scorn".⁵⁶

In the wake of the Somalia affair, revelations about violent hazing rituals and claims that accusations of sexual assault on military bases had been inadequately investigated, the government slashed the defence budget, gutted the military's equipment and personnel numbers, and was thereafter understandably reluctant to expose the armed forces to closer media scrutiny. As a consequence, during the Canadian Forces' first deployment to Kandahar in 2002, and in the early stages of its 2003-2005 deployment to Kabul, Chris Wattie of the *National Post* claimed that admission to the main Canadian base, "Camp Julien was repeatedly delayed, and once inside, access to troops was minimal and depended largely on the commanding officer's discretion".⁵⁷ This strategy of obstruction, Wattie alleged, had its origins at the highest levels of government: "Certain elements in the Prime Minister's Office, Privy Council Office, and Director General Public Affairs, both civilian and uniformed, opposed embedding from the beginning."⁵⁸

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵⁴ Rick Hillier, *A Soldier First: Bullets, Bureaucrats and the Politics of War* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 109.

⁵⁵ Sharon Hobson, *The Information Gap: Why the Canadian Public Doesn't Know More About Its Military* (Calgary: Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, 2007), p. 5.

⁵⁶ Hillier, *A Soldier First*, p. 115. For detailed coverage of the events in Somalia and their lengthy political ramifications see the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *The Somalia Affair*, <<http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/war-conflict/peacekeeping/the-somalia-affair/topic-the-somalia-affair.html>> [Accessed 1 February 2015].

⁵⁷ Dominique L. Price, 'Inside the Wire: A Study of Canadian Embedded Journalism in Afghanistan', M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, Ottawa, 2009, p. 52.

⁵⁸ Hobson, *The Information Gap*, p. 10.

Yet this strategy was about to change. When the United States invaded Iraq in February 2003, though “the stench of Somalia” was still thick in the air and the nation’s forces “were in disrepute and despair”, the military were suddenly in a position to do their political masters a favour and the media were needed to advertise the fulfilment of a promise.⁵⁹ Under pressure from the United States to contribute troops to Iraq, and keen to avoid what would have been a deeply unpopular commitment at home, the invitation to deploy forces to Afghanistan as part of ISAF provided the Canadian Government with a convenient solution to a tricky political problem.⁶⁰ For the armed forces, the nation’s largest military commitment since Korea was heaven sent. It provided them with the opportunity to demonstrate their relevance to their political masters, to leverage some new capability, and above all else to show the Canadian public that they were a disciplined and moral fighting force. In their eagerness to regain the politicians’ trust and the public’s respect, the military pushed for a visible presence in Afghanistan and agreed to more open relations with the media to publicise their works there. The Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier, had already rejected an invitation to serve under the Italians at Chagcharan in Herat Province because “There was no upside, no profile ... Nobody would have noticed that we were there.”⁶¹

In electing instead to assume the leadership of Regional Command South in Kandahar, by 2006 among the most dangerous places in an increasingly perilous country, the Canadians ensured that they would be constantly in the public eye. Recognising the risk they were embracing the government and the military did their best to prepare the public for the casualties that were likely to ensue. In turn, as Sharon Hobson noted, “The prospect of increased risk brought the media to Afghanistan in droves.”⁶² Once there, large numbers of the media—in the first instance thirty embed places were available to Canadian and foreign media at any time—enjoyed virtually open access to Canadian Forces, extensive freedom of movement in theatre and the right to dis-embed and return to their place on embeds that lasted six weeks and could be extended beyond that. They exercised control over their own copy and were able to pursue particular assignments with the military through negotiation with Public Affairs Officers on a “bid and ask” basis.⁶³ These conditions met with a generally “enthusiastic” response from the press who, from soon after the return of Canadian forces to Kandahar in 2006, for up to eighteen months enjoyed, in Sharon Hobson’s phrase, “tremendous access to the soldiers they were covering”.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (Toronto: Penguin, 2007), pp. 12, 57.

⁶⁰ Canadian politicians referred to this as ‘the Afghanistan solution’. For more on this see Gross Stein and Lang, *The Unexpected War*, pp. 65, 67-8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶² Hobson, *The Information Gap*, p. 12.

⁶³ Price, *Inside the Wire*, p. 56.

⁶⁴ Hobson, *The Information Gap*, p. 12.

Get it in Writing

For differing reasons, political conditions in Canada and the Netherlands conspired to support candid coverage of the engagement in Afghanistan. In both countries the military exploited these conditions to ensure maximum exposure and optimal leverage from the resulting political and public relations advantages. Notably, for the Canadians, as for the Dutch, the new policy of openness towards the media and their publics was underwritten by and framed within a formal agreement between the military and the media dictating ground rules, duties, responsibilities and dispute resolution processes for both parties. By the time Canadian Forces re-deployed to Kandahar in 2006, the Canadian Forces Media Embedding Program Ground Rules (CFMEP) document had been in place and evolving for almost three years. Its introduction made it plain that its principal objective was less to address operational security requirements or furnish commanders with the directions necessary to adjudicate information management problems in theatre, though these were amply accommodated in the document, than it was to serve the public, “to inform Canadians about the role, mandate and activities of the Canadian Forces (CF) on deployed operations”.⁶⁵ The document underwent a lengthy process of refinement in the face of experience in theatre and these changes were incorporated into subsequent drafts of the policy.⁶⁶

Dutch military-media relations in Afghanistan were also shaped by an explicit communications strategy, the *Communicatieplan*, whose purpose, like the CFMEP, was “to showcase the importance and the developments of the mission and its specific assignments in a professional manner, to reach the public, visitors, politicians and others that are involved”.⁶⁷ The *Communicatieplan* was informed by four principles of respect that underpinned the planning for media coverage of the deployment and informed the behaviour of media organisations and their representatives, the MvD, its uniformed personnel and the PIOs—these were “respect the security, respect the individual, respect the home front, respect the coalition”.⁶⁸ While the Dutch media, like their Canadian counterparts, had no role in the drafting of the original document, they did, like the Canadians, play a central role in

⁶⁵ Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, *Canadian Forces Media Embedding Program: Guidelines, Ground Rules and Documentation for Joint Task Force Afghanistan* (Ottawa: Department of National Defense, 2010), p. 1. The document was formerly available on the Department of National Defense website, but since the withdrawal of Canadian Forces from Afghanistan the link has been disabled.

⁶⁶ For example, after CF re-deployed to Kandahar, “the number of embed positions was cut in half, down from 30 to 15; a maximum embed stay of six weeks was implemented; and, a process was put in place for news organizations to formally request embed extensions”. Price, *Inside the Wire*, p. 56.

⁶⁷ Ulrich Mans, Christa Meindersma and Lars Burema, *Eyes Wide Shut? The Impact of Embedded Journalism on Dutch Newspaper Coverage of Afghanistan* (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2008), p. 15. The *Communicatieplan* is available (in Dutch) at <www.communicatieplan.info/wp-content/uploads/2008/02/communicatieplan_mindef_uzuzgan_2006.pdf>.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

interpreting and adapting it for use in the field. These revisions were effected through irregular meetings between the then Head of Operations in the Directorate of Information and Communications in the MvD, Robin Middel, and a core of defence correspondents who made a number of visits to Afghanistan over the course of the Dutch deployment. Other localised arrangements were worked out between reporters and the Dutch military's PIOs. From the example of the Dutch and the Canadians it is hard to overstate how the military and the media benefitted from a jointly constructed document in which both parties had a practical investment.

These formal compacts produced consensus on and cooperation around seven fundamental factors shaping the nature and quality of media coverage from Afghanistan.

1. The provision of an explicit media management policy to which both parties freely subscribe and which is subject to adaptation by means of negotiation as necessary.
2. A transparent process for the selection and allocation of reporters to embed places—a queue, if you like.
3. Mutual consultation re the timing of media visits, subject to operational exigencies.
4. The military's facilitation of minimally restrictive media access to its personnel in the field.
5. The military's facilitation of maximum freedom of movement among the troops for the media—with customary exclusions for Special Forces.
6. Media control over content—subject to appropriate operational security briefings.
7. Mutually agreed sanctions for the infringement of the ground rules.

While the ADF began to incorporate some of these features in its arrangements for the Australian media towards the end of its deployment, up until 2011 it lacked an explicit media management policy, a transparent process for the selection and allocation of embeds, minimally restrictive media access to the area of operations or unfettered freedom of movement for embedded media within it, while retaining the right to examine all media copy. The ADF are to be congratulated for finally arriving at a system that enabled greater access and greater freedom of movement for the media in the final years of the conflict in Afghanistan. But it is sobering to consider how different the coverage of the conflict, and its consequences for all parties, might have been had the military worked with the media at an earlier point to establish the framework for an information management policy and its ground rules, clearly

setting out mutual rights and responsibilities. Such tortured relations between the military and the media raise the question of how much the ADF has learnt from its experiences in Afghanistan and how well equipped it is to deal with the likes of Isis, or the Chinese military. How, one wonders, when put to the test, as it inevitably will be, will the ADF rise to the information-centric challenges of the modern battlefield?

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