

7. 'Embedded journalism': Some NZ military perspectives

COMMENTARY

On 22 May 2009, Massey University's Wellington campus hosted a conference on war reporting. Jointly organised by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Massey's Department of Communication, Journalism and Marketing, the conference was attended and contributed to by senior international and national news media as well as humanitarian, legal and military representatives. This commentary is drawn from presentations by two military officers, management head Colonel Martin Dransfield and Director of Defence Communications Shaun Fogarty.

Keywords: conflict reporting, embedded journalism, media training, military relations, Official Information Act, public right to know, Timor-Leste, war reporting

Under defence eyes: Interacting with the media

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WHILE I have served on a number of operations, my focus this afternoon will be on my relationship with the media during my command of the New Zealand battalion in East Timor during 2000.

Our role in East Timor was to provide security in the Cova Lima district, which is in the south of East Timor, on the border, covering 1500 square km. Because of its isolated location and weather patterns it was the most backward part of Timor and had witnessed some of the worst atrocities in 1999—including the massacre in the Suai church where the militia, high on drugs, had killed 65 locals and two priests.

We replaced the first battalion RNZIR in May 2000 and I had under command a Fiji company, a Nepalese company, and an Irish group. Initially there

were no security incidents. Refugees were returning, the market was flourishing, NGOs were getting established and our role was more one of facilitating the UN and NGOs' role in reconstruction and repatriation of refugees.

This changed on July 24 when Private [Leonard] Manning was killed and, for the following four months, we had a number of security incidents.

Interaction with the media

What was our interaction with the media while in East Timor? Based on the security situation, there was less interest at the start. My most vivid memory was the time I spent with Sean Dorney [of Radio Australia]. He gained my confidence quickly, based on his experience and his informed questions.

Accordingly, I embedded him with my team for a couple of days. We took time to brief him, and then gave him free range around the battalion. He produced some excellent articles that reflected the situation on the ground. In hindsight, he shaped my approach to journalists, which was, and remains, very positive. In short he wanted a story, we wanted to tell our story, so we both achieved what we wanted.

When the security environment changed for the worse, there was a higher level of interest from a wider range of media around the world. The incidents included Manning's death, the evacuation of UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] workers from Atambua and a series of militia contacts.

Key points from these incidents are:

- When a soldier is killed our priority is to inform their family, so we cannot immediately provide all the details you may desire. Moreover, the information we can provide is shaped by security concerns. In my time the media appreciated that.
- The time we can give to the media is balanced against our need to focus on operations.

I recall Cameron Bennett filming a piece for *60 Minutes* when we had a contact involving the Nepalese company. He was keen to interview me, but also aware that he had to fit it around my command responsibility. The fact that I gave him some time was because he gained my trust due his experience. I knew he was an objective reporter, and most critically, he was respectful. The outcome was an objective but balanced report, i.e. NZBATT is doing a dangerous job, but also a good job. The bottom line is that I was

REPORTING WARS

committed to ensuring accurate and timely information reached our families back home. So again it was a win-win situation. The media wanted a story; and we wanted to reassure our families that we were in control.

Lessons learned as a commander:

- It is critical to have an effective Public Relations Officer who has your confidence and that of the media. I had [NZ Red Cross communications and marketing manager] Denise McKay and she fitted both those qualities.
- There is the potential to get caught up in media requirements which could take time away from other priorities. I needed to be disciplined and also give the media a clear understanding of my priorities.
- Media training is vital for understanding the media industry, their challenges and needs. Appreciation for their role, and involving them early in your tour, will help them appreciate ours.

Hints for media:

- Quickly build a rapport with the commander on the ground. Dorney and Bennett achieved that with me and quickly won my confidence.
- In building that rapport, [I would] emphasise that you [must] appreciate our challenges, and that our first priority has to be the safety and security of our people on the ground. Moreover, you [must] appreciate that sometimes we can't tell you everything you want to know as it may impact on current and/or future operations. Establish the ground rules.
- [The media must] talk to the commanding officers first, as we have the full and accurate facts that the soldiers sometimes don't have. Hand in hand with this, I would ask that you respect the privacy of our soldiers, particularly those who don't want to talk to the media.
- Don't feel intimidated by the uniform—we want to talk and are more than willing to help you understand the situation. We want the public to be proud of what we are doing and we appreciate, for them to know what we are doing, we need the media.
- We are only there to discuss the operation, not the politics. Ask the politicians those questions.

Conclusion

I personally had a very strong relationship with the media in 2000. Nine years later we continue to be involved in Timor and 11 other missions. In all these missions we do an important job for which the NZ Army has a long history of success, and is highly regarded.

In doing that job we are more than happy to assist the media. In short, the relationship is based on trust, and in the knowledge that we need each other.

Colonel Martin Dransfield was Commander of the Second New Zealand Battalion in East Timor in 2000 when a New Zealand soldier and a Nepalese soldier working with the battalion were killed in conflict. He has worked in Norway, Australia and as the Defence Advisor in Singapore, deploying on operational missions to Northern Ireland, Sinai and East Timor. He currently heads the office of strategy management for the army.

The challenge of accommodating journalists, aid workers, and the military

LT COMMANDER SHAUN FOGARTY

NZ Defence Force

Free press with a caveat

THE QUESTION posed by most of these panel sessions, is can the military and the media work together to achieve their individual aims. My answer to that—my experience tells me the answer to that—is yes we can. However there are some very real challenges along the way. We are often seen as not being open enough to journalists. That's not because we don't love the media, or that we don't want media attention. In fact, often the opposite is true. The New Zealand Defence Force has for some time recognised the value of the media in achieving our mission and individual aims.

News stories about our work promote support and trust from the wider community back here. They help us to recruit new members to the navy, army and air force and we believe that, in a free and open society like New Zealand, the public, via the news media, has the right to know what we're doing, and

REPORTING WARS

how we're doing it. This is an important aspect of the very freedoms that we can be called upon to fight to protect.

But there is the obvious caveat, and that is the safety of our people, and I think it must be acknowledged that the very nature of the mission the New Zealand Defence Force presents some unique communications' challenges. To maintain the security and accepting responsibility for defending New Zealand's interests [requires decisions from us] on what and when certain information can be shared. Indeed, people's lives may depend on it.

The biggest challenge

So therein lies, in my view, the biggest challenge of working with the media and journalists. With New Zealand's news media there is an expectation the public sector will always answer any questions. These are [sometimes put] with the backdrop of the Official Information Act. Those of you familiar with the OIA process, will be aware that Section 16 provides a conclusive reason for not providing information, [when] to do so will endanger the safety of any person.

Most often, it is us at Defence who have to be arbitrators of that and, maybe, this is where we can do a better job of explaining why sometimes we say 'no'. An illustration here: we are often asked by journalists for the departure or arrival time of forces going into a mission area. From a Defence perspective, such information about something as simple as a time of departure [carries] risks. If such information was to get into the wrong hands, it would provide an opportunity to mount some kind of attack, either at an air base or en route. So while journalists may think we're controlling the media, in fact, what we're trying to do is control the information we put out so that people aren't unnecessarily in harm's way.

Commander Shaun Fogarty, who joined the Royal New Zealand Navy in 1988, has served with the United Nations in the former Yugoslavia and East Timor. He served onboard HMNZS Te Mana during her Operation Enduring Freedom deployment to the Persian Gulf in 2003. His current role is Director of Defence Communications.

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