



LtGen Zinni encounters the media in Mogadishu, Somalia.

Media Relations: A Commander's Perspective

In many of today's operations, media relations can prove to be more important than fire and maneuver in determining the outcome . . .

by LtGen Anthony C. Zinni
and
Col Frederick M. Lorenz

On 9 December 1992, Marines landing on the beach in Mogadishu, Somalia, were met by an unforgettable sight. The glare of floodlights and a large press corps contingent turned the landing into an event that would be instantly broadcast around the world. Did the presence of the media endanger the lives of the Marines? Was there a negative impact on the operation? For Marines, one point became clear—the presence of the media would have to be carefully coordinated in future operations.

The worldwide revolution in communications has forever changed the landscape of military operations. The impact of the media on the formulation of national policy is a fact of life. It was images of starving children on the evening news in the fall of 1992 that ultimately resulted in the deployment of a multinational force to Somalia in Operation RESTORE HOPE. Later, it was images of U.S. personnel dragged through the streets of Mogadishu that contributed to the termination of U.S. involvement. Military operations can no longer be defined only in terms of fire and maneuver. The U.S. commander must understand how to deal with the media and the important implications of media coverage.

DoD Media Policy

The Department of Defense (DoD) Media Pool system was established in 1984 in response to the recommendations of an independent panel. The pool system was established to ensure that print and broadcast media would have rapid access to news of military operations in remote areas while still pro-

tecting the operational security of our forces. The pool is designed to permit small groups of journalists with military escort to travel to ships, bases, and frontlines in order to conduct interviews and observe the operation first hand. Critics of the pool system in DESERT STORM charged that access to potential stories was limited and that the system effectively created an environment of censorship. Since DESERT STORM, DoD has worked to make the system more favorable for the media while still protecting operational security.

Media pools are not designed to serve as the exclusive means of covering U.S. military operations. For many operations they provide the only feasible means of early access, and that is their primary justification. Pools should be as large as possible, subject to security and logistics limitations. The military host is responsible for the transportation of the pool and timely transmission of pool material, again subject to mission limitations. As soon as conditions dictate, pools should be disbanded, often within 24 to 36 hours after the operation begins. The arrival of the "early access" pool should not affect the rights and responsibilities of independent journalists already in the area.

In order to preserve security, current ground rules for DoD media pools provide that members will not disclose the fact that the pool has been activated. Pool members must remain with their escorts to facilitate movement and to ensure troop safety. The media pool is considered noncompetitive—all members must share their reports and photos on a timely basis. Failure to abide by the rules may result in expulsion from the pool. The

goal is to protect the security of the operation, while allowing pool members the greatest permissible freedom and access in covering the story.

The UNITED SHIELD Experience

Operation RESTORE HOPE continued until 4 May 1993, when responsibility was turned over from U.S. to U.N. control. By the end of 1994, more than 130 peacekeepers had died, and the international community had spent more than \$2 billion on the operation. The U.N. mission to Somalia had been judged a failure, and the U.N. ordered the withdrawal of the remaining peacekeepers by the end of March 1995. In late 1994, renewed fighting in the city of Mogadishu presented an increased danger to the departing peacekeepers, and the U.N. called for U.S. assistance to provide security for the withdrawal.

Operation UNITED SHIELD, the U.S. provision of that security, presented a number of challenges in terms of media relations. A 20-member U.S. media pool was embarked on the USS *Belleau Wood* and was given priority in terms of access to the operation, transportation, and logistics support. In addition to the pool, the landing force was faced with roughly 100 additional "independent" journalists on the beach in Mogadishu. This

number included the technicians who were needed to operate the satellite communications system, the WTN "dish." What limitations or rules should be placed on media to ensure their safety and protect operational security? What about journalists who refuse to follow the rules? How would the commander handle two classes of journalists in a fair and impartial manner? What about media that accompanied coalition forces; would they be treated as members of the pool or as independents? What about the local Somali press; would their presence create a security problem? How would media policy with the U.N., which had an operating public affairs office, be coordinated? The real challenge was to develop an integrated media plan as part of the overall plan for battlefield preparation. Using UNITED SHIELD as a backdrop, the following are provided as lessons learned for commanders in future operations.

- *Understand and Appreciate the Role of the Media in Military Operations.* It is important for the commander to have an objective view of the media. Patience will be required. Some time must be spent on fundamental education in military terms and doctrine, since the hardened war correspondent is largely a memory. Most members of the

Man the Guns! Press Reps Approaching!

by Col Paul E. Hanover

If Marines want to use popular opinion to their advantage, they had better develop a conscientious 'perception management' strategy.

The *Gazette* has published numerous articles on media relations over the years, some of them very good "how to" pieces about preparing a command's public affairs positions and meeting the needs of the journalist while not compromising mission integrity. The tenor of some of these, however, reflects a siege mentality: Get ready! Sentries up! Press corps in the wire! My observations of the media coverage of the U.S. European Command's support of DESERT SHIELD/STORM and the Kurdish relief effort (PROVIDE COMFORT) left me with a substantially stronger sentiment for, and opinion of, the press corps. These concerns have been simmering for some time now as have others raised by more recent media treatment of Marine-related incidents.

To begin with, it is crucial to always bear this fact in mind: a journalist's job is to *sell information*. They do not work for free. They are not, by and large, any more idealistic or intellectually honest

than the average TV weatherman. If they can get an edge on an evolving situation, they'll exploit it. That's their livelihood. Their job is to make people watch/read their network/publications news coverage. More to the point, their mission and the military mission are often antithetical.

I suggest that commanders at every level must be aware of several obvious and worsening problems in public journalism. These problems can be identified by the terms *motive transparency*, *editorial arrogance*, *guiding agenda*, and *stringerism*.

- *Motive transparency* is best defined by an example. Imagine that a journalist videotapes a Marine shooting at a fleeing man, dressed in civilian clothes, in the middle of Mogadishu. That event could be shown on CNN within hours of its occurrence. Without proper buffering of that scene, the reaction of 99 percent of the viewers would be righteous fury. However, the unslakable demand for "information" and the awesome speed with which "news" can be

disseminated could—and often do—prevent depiction of events in their appropriate context and balance. The fact that the above Marine's motive may have been to apprehend the man who had just sliced the throats of two beggar children for their few collected coins, will never be given due weight. Even if explained in voice-over narrative, the overwhelming impact of the video itself will leave a pejorative message. This Marine's commanding officer will have to deal with charges of gangsterism, inappropriate use of force, and perhaps murder. The phenomenon works to the opposite effect, as well. Imagine reviewing a journalist's footage of an exhausted platoon leader, staggering back into a base camp, carrying a wounded Marine in his arms. The 15-second clip ends with corpsmen running to take the wounded man while the lieutenant collapses from wounds or exhaustion. This officer's commanding officer will be pressed for personal details about his

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media have never served and have little experience with the military. Most important, realize that media representatives are generally responsible people who will comply with reasonable limitations set by the commander. They can be trusted, particularly when you step off on the right foot together. They represent the people of the world who have a right to know what is going on, subject to valid security concerns.

- *Never Attempt to Manipulate the Media.* A commander must be forthright and open in his dealings with media representatives; anything less is sure to backfire. If there is bad news, it is best to deliver it immediately rather than to be accused later of a cover up. Careful preparation for media interviews is essential. Use the members of your staff to assemble the pertinent facts and be aware in advance of what you *cannot* reveal due to security reasons. Always consult with the operations officer, the public affairs officer (PAO), and the staff judge advocate (SJA) in advance of important interviews. Honesty is the best policy. The policy of openness can be enhanced by a good rapport with the media. This may require “working the crowd” and getting to know as many individuals as possible, not just the key players. Re-

member to be proactive with the media rather than purely responsive.

- *Encourage Confidence in Your Subordinates in Their Dealings With the Media.* There is no substitute for preparation when it becomes clear that there will be media interest in your operation. Advance word to subordinates will help them prepare for interviews and questions. Training here is indispensable. During Operation UNITED SHIELD, a video was distributed by the Combined Information Bureau (CIB) on how to prepare for, and respond to, media questions. All personnel need to be informed of the presence of the media, why they are there, and the need to be straightforward in media relations. The best advice to subordinates is to look your best, remember you are representing your Service, and to be honest with media representatives. It may be helpful to remind the troops to “stay in their lane” and not to speculate about policies that are beyond their pay grade, or to make predictions of upcoming events.

- *Use Your PAO Effectively.* The PAO is the subject matter expert and has the skills necessary to develop an effective program of media relations. The PAO needs to be part of the crisis action team

“heroic” lieutenant. Irrelevant to the captured “magic” of the moment is the fact that the commander is considering court martial for the lieutenant’s disregard of direct orders concerning rules of engagement and local security—resulting in the avoidable loss of life. We have all been living with *motive transparency* to some extent forever. However, it is now so serious that the operative self-defense axiom is that you need to worry just as much about what appears to be happening as you do about what is really happening! This is called perception management, and it is a powerful tool in psychological warfare!

- *Editorial arrogance* is the second increasing problem public journalism faces. This is the general effect of a journalist’s presentation, regardless of medium, that implies the journalist possesses superior insight or knowledge about a situation or individuals involved. The implication is that the journalist’s own implications or statements tend to have more credibility than those of the people reported on—rather like fictional writing’s omniscient narrator being dropped into news reporting. There are several editorial devices used to achieve this. One common one is depersonalizing (referring to third parties by their last names or job titles only and making extensive use of anonymous sources). No journalist in his right mind would refer

to the President as “Clinton” to his face, but almost every U.S. journalist does so when referring to him in the media. (European journalism, by the way, seems to preserve the dignity of every person reported on, regardless of social or political status.) However, these same journalists faithfully refer to one another by first name or complete name.

As a second device, journalists will also present sound bites (excerpting pithy phrases from a complete statement, often resulting in a sane man sounding like an idiot) as constituting an individual’s position on an issue. Sound bites are lethal. Sound bites are, without doubt, the single greatestcrippler of honest information sharing in the media. If a complete thought doesn’t fit in a 30 second string, it will be “eviscerated” until it does. Complete thought pieces are relegated to trade publications and internal staff papers, where we tend to preach to our own choirs. For sloganeers, politicians and stand-up comedians, sound bites are bread and butter communiqués. For statesmen and military representatives, they are anathema. Unfortunately, a journalist will often create a sound bite from a military statement if it is not carefully worded.

A third very subtle but powerful technique affecting superiority is the innocent sounding art of balancing (presenting divergent points of view in a

manner that masks the merits of any one of them). This is often accomplished under the guise of fair reporting but in reality is the unfocused presentation of contending arguments to the point where the journalist has to sort things out for the listener/reader. Taken together, these techniques lead us to trust and believe in the reporter’s assessment more than we do those of the self-serving Presidents, martinet generals, and forked-tongued statesmen who have been interviewed or quoted.

- *Guiding agendas* are the third problem. Journalists are subject to the same loyalties, preconceptions, and personal convictions as anyone else. In addition to their overarching objective of selling information, they bring with them their institutional and personal agendas. Collectively, these comprise guiding agendas which must be reckoned with by any public affairs agency, whether military, political, or civilian. If we were politicians, we could hire “spin doctors” for our staffs. These new scientists would confront the press corps’ guiding agendas individually, translating reality into terms acceptable to each prejudice and preconception. As a group, we military are woefully inept at this, and I’m proud of our incompetence (there’s a sound bite!). If we kill civilians in an air strike, we might refuse comment, might deny it (absenting any factual evidence),

and remain a key part of the planning for the operation. Remember to be proactive and flexible. Before deploying to UNITED SHIELD it became clear that there would be more than 100 journalists on the beach within the secure perimeter created for the withdrawal of U.N. personnel. This was in addition to the 20 members of the media pool. As a result, the CIB was augmented with 14 personnel, and a "media city" was established to manage and safeguard media representatives. Not all the augmentees need to have formal PAO training. Both the combined task force SJA and the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit senior SJA were assigned PAO duties for the time ashore in Somalia where careful planning paid off in good media relations and a safe and successful operation.

- *The Media Should Have Access, Subject to Mission Limitations.* Media representatives need access to the right people and places to be effective. Commanders need to do all they can to facilitate this access, subject to mission, safety, and security limitations. During Operation UNITED SHIELD, the operation plan was briefed to the media before the landings, with the request that it not be revealed until the events occurred. In return for their cooperation, access was guaranteed to the

key events of the operation. Media representatives were transported to the beach just before the main landings with reasonable limitations placed on movement and location of observers. A repeat of the floodlight incident of December 1992 was avoided when the media were told that no artificial light sources would be permitted on the beach on the night of the landings. There was no problem with compliance, and many of the camera teams came equipped with night vision cameras that permitted coverage. The media pool was given the priority in terms of transportation and vantage point, but the "independent media" were not ignored. A 5-ton truck was brought ashore in advance of the main landings to be used as a shuttle exclusively for the "independents." In terms of access, commanders should encourage the media to interview junior enlisted personnel. This helps to keep the operation in perspective and acknowledges the contributions made by all.

- *Don't Neglect Media Logistics.* Reporters live to file their stories and this can be difficult in remote locations and military-controlled areas. In UNITED SHIELD, the media requested to install a multi-million dollar satellite dish in the compound that

might own up and show regret—but we would not try to "spin" it; that is, to make the black cloud appear to have a silver lining. The point is to remember that commanders will probably never encounter an impartial journalist.

- *Stringerism* is the fourth major problem. While stationed in Europe during the collapse of the Soviet Union and the warming of political-military relations with the former Warsaw Pact nations, I had the honor of meeting a Polish general officer during a visit to our headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany. We were talking about the strange sense of former enemies becoming potential allies. He shook his head with obvious regret and said, "You, the enemy I know, I can fight. Now I must learn to fight the amateurs and children." This sentiment aptly describes *stringerism*, in another word, amateurism—the lack of professionalism and professional qualifications of press representatives with whom we deal every day. We read atrocious grammar, spelling, and punctuation. We hear very poor diction, regional and ethnic colloquialisms, and gross mispronunciations. These are the people often sent to cover operations such as the Somali relief effort, the Yugoslavian civil wars, and the Iraqi-Turkish conflict over the nomadic Kurds. They have no background or sense of historical perspective on the problems they are reporting. They go

public with their first impressions, shaping opinion in a vacuum, frequently exacerbating the confusion and uncertainties of a situation. If you want to hear informed reporting, listen to the BBC. If you want excitement, watch CNN.

After considering this, you may well conclude that the best solution is to keep the press at arm's length from your operations. That is the correct answer! However, we normally can't do that, so it is best to remember that offense is often the best defense. If you are the on-scene commander responding to press queries, consider these ideas which have worked in the past.

1. Staff the public affairs effort with your best writers. Stringers often quote directly from provided copy, so ensure that copy reflects complete and accurate situation reports. Do not allow it to contain speculation or unconfirmed information. Reissue the report daily, even if the information is unchanged.

2. Select one or two of the most informed and capable correspondents. Deal extensively (not exclusively, of course) with them. The key is to involve them in the perception management strategy and earn their loyalty. There is no rule about fair play in a press pool.

3. Fully anticipate that your public affairs officer's job is perception management. Don't dodge the issue. Don't feel compelled to tell everyone every-

thing. Get all the help you can from locals and the State Department.

4. Always remain in command. Don't make statements about what you're authorized to say and not to say. Don't bump questions upstream. This invariably appears as though you're a mere underling, or you're lying or dodging. Remember motive transparency. Simply state that you won't answer a question, not that you can't. If they get pushy, ignore them.

In conclusion, it is becoming urgent that commanders be aware of the image they and their forces are presenting to tax-paying Americans. It is vital to sustain as much popular acceptance, if not actual support, for our military operations as possible. The most likely route to success is through a conscientious perception management strategy. Use the powerful tool of popular opinion to your advantage. Don't be victimized by amateurs.

USMC

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required 30 technical personnel and 6 pallets of electronics. During the planning stages of the operation, there was concern that the dish would be too difficult to transport, security would be a problem, and evacuation in a hostile environment would be impossible. But instant satellite communications has become an essential requirement for both print and television media. The decision was made to permit the dish, and the equipment was safely evacuated at the conclusion of the operation. Media pool members are assured priority in terms of nonsecure communications links to their home stations. But there are limits to support. Media representatives who desired to set up satellite phones aboard the USS *Belleau Wood* had to first ensure that they would not interfere with shipboard communications. And when a television media pool member asked that an AV-8B Harrier jet be assigned to fly their tapes to Mombassa, the request was properly denied. Support for the media cannot impede the mission or compromise operational security.

• *Special Considerations for the CTF Commander.* Combined Task Force (CTF) UNITED SHIELD consisted of forces from 7 nations with a total of 23 ships and 16,000 personnel. U.S. forces remained under the operational control of U.S. Central Command (CentCom) and U.S. media policy was set by CentCom's commander in chief. The U.S. chain of command was necessarily concerned with U.S. media and the impact that reporting would have on the formulation of U.S. policy. But the responsibilities of a combined task force commander are broad and concern issues beyond U.S. policy. For example, in UNITED SHIELD the Italian forces had major concerns about media relations and the impact upon public perception in Italy. This may present a dilemma when dealing with directives and policy in the U.S. chain of command.

In Somalia, CTF UNITED SHIELD assumed tactical control of the forces attached to U.N. Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM) as part of the transition on 26 February 1995. UNOSOM had an existing public affairs infrastructure, and it was important that the proper coordination be accomplished. The other coalition countries, particularly the Italians, had their own media concerns, and the Italians had their media pool embarked on the ITS *Garibaldi*. The combined task force commander had to deal with questions concerning international media, as well as standards and policies for coalition (non-U.S.) media pools. In February 1995 there were representatives of the various Somali factional newspapers who had been attending UNOSOM news briefs. Should local media be excluded for security reasons or should only "neutral" local media be invited? In Somalia all the media represented particular factions, and each of the 14 newspapers was aligned with some clan or political movement. As a result, it was determined that Somali media would not be admitted to the

secure military area during the evacuation. They were, of course, free to cover the operation from outside the military perimeter in the city of Mogadishu.

A critical part of any operation is the careful coordination of all aspects of information. It can be more important than the traditional notion of fire and maneuver, and needs to be thoroughly coordinated with other forms of communication. The impact of news reports on the homefront in the United States is only one factor. Modern communications will often bring instantaneous news reports to our adversaries. For example, it was well known that Mohammed Farah Aidid watched CNN and used the media to advance his political and military policy. Although Somalia had been devastated by years of civil war, small battery operated radios tuned to the BBC Somali language broadcasts allowed news reports to travel quickly throughout the country. It is important for U.S. commanders to coordinate psychological operations with public affairs activities to achieve military objectives. For example, in UNITED SHIELD the message to the Somalis, through leaflets and speakers, was that the world would not abandon them, and the Mogadishu port and airport would be closed for only 4 days. It was important to be consistent in press briefings for the media pool and international journalists. If the message to CNN was different than the leaflets distributed to the locals, a serious problem could have arisen.

During Operation UNITED SHIELD, it sometimes became difficult to reconcile U.S. media policy with the responsibilities of a CTF commander. The initial U.S. policy on media relations was "passive only," and this made it difficult to be proactive and get the correct picture of UNITED SHIELD to the world. In the United States, there was extreme sensitivity to the issue of U.S. ground troops in Somalia after the devastating losses of October 1993. Still, there was the vital U.S. interest of ensuring the safe evacuation of forces that came to Somalia at U.S. request in 1992 and 1993. For Operation UNITED SHIELD, U.S. forces were essentially operating in a low-profile environment exposed to the minimum risk possible and limited time ashore. This approach was not necessarily consistent with the interests of the nations placed under U.S. tactical control for the duration of the operation. The Italians, for example, had a large and capable force in Somalia—the most significant deployment outside home waters since World War II. They were anxious for an active public affairs approach that would bring the news promptly to the Italian people. The Pakistanis had lost more

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than 100 killed in Somalia and wanted the maximum U.S. support ashore during the critical stages of the withdrawal. In UNITED SHIELD the commander was required to comply with U.S. directives while carefully balancing the interests of coalition forces.

Media Pools and "Independents"

DoD policy favors the use of pools as the primary means to provide access for media when that is essentially the only way to cover the operation. In UNITED SHIELD there was an interest in ensuring that the pool would be effective, in part because of past criticism that media pools place unreasonable restrictions on its participants. After the pool was created, it became clear that there would be more than 100 media present on the beach in addition to the pool. Since the media already had access to the scene, it was questionable whether the special access provided by the pool was necessary at all. But the pool remained, with both the pool and independent media present inside the secure military perimeter during the 4-day operation. This resulted in a "two-class society," with different privileges for each group. Despite a limited number of complaints, the parallel arrangements were successful and all media were successfully evacuated at the end of the operation.

As a result of the tight security and short duration of the expedition, a "media city" was used to house the journalists with the media pool which ultimately provided more spacious (but still Spartan) accommodations. For the independent journalists, it was announced in advance that when the gates to the compound were closed in preparation for the final evacuation, they would be required to remain in media city and would be evacuated during the last 48 hours. This provided a real dilemma for many journalists, who would be isolated and unable to file their stories during the final hours of the evacuation and transit to Mombassa. Their alternative was to remain in the city of Mogadishu where they could cover the story from "outside the wire," continue to stay at the single functioning hotel in town, and be escorted by their locally hired armed guards.

After the closure of the gates and just before the final evacuation, four journalists requested that they be permitted to cross the defensive lines to the city, where they would be picked up by their guards. This provided a dangerous alternative, but their departure was permitted after a video taped warning that they had been advised against that course, and that their actions were at their own risk. The journalists made the transit safely after coordinating the departure through the gate that was determined to be the most secure exit point. The lesson here: Although it is important to set clear and unambiguous ground rules for journalists, some flexibility is required.

Conclusion

Operation UNITED SHIELD was unique because it brought a formidable expeditionary force from the sea to conduct a short-term amphibious withdrawal under moderate threat conditions. There were substantial political and public affairs limitations, which were based on sensitivities in the U.S. to Somalia casualties. Though unique, UNITED SHIELD provided a number of lessons. Direct involvement of the commander will pay dividends in terms of mission accomplishment. Learn to understand the media—they can be trusted with sensitive information if the proper ground rules are established early. Don't try to manipulate them; such efforts will surely backfire. When serving in a coalition operation, remember that coalition partners have their own interests in media relations that must be carefully considered.

In UNITED SHIELD, careful coordination and planning of diplomatic efforts, commander's intent, psychological operations, and public affairs activities resulted in a successful mission. All U.S., U.N., and coalition forces were safely evacuated without friendly casualties. Worldwide media reports were positive, demonstrating that the United States stands behind its commitments. On today's battlefield, effective media relations have become an essential ingredient to military success.

US  MC



>Gen Zinni is CG I MEF and served as the commander of CTF UNITED SHIELD. Col Lorenz was the senior legal advisor for both Operation RESTORE HOPE and UNITED SHIELD.

>>For other articles that can help Marines in cooperating with the media, see the Focus Section in the Oct92 MCG.

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