

CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams

To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

Why Bother with the Media?

Recently a company commander vented, “I’m not here to escort news reporters around. They’re nothing but a distraction to me. They’re disruptive to my patrols, and there’s always the risk of being misquoted. And, anyway, has anything really positive ever come out of

it? Where is the return on my investment?” His comments stirred many of his fellow leaders in the Company-Command forum to respond and share their own experiences of engaging with the media at the company level.

Erik Peterson

Past CDR, C/2-12 CAV

I found that a lot of good things come from the media, but often we don’t utilize them as an asset. They are out to tell a story, and they are going to get it with or without you. If you are involved, you can tell your side of the story and present the facts. If not, you can’t. I’d much rather shape what they are reporting.

I had a lot of success as a company commander when I integrated media members as part of the team. The first thing I did was give them a briefing on what was going on in my sector and what my vision was for success. Next, I found out what they were looking for in their reporting. If I could support it, great; if I couldn’t, I’d let them know. Then I gave them the rules. They had access to everything in my company, and I’d give them honest answers to all their questions. Finally, I’d assign an escort, usually my executive officer or a platoon leader who was directly responsible for “assisting.” In return,

the press members would ensure that they would do absolutely nothing to put my troops in danger. This arrangement worked very well. A lot of times, I found that reporters didn’t know how to respond when you were nice to them.

I discovered that I could learn a lot from reporters. First, reporters have a lot of contacts—their own or people working for their news outlets. More than once, I was in a dilemma, and a press member called a contact and got some pretty good data. Second, reporters interview a lot of people. They might be with you today, but the day before, they may have interviewed the commanding general, and the day before that, the Iraqi secretary of the interior. If you engage reporters, they’ll talk for hours and vastly increase your situational awareness. Third, often reporters are assigned to a region and have worked there for years. They understand things that befuddle us. I would actually debrief the media after they got back from a patrol and talk about what they saw. Often, they pointed out things I’d never considered to be important but were in fact very important to the local community. Finally, sometimes you need to see yourself in a different light. I can remember a couple of moments where I got really mad at what media were reporting, only to realize that they were reporting the truth. In a counterinsurgency fight, you might not be influencing the population in the way you think you are.

In the end, I had a lot of good press. The media can be a double-edged sword and take things out of context, but I found that to be the exception, not the rule. We just need to plan how we use them.

Then-CPT Erik Peterson (left) confers with GEN George W. Casey Jr. when Casey was the commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq, in Baghdad, in January 2007.



Robert Ritz
Past CDR, C/1-9 CAV

Here's a lesson I had to learn the hard way. Do not trust reporters to get the story right. Do not trust them to quote you accurately. Do not trust them by expressing your thoughts "off the record." I handled the media like I handled any key-leader engagement [KLE] in Iraq. I recorded our conversations and put them on the record.

Now, while there are these downsides to talking with the media, you do need to ensure that the story of your Soldiers gets out. I am tired of hearing complaints that the media are not reporting all the good things we do downrange from the same people who refuse to interact with the media. The media are the ones who, warts and all, will showcase your Soldiers' actions. And those actions, warts and all, need to be reported. In the end, remember that reporters are using you as much as you are using them. Act accordingly and "cover your six."

Joshua Fuller
Current CDR, HHC/1-72 AR

It's very important to allow the media to embed. Having seen this go horribly wrong, however—an AP reporter once misquoted a lot of Soldiers from the platoon and wrote a politically skewed, defeatist article—I recommend that all leaders deploying in support of a military operation properly prepare themselves and their Soldiers. Media training for all of your leaders and Soldiers is very important. Soldiers need to know what they are allowed to comment on and how to give an interview. Once you arrive in theater, ensure that every one of your Soldiers understands what he is and is not allowed to say. It is never a bad idea to distribute the public affairs officer's [PAO] top talking points or messages. Finally, try as much as possible to vet the reporter and his articles without violating journalistic principles. Try to review the material soon after publication. If an article goes against current talking points, alert your PAO and your chain of command to the situation, and be prepared to explain how your Soldiers'



CPT Eric Gust encourages his fellow commanders to obtain information on reporters before they arrive at the unit.

remarks were used out of context. On the other hand, if you work with a good reporter who gives an accurate accounting of the situation on the ground (and tells the Soldiers' stories), it can be a great boon for your unit's morale. Make sure your Soldiers get a copy of anything that puts their names in print.

Eric Gust
Current CDR, B/2-82 FA

The media is a double-edged sword in many ways, but as long as you are briefed on the reporter's agenda before he or she arrives, you should not be caught off guard. The following information should be given to you by your headquarters [HQ] before a reporter visits. If not, make sure you get it.

■ Who is the reporter, and which news outlet is he or she from?

Soldiers' Guidelines for Engaging Reporters

Know with whom you are talking.

Before answering questions, write down the reporter's name, telephone number and the name of the news organization. Do this even if you are going to decline comment; it will discourage the reporter from persisting after you say no.

Think before you speak.

Thanks to technology, the enemy has access to what you say the moment you say it. Think before you answer. A positive, enthusiastic response can build morale and show American resolve. On the other hand, a poorly thought-out response can create false ideas, confusion or damaging speculation.

Know the role of the American press.

The representatives of the media are doing a job vital to democracy. It is not harassment when they ask you for an interview. It is harassment when they persist after you de-

cline to comment. Do not be intimidated by people reporting for the media. If you mean no, say so and walk away.

If you agree to an interview:

- Do not attempt to speak for your unit/organization, the Army or the Department of Defense.
- Do not identify specific units/organizations, personnel strength or anything that would identify the mission.
- Do not present hearsay as fact. Label your opinion as such.
- *Everything* you say will be "on the record." Don't say anything, even in jest, that you don't want to read, see or hear later on. Contact your unit or the public affairs office for assistance with media requests.
- Relax, be yourself—a professional Soldier!
- Be confident; you control the interview.

—Excerpted from guidelines produced by CPT Sharon Stewart for her brigade.

- What is the political slant of that outlet/organization?
- What is the focus of the actual article/report, and does the reporter have an overall positive/negative agenda?
- Whom does the reporter want to talk to?
- How long is the reporter staying?

These may seem like obvious questions, but I've been surprised by how much the media situation gets finger-drilled and HQ just sends reporters down to the company level with minimal warning or information.

Joe Grigg

Past CDR, 183rd Maintenance Company

This subject is really bigger than most people realize. Most everyone reading this has been introduced to DIME [diplomacy, information, military and economic], the four elements of national power used on a strategic level. Information is a key strategic asset, and the media is the strongest weapon/asset of the information element. Every time you are interacting with (e.g., talking to, ignoring) the media, you are dealing with a strategic weapon. Aimed properly, that weapon could help get more funding from Congress, help strengthen American resolve to win the fight and possibly hurt the recruiting efforts of the enemy. If it is aimed poorly, however, it will do the opposite—cut funding, weaken American opinion and bolster the enemy. Being friendly and working with the media is always better than ignoring them. The media are a grenade that is going to go off with or without your throwing it in the right direction (and, no, you can't put the pin back in). Like a grenade, the media are a weapon that often does more damage than good and is difficult to use (e.g., being misquoted, interview bias). But the grenade is going to go off, so prepare to throw it in the right direction.

I looked at it this way. I had a company of "strategic corporals" who were capable of being heroes on the national stage if I just took a couple of hours every month and went over talking points and things not to say (left and right limits). I ensured that even my most disgruntled Soldier understood what I expected of him. Then, every time the press came around, I was as friendly as possible and extended them professional courtesy that I expected in return. I had good results from this approach. My only issue is that reporters do not have the time or print space to tell the whole story, so the public forms opinions without all the information.

Robert Murdough

Past CDR, D/1-46 IN

We should welcome reporters! We should take any opportunity we have to tell our story. We constantly hear (and say) how no one understands what we do, how no one really "gets it," how they don't know what it's really like. Who's going to tell that story if we never show anyone? Being a jerk to reporters isn't going to keep them from writing their stories. A newspaper columnist has X column inches; a TV reporter has X minutes to fill. He's going to fill it with something, whether or not you talk to him. Cooperating with the media is the best chance you have to get your story out there, the way you want it.



CPT Robert Murdough, shown here as a platoon leader in Iraq, believes that cooperating with the media is our best course of action.

Stephanie Leary

FRSA, 94th EN BN

Word of this conversation about the media spread to the Family Readiness Group (FRG) leader forum (<http://frg.army.mil>). Stephanie e-mailed her response to a CC member.

We family members live for news from downrange when our spouse, son or daughter is deployed. Even if the story is not about our Soldier, we find pride and satisfaction from hearing the stories of his or her teammates ... who are our family, too, by association. Media reports make us feel closer to our loved ones. This can even affect family members who are not directly associated with the military as part of the FRG. When they hear of the good things our Soldiers are doing, they support the effort instead of brooding over the fact that the Army took their loved one away. More often than not, I think that the stories are good ones that need to be heard by our families and the public. Our Soldiers are doing great things out there and deserve to be noticed!

Sed Rankin

Past CDR, HHC/10th Sustainment BDE

I just finished advanced media training here at the Command and General Staff College, and the scenario we used was one in which I was a battalion commander. One of our patrols resulted in a 12-year-old child getting shot by one of our snipers. I did three "consequence-management" interviews in this training, and it was awesome. I was provided a DVD of the interviews, and even my wife watched them.

The media tell the Army story and enable us to get our story out first. Information is the I in DIME and is a very important aspect of the world we live in today. Our enemies are constantly using the media to portray us in a negative light with the local populace. We, too, have the opportunity to show the world what we do each day, and the media can

only report the facts if we tell and show them. So, utilize the PAO. Engage him or her, get your troopers trained on speaking to the media, and then “murder-board” them just as if they were going to a promotion board. Your Soldiers will love it, and you will have media-ready troopers. Engage the media; they are a great resource and combat multiplier.

Sharron Stewart

Future CDR, SC

When I was enlisted, I was a public affairs specialist. Once my brigade commander found out my enlisted background, I became the brigade PAO. It was my business to handle all brigade interactions with the media, to come up with talking points for those being interviewed, and to provide guidelines to deploying and redeploying Soldiers on what to say and what not to say when being interviewed. I also made and distributed plastic, pocket-sized cards that had guidelines and regulations to help keep Soldiers out of trouble in a media encounter. Whenever possible, I would oversee any media interview—not to interfere with anyone’s freedom of speech, but to listen to the reporter’s questions for any hint of a leading question and to interject as I saw fit. I asked the reporter to rephrase the question or told him that I needed clarity.

The media are very necessary. They are the means through which the American public is able to see our heartaches, triumphs and struggles. Yet they can also be a major distraction in a deployed unit. So, if at all possible, a school-trained PAO should serve as the media’s liaison and the unit’s buffer. In the “world of Stew,” we would have a PAO bubba or bubbette as the media’s escort while the Soldiers being profiled carried on as usual.

Sunset Belinsky

Past CDR, D/1-43 AD & 4th PAD

Every Soldier is responsible for telling the Army story. If you don’t do it, the media will go to someone else, who might not get it right. At least if you invest the time in helping them get it right, you have a chance at giving them the tools to tell our story to the broader public. Even if you are not the story, every interaction goes to helping them understand the context of what you are doing. If you don’t play, you can’t win.

If you are concerned with being misquoted, get over it. If you are misquoted, respond directly to the reporters responsible. You will help them gain broader context even if they don’t publish a correction. It doesn’t hurt to ask.

This is not the Vietnam era. Most reporters have a job to do, with bosses who expect certain things out of them, just like you do. Most of them believe it is their job to tell the important stories to whomever their audience is. Most of them know very little about what you do, but they truly want to get it right.

Approach preparation for a media engagement as you would a KLE. Find out as much as you can about reporters, their “outfits,” their bosses, the stories they are trying to get, etc. Use your PAO or unit public affairs representative to help you prepare. Don’t neglect local-national media. They can be an important tool in getting your message out.

The media are not going away. With the increase in blogs



MAJ Sed Rankin recommends that we “murder-board” our Soldiers on media interviews just as we do for promotion boards.

and online news outlets, they are becoming more and more present. Speed is sometimes more important to them than accuracy. Help them get it right the first time. At the very worst, you’ll be misquoted. Your boss will eventually forgive you. At best, you can establish a relationship that will serve you well as you move up. Just two cents from a PAO.

If you are a currently commissioned officer who is committed to becoming a more effective leader and advancing the practice of company command in the Army, log on to <http://CC.army.mil> and connect with other like-minded professionals. If you are not a member and wish to contribute to this conversation, send your thoughts to peter.kilner@us.army.mil.

