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UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN THE PERSIAN GULF:
INFORMING GULF WAR TROOPS

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INTRODUCTION

"You are the thunder and the lightning of Desert Storm." So was the message to coalition forces on 16 January 1991 from Gen H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander of the U.S. Central Command in the Middle East. General Schwarzkopf transmitted his words to sites throughout the Arabian Peninsula to announce the start of the war against Iraq--the war to liberate Kuwait. His message reappeared that morning in newsletters and newspapers, on radio and television, and on airfield bulletin boards throughout the Persian Gulf. The purpose of this paper is to explain how Air Force Public Affairs professionals delivered those words and other messages to troops serving in the Persian Gulf War. We'll look at the Internal Information effort, specifically the restrictions and limitations deployed PAs had to overcome; the proliferation of newsletters at deployed sites; the establishment of an Air Force-unique newspaper; broadcast media serving the troops; the creation of a headquarters Internal Information division; and other functions of deployed Public Affairs professionals. Before we start our examination of Internal Information efforts, it's important to look briefly at a more well-known function of Public Affairs in the Gulf--the relationship between civilian news media outlets and the military establishment.

MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Air Force researchers dedicated an entire chapter to "Media and Public Affairs" in the *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, a five-volume after-action report produced in 1993. The study's authors say that Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM "demonstrated that press

coverage is an unavoidable yet important part of military operations,” and explained how the civilian media and U.S. military delivered the war live into living rooms across America and around the world. Public opinion of the U.S. military was at an all-time high, bolstered by flattering reports from the Middle East about U.S. troops and their high-tech weaponry. The survey also points to extensive related works for further reading, including *How CNN Won the War: A View From the Inside*, by Maj Gen (Ret) Perry M. Smith; *Hotel Warriors: Covering the Gulf War*, by John J. Fialka of the *Wall Street Journal*; and *The Media and the Gulf War: The Press and Democracy in Wartime*, edited by journalist Hedrick Smith (5:135-137).

Unfortunately, nowhere in the 97 pages dedicated to Public Affairs is there a mention of an equally important--and larger--mission: Internal Information efforts to keep airmen informed throughout the buildup and war.

RESTRICTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

U.S. Air Force Public Affairs people found themselves in a uniquely foreign environment--the largest U.S. troop deployment since Vietnam, bare-base conditions, and away from the modern tools available at home bases. The first units to arrive carried laptop computers and dot matrix printers. Some had cameras. Few, if any, possessed electronic mail or telefax machines to send and receive news and updates. According to a message from Capt Becky Colaw of the 354th Tactical Fighter Wing (Deployed), by December the unit had assembled a modern office with the technology listed above (3). Other units purchased equipment locally, had it shipped later from home bases, or relied on equipment purchased by the Government of Japan, including state-of-the-art cameras and computers with desktop publishing.

Restrictions placed on deployed PAs stemmed from the operation's public affairs guidance, host-nation sensitivities, and ground rules which applied to military and civilian

journalists alike. According to the *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, a variety of information could not be reported "because its publication or broadcast could jeopardize operations and endanger lives." Restricted information included specific unit sizes, locations, security posture and future operations (5:275). Photographs shot by U.S. military photographers had to undergo a security review at U.S. Central Command Air Forces in Riyadh before being sent back for use in base newspapers and other internal media. Captain Colaw addressed the issue in her 14 Dec 90 message to U.S. Central Command Public Affairs, stating: "You can help by eliminating clearance procedures for photographs. Again it's a shame that photos have to be cleared. The process takes too long and eliminates the news value of the photographs. If field PAOs can decide what CBS/NBC/AP and others shoot at their location they should be able to do the same thing for their home base newspapers." (3)

DESERT NEWSLETTERS

Internal information is public affairs' bread and butter during peacetime. Traditional products include base newspapers and commander's television access channels, expanding overseas to Armed Forces Radio and Television Service. However, in wartime the challenge for deployed PAs is to tailor their products to meet the needs at their site and find a role that keeps them relevant to the people they're supporting. For example, Air Force units in the Gulf were spread across the Arabian Peninsula, at air bases with diverse missions and facilities. As far as access to timely media and entertainment, units could be described as "haves"--those with CNN satellite dishes, Armed Forces Radio, and daily newspapers--and "have-nots"--those people at the most remote sites and end of the media food chain. Deployed PAs had to look at their situations and try to fill the voids.

One common thread woven throughout the deployed units was the local newsletter. Most newsletters were small, one or two pages produced daily or every other day. Products existed at virtually every air base on the peninsula, with some named for the unit, such as *Team Stealth* or *Wild Weasel*; and some for the location, including *Desert Digest*, *Sandscript*, and *Gulf Guardian*. Topics covered in the newsletters ranged from movie and chapel schedules to dining hall menus, commander commentaries and compilations of civilian media reports. According to Capt Paul Wilson, who served with the 4th Tactical Fighter Wing (Deployed), his unit's *Tent Town Talker* began in August and by October had "progressed from Gourmet MRE Tips and Rumor Mill to in-depth news features and recurring columns." (7)

What was the leaders' use of the deployed newsletters? According to Captain Wilson of the 4TFW, commanders and special agencies called on his shop first and most to get news to the troops (7). Further, Col Alton C. Whitley, Jr., Commander of the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing, wrote a letter to the Tactical Air Command Director of Public Affairs and said of the *Team Stealth*:

I'm not sure if you've seen copies of our deployed public affairs activities. I think they're worth looking at because our newsletter has played an important role in keeping our troops informed. This newsletter was published daily for the first 30 days of our deployment. We've just started publishing it four times each week--Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Initially it was the wing's primary source of information for our general population. Its primary purpose is to get the 'word' out to our internal audience on local policies and procedures. It is also used to highlight unit and personnel accomplishments. (6)

DESERT DEFENDER NEWSPAPER

Another information medium in the Gulf was a weekly service-unique newspaper, the *Desert Defender*, which aimed to serve deployed airmen with a variety of news. The newspaper

debuted on Aug. 30, 1990, produced at Tactical Air Command (TAC) Headquarters at Langley Air Force Base and delivered to all air bases in the Middle East via first-class mail. SMSgt John Banusiewicz, who was assigned to TAC as the command newspaper consultant, served as managing editor and led a staff brought in from other major commands with the goal of representing an Air Force-wide focus. Sergeant Banusiewicz said TAC leaders established the Desert Defender in late August to serve deployed units, which they thought were in an "information vacuum." Starting from scratch, with no advance planning or precedent, was a challenge, according to Banusiewicz:

Initial tasks were determination of staff (important, we thought, to have the major flying commands represented), acquisition of equipment (computers, software and supplies), working up a contract, developing a mission philosophy (this paper was different from anything the Air Force had done before), naming and designing the paper, and--most importantly--figuring out the best way to get the paper to the deployed forces. The time span from the initial tasking to investigate the feasibility, to the first issue being on its way to the Gulf was nine days--Aug. 21 initial tasking to Aug. 30 publication date. (2)

At first, the content for Desert Defender came from the staff and Air Force News Service at Kelly Air Force Base, Texas, which draws stories from field units around the world. As time went on, according to Sergeant Banusiewicz, deployed PAs sent stories to the *Desert Defender* staff any way they could get them there--mail, fax, and electronic mail. Photographs from the front were a bigger obstacle as security rules required that all photos undergo a review in Saudi Arabia. This meant delays which added to the transit time from the Middle East to Langley AFB. The Air Force filled part of this void by contracting with United Press International for a weekly photo package. Although civilian photojournalists also worked under security review, they could shoot their photos, have them cleared, and beam them electronically to the States the same day (2).

A review of the *Desert Defender* reveals a wide variety of news. Sergeant Banusiewicz said the newspaper had several messages for the troops, including updates on what was happening in the Middle East and what was happening at home. "We wanted them to have a day-by-day account of the crisis that necessitated their being over there. We wanted to show them the overwhelming support they were getting from the general population in the United States." As other news sources became available, the paper turned more to Air Force news in general, with news from home bases and updates about personnel issues, promotions, professional military education, and other policies that affect the troops (2).

The newspaper run lasted from 30 August 1990 to 5 April 1991. Sergeant Banusiewicz adds that feedback from troops at the front was positive throughout the run of *Desert Defender*:

We got dozens of letters. After several weeks, *Stars & Stripes* and *USA Today*, as well as Armed Forces Radio and Television Service, had become available at most major deployment locations, and we got a few letters saying "This stuff is old news by the time we see it." But we got many more from more austere locations thanking us for the product and wanting to make sure we knew the *Desert Defender* was all they were getting. We did a readership survey about four months into the *DD*'s run, and the results were overwhelmingly positive in all respects. (2)

BROADCAST MEDIA SERVING THE TROOPS

The geographic location of the Arabian Peninsula, coupled with the way units were spread throughout the Gulf region, meant reaching troops with broadcast media proved to be a challenge. According to a status report on 10 December 1990 from the deployed Armed Forces Radio and Television Service operation, the unit had a diverse mix of radio and television operations at 10 locations, with priority going to areas with largest troop concentrations.

"AFRTS transmitters are providing coverage to the majority of units serving Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. However, some units still report difficulty receiving the service." The major on-air sites

included Riyadh, King Fahd International Airport, Al Jubayl, Dhahran, Nariya, Fazran and Bahrain (1). The 8 October letter from Captain Wilson of the 4TFW said: "On the electronic side, the long-promised down-link radio receiving gear has not arrived..." (7)

However, AFRTS officials said they did get equipment into the theater and at larger locations aired radio news, sports, and entertainment, including five-minute news on the hour and extended local news. Radio vans traveled with units, downlinking the AFRTS signal and re-broadcasting on local frequencies. AFRTS officials notified deploying units to advise troops to bring portable radios, and asked units to bring televisions for use in common areas. Television service reached three communities (1).

INTERNAL INFORMATION DIVISION

It would make sense for this section to appear earlier in this paper, as the Internal Information Division at U.S. Central Command Air Forces (Forward) was established to direct all efforts aimed at informing the troops. However, according to a message from Tactical Air Command Public Affairs, the division wasn't established until December 1990 (4), more than four months after U.S. troops arrived in the Persian Gulf. The mission for the division, according to the TAC message, was:

- 1. To develop, implement and maintain a comprehensive Air Force Internal Information program in support of the Secretary of the Air Force, the Air Force Chief of Staff, and the Commander, U.S. Central Command Air Forces.**
- 2. Keep the Air Force internal audiences, both in the AOR and outside, informed of activities and operations conducted during Operation DESERT SHIELD. As a secondary mission, forward applicable products for public release after appropriate clearances; and**
- 3. Provide Internal Information guidance and assistance to USCENTAF/PA (FWD). (source)**

Division makeup consisted of a captain officer-in-charge and six enlisted technicians: photojournalist; print writer; two broadcasters; electronic maintenance; and administration. The

message from TAC Public Affairs said the division would compile stories, photos, and video from field units and complete a weekly product list for use in *Desert Defender*, Air Force News Service, Air Force Radio News, hometown features, and features for the Air Force Now television program. TAC officials also recommended that PAs worldwide use the division as a central clearing house to find DESERT SHIELD products for use in internal media, including base newspapers, newsletters, commander's calls and family meetings (source).

OTHER PUBLIC AFFAIRS ROLES

Public Affairs professionals also dealt with a lot of catch-all duties which most easily fit into the Internal Information arena. According to the letter from Captain Wilson of the 4TFW, his unit had no photographer assigned, so the PAs took on that role, shooting photos at re-enlistment and promotion ceremonies; accident sites; and special events. They also processed their own black and white film and color slides in a small darkroom, which came about after a local contractor donated use of his on-base facility. The 4TFW/PA office picked up *Stars & Stripes* and *USA Today* newspapers each morning from the postal tent and delivered the papers to outlying sites and units on base, ensuring the troops had access to the publications.

The letter from Colonel Whitley of the 37TFW stated that his PA sent more than 250 hometown news releases back to the United States by October. They also helped arrange and cover visits by distinguished visitors, including CINCCENT, USCENTAF Commander, and the Saudi Ambassador to the United States (source). Captain Colaw of the 354TFW said her shop would also download daily, commercial wire service news reports and post them on the camp bulletin boards. "The news wire is our most current news as we download and hang it daily." (source)

CONCLUSION

Public Affairs professionals deployed with their units to the Persian Gulf and played two important roles: first, managing the Air Force's relationship with civilian news media; and second, informing the troops through a variety of print and electronic means. Since there is so much literature on the media relations aspect, I focused this paper around Internal Information, not only to look at what deployed PAs did, but to document the accomplishments and to show the impact they had on the front-line troops.

Technology has grown by leaps and bounds just in the six years since the coalition liberated Kuwait. As the force has been called on more and more around the world, Air Force Public Affairs professionals have gained some of the same technologies as their civilian media counterparts, including satellite telephones, digital cameras and laptop computers. With this focus and a knowledge of past events, Public Affairs should continue their mission of informing and educating the public about the world's most respected air and space force.

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