

The Information Gap: Why the Canadian Public Doesn't Know More About its Military

By

Sharon Hobson

Canadian Correspondent for Jane's Defence Weekly

and

Fellow of the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute

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1600, 530 – 8th Avenue SW, Calgary, AB T2P 3S8

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Executive Summary

The arrival of the first Canadian warships in the Arabian Sea in November 2001 marked the beginning of a lengthy Canadian commitment to Afghanistan. Initially, the Canadian involvement was as part of a US-led force, attempting to rid the country of al Qa'ida terrorists and the complicit Taliban government. This was followed by Canadian Forces joining NATO allies in a drive to secure the country and provide the right conditions for the success of a democratically elected government.

With the deployment of troops, there came a small army of journalists, and more extensive war coverage than this country has seen in 50 years. Even so, the interest by the media in this particular mission did not necessarily result in a well-informed Canadian public. The reasons were many.

The government failed in its duty to explain the "why" – the rationale behind the commitment. The military, for its part, did not fully provide information on the "how" – what capabilities and tactics it will use to accomplish the assigned mission. And the media, which must bring this information together with eye-witness accounts, research, interviews, learned observations, and critical analysis, did not provide as full a picture as possible.

Drawing on interviews with those directly involved in the Afghanistan mission, this paper looks at how each of the major players fell short of fulfilling their public information mandate, from the government and the military's unwillingness to provide information in the early stages of the war, to the problems with the "embedding" program. It concludes that both the military and the media rely too heavily on "embedding" as a means to providing information on the Afghanistan mission and the Canadian Forces role.

Résumé

L'arrivée des premiers navires de guerre canadiens dans la mer d'Oman, en novembre 2001, a marqué le début d'un long engagement du Canada en Afghanistan. Au départ, cette participation faisait partie d'une force menée par les États-Unis, qui voulait débarrasser le pays des terroristes d'Al-Qa'ida et du gouvernement complice des Talibans. Elle a été suivie des Forces canadiennes qui se sont jointes aux alliés de l'OTAN dans une campagne de prise de contrôle du pays, de manière à favoriser les conditions propices au succès d'un gouvernement élu démocratiquement.

Conjointement au déploiement des troupes, est arrivée une véritable armée de journalistes, et la couverture médiatique de guerre la plus étendue que le pays ait connue depuis 50 ans. Malgré tout cela, l'intérêt porté par les médias à cette mission en particulier n'a pas nécessairement favorisé un public canadien bien informé. De nombreuses raisons expliquent cette situation.

Le gouvernement a failli à sa tâche, qui était d'expliquer le « pourquoi » -- les raisons qui ont motivé cet engagement. De son côté, l'armée n'a pas donné tous les renseignements sur le « comment », soit les capacités et les tactiques qu'elle utiliserait pour s'acquitter de la mission qui lui avait été confiée. Quant aux médias, qui doivent réunir cette information par le biais de comptes-rendus par témoin oculaire, de recherches, d'entrevues, d'observations acquises et d'analyse critique, ils n'ont pas brossé un tableau aussi complet que possible.

En s'inspirant d'entrevues avec des personnes directement impliquées dans la mission en Afghanistan, le présent document examine comment les principaux protagonistes ont failli à leur mandat d'informer le public, qu'il s'agisse de la répugnance du gouvernement ou de l'armée à fournir des renseignements au tout début de la guerre, ou encore des problèmes du programme des « journalistes intégrés ». En conclusion, l'armée et les médias se fient bien trop au système « d'intégration » comme moyen de fournir de l'information sur la mission en Afghanistan et le rôle des Forces canadiennes.

"I often get asked ... why are you there? ... We're there because you sent us. ... As a soldier, it's not my job to explain why *you* sent *us*. Soldiers don't do that. We tell you what we're doing, we tell you how we're doing it, but we should not be in the position of explaining to the people of Canada why we're there. The responsibility for that lies with the political leadership and those who sent us."

Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie,
to the Canadian Journalism Foundation conference on "The Media,
the Military, and the Pollsters: Who's Got the Story in Afghanistan?"
7 December 2006.

Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie's remarks were surprising, but accurate. Although the line between quiet acceptance of duty and vocal support of policy has been blurred in recent years, it is not the military's responsibility to explain the political rationale for a mission. The government bears the primary and the ultimate responsibility for deciding what commitment to take on (as well as its size and scope), with the military providing information on its capabilities and operations.

But the public needs more than verbose government statements and military "can-do" optimism if it is to understand exactly what the Canadian Forces (CF) do. That is where the media comes in. It is the media's responsibility to bring information from the government and the military together with eye-witness accounts, research, interviews, learned observations, and critical analysis to fill in the gaps so that the public is given the information it needs to understand what the military forces are doing.

At least that's how it's supposed to work in theory. In practice, there are gaps.

Standing "Shoulder to Shoulder" – 2001–2003¹

When the terrorist-hijacked planes hit the twin towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the Canadian public entered an information vacuum. The government made various pronouncements about standing "shoulder to shoulder" with the U.S. and participating in action taken under NATO's Article V mutual defence clause, but provided very little information on what exactly it planned to do or even what options were being considered. The Privy Council Office took tight control of all communications, and the transparency policy that was adopted by the Department of National Defence (DND) in 1998, while it was still the official policy, was essentially overridden.

"The amount of information the Canadian Forces has released since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks pales in comparison to what other countries such as the U.S., Britain, and Australia have disclosed," according to analysts interviewed by *Ottawa Citizen* journalist David Pugliese. He wrote, "In the hours and days after the attacks on New York City and Washington, U.S. military officials went out of their way to reassure the public that the country was being defended and that fighter aircraft were patrolling the skies over major urban centres. Canadian military officials, however, refused to release such information and at one point declined to confirm CF-18 fighters were helping to intercept a suspect jetliner even as live TV broadcasts showed the Canadian planes in action."²

In a desire to thwart a potentially embarrassing debate on the issues of military options and capabilities, the Minister of National Defence, Art Eggleton, went so far as to accuse a Bloc Québécois member of "playing politics" merely because he asked about the state of the Canadian Forces.³ The government effectively shut down any information flow on the military by hiding behind "national security" concerns. But the preparedness of the CF to fight a war against terrorism was a key question, and it did not go away. After years of ignoring defence issues that were not scandal-related, the media turned its attention

¹ Due to time and resource constraints, this study deals mainly with the print media. However, the author did include television reporters in her interviews in order to gain a fuller understanding of the issues.

² David Pugliese, "Canadian Forces Pass Up Spotlight," *Ottawa Citizen*, 6 March 2002.

³ Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs, *Evidence*, 4 October 2001.

to the military, and in the absence of any official response to its questions, turned to outside experts for an opinion. The consensus was that the CF was undermanned and ill-equipped to fight a war.⁴

Still, the government claimed it did not intend to fight a war. The Minister of National Defence said “we are not using the word ‘war.’ I don’t use it because it conjures up an image of a very conventional war and I don’t expect that much of this will be a conventional war.”⁵ For the first five years, the government – and the military – referred to it as a “campaign,” “operation,” or “mission.” The media, however, refused to be a part of the government’s spin.

Regardless of what the government called it, on 7 October 2001, Prime Minister Jean Chretien announced that Canada would be contributing air, land, and sea forces to the fight against terrorism,⁶ and the Chief of the Defence Staff General Ray Henault issued a ten-day warning order for Operation Apollo in support of the U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). It would include six major warships, three CC-130 Hercules tactical transport aircraft and one CC-150 Polaris strategic transport, as well as two CP-140 maritime surveillance aircraft and Joint Task Force 2 (JTF2) soldiers. There was, however, little information provided by either the government or the military on what the Canadian forces would actually be doing, and where they would be doing it.

The biggest question – “Why so many ships?” – was left unanswered. Military action was being taken against the land-locked state of Afghanistan by air and ground forces, so why was Canada sending one-third of its surface fleet to the region? The Defence Minister merely said, “The Canadian Forces will become an integral part of the overall international campaign.” General Ray Henault’s explanation was hardly illuminating either. He said the Canadian navy would perform “traditional naval tasks of supporting direct action in the region; that is providing force protection, surveillance, and naval activities required to support and escort the naval battle groups.” As for the land force contribution, according to the *National Post*, “General Henault would not detail, for security reasons, what role the elite Joint Task Force 2 counter-terrorism unit will play, but denied any of the commandos are involved in special operations in Afghanistan.”⁷

Reporters covering the commitment paid particular attention to the ships’ armament and the fact that they have been integrated with American battle groups many times before. But in the lead-up to the ships’ departure, the media failed to cover the complex preparations for the mission, such as training and logistics, and the navy never clearly answered the question of the ships’ role.⁸ Dr. Richard Gimblett, author of a book on the navy’s participation in Operation Apollo,⁹ says the Chief of the Maritime Staff, Vice-Admiral Ron Buck, proposed a strong naval presence because he knew if he didn’t put the navy’s task group concept¹⁰ to use, the navy would likely lose it. But Gimblett says that, even though Canada was sending so many ships to southwest Asia, “the navy didn’t know what they were doing until Commodore Drew Robertson arrived in theatre in late November.”

Interest in the navy’s role dropped off significantly once the ships had sailed for several reasons. First, the government wanted the navy to keep a low profile during its deployment, hence information was kept to a

⁴ See, for example, James Cudmore, “‘We’d Need a Taxi to Get Us There’: Mackenzie,” *National Post*, 17 September 2001; David Pugliese, “Forces Weaker Than Brass Admits: ‘Effective’ Personnel Will Number Only 50,000 by the End of March 2002,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 25 September 2001; “Toothless, at Home and Abroad,” *National Post* editorial, 25 September 2001.

⁵ Sheldon Alberts, “Canada Joins War Effort,” *National Post*, 9 October 2001. As recently as June 2006, senior officials were still refusing to refer to the Afghanistan commitment as a “war.”

⁶ The announcement was made while Parliament was not sitting, and it was not recalled early. Furthermore, despite the government’s expectation that the campaign would be long and complicated – potentially affecting Canadian foreign policy and diplomatic relations for many years – the main parliamentary committee responsible for these issues, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, did not hold a session on Afghanistan until three months after the ships had sailed – 17 January 2002.

⁷ Sheldon Alberts, “Canada Joins War Effort,” *National Post*, 9 October 2001.

⁸ Heather Sokoloff and Chris Wattie, “Our Warships to be Treated as ‘American’,” *National Post*, 9 October 2001.

⁹ Richard Gimblett, *Operation Apollo* (Ottawa: Magic Light Publishing, 2004).

¹⁰ The task group concept involves maintaining the capabilities to be able to deploy a self-supporting group of ships – a command and control destroyer, two or three frigates, and a support ship – as either an independent force or as part of a coalition operation.

minimum.¹¹ Secondly, navy patrols do not make for good television visuals. Third, the government's subsequent decision to send the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (3PPCLI) to Kandahar was more compelling.¹² Finally, given that ships operate at sea, far from curious eyes, it is harder for the media to find out what the navy is doing. Dr. Gimblett says it then becomes the navy's responsibility to get its story out, but a strict interpretation of operational secrecy often prevents that. Certainly the fact that the navy was protecting the U.S. Marine Expeditionary Unit embarked in the Amphibious Ready Group off the coast of Pakistan would have been an interesting story for the media, but the navy was not talking.¹³

Finally, in mid-December 2001, the navy began providing information to the media on what was going on.¹⁴ But by that time, the media was more interested in the land force commitment (the delay in its deployment being interpreted as government dithering), and a month later, the handling of prisoners of war (which could be used by both the media and the parliamentary opposition to discredit the Defence Minister).¹⁵

The deployment of 3PPCLI to Kandahar assumed a high profile, and Defence Minister Art Eggleton and General Ray Henault held a press conference on 7 January 2002 to provide further details regarding the mission. General Henault described the troops' role as, "they're going to be doing a number of missions and tasks which will support activity in and around Kandahar providing security for the airport, for example ... site exploitation, and that is going into sites that have already been attacked or have been now neutralized and will provide what is required to streamline both the activities that are underway in terms of detention of prisoners and so on, and also smoothing the way for humanitarian assistance." He included his favourite descriptor of the CF – "So we're doing again what we've always done and that's punching above our weight, and we're very confident in everything that we're going to do." He also acknowledged that the "JTF2 has been operational for some time now ... they have been accomplishing missions. And that's all I can really tell you about that."¹⁶

The disposition and role of the various CF units remained fuzzy. The CP-140 aircraft were based "within the Persian Gulf region," but their precise location has never been officially revealed, at the request of the host nation (although it is an open secret unofficially). In an interview with Canadian Press, the commander of 405 Maritime Patrol Squadron said "we do a number of missions, including maritime interdiction," and he claimed that "we've had a 100 per cent success rate so far," but there was no definition of what "success" means to an aircraft doing "maritime interdiction" from an altitude of 20,000 feet.¹⁷

The first troops began arriving in mid-February, with members of the media arriving around the same time. Although the DND says it began "embedding" reporters in the mid-1990s in Bosnia, the more structured program began in February 2002 in Kandahar, with subsequent revisions as various lessons were learned about accommodating reporters on military operations. Captain Doug MacNair, a public affairs officer with the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command (CEFCOM) and the current embedding coordinator, defines an embedded journalist as "any journalist who enters into a formal arrangement with the military whereby they trade journalistic freedom for access."

¹¹ Off-the-record interview with Officer C. It is not clear why the government wanted the navy to say little about its mission, but the officer speculates that Prime Minister Jean Chretien was uneasy about being seen as too supportive of President Bush's war on terrorism.

¹² Government of Canada, *News Release*, NR-01.077, 14 November 2001.

¹³ Carol Harrington, "Canadian Ships in Place in Mideast," *Chronicle Herald*, 22 November 2001. Vice Admiral Buck told the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, "Currently from a naval perspective, this operation is very complex," but he refused to give details. At the same time, he complained that Canadians do not have a good understanding of their military.

¹⁴ Kevin Cox, "Canada Aiding Naval Blockade," *Globe and Mail*, 18 December 2001; Bill Spurr, "Fleet Helping to Block al-Qa'ida Escape," *Chronicle Herald*, 18 December 2001.

¹⁵ See, for example, Tim Naumetz, "Canada to Hand Over Prisoners to U.S.," *Ottawa Citizen*, 18 January 2002, "JTF2 has Turned Over Prisoners," *Ottawa Citizen*, 30 January 2002, and "Eggleton Kept PM in Dark," *Ottawa Citizen*, 31 January 2002; Shawn McCarthy and Steven Chase, "Handover of Captives by Canadian Troops Sparks Ottawa Storm," *Globe and Mail*, 30 January 2002; Sheldon Alberts, "Eggleton Knew for Eight Days," *National Post*, 31 January 2002, and "Handover of Prisoners to U.S. Forces Will Continue," *National Post*, 6 February 2002. The handling of detainees has continued to be an issue throughout the Afghanistan deployment.

¹⁶ Department of National Defence, Transcript, 7 January 2002.

¹⁷ John Ward, "Auroras Settle into Their Role," *Chronicle Herald*, 15 January 2002.

Mr. Mitch Potter, of the *Toronto Star*, was one of the first reporters to embed with the CF, and he says the first embedding agreement, which was signed on-site instead of prior to arriving, was “written in the language of the first Gulf War,” and that “I think there was generally a spirit of mistrust from the military towards the journalists, just a baseline feeling that we were people that had to be dealt with and nobody was too enthusiastic about it. It was more about limiting us than anything else.” The embedding agreement has been greatly modified since – much to the relief of the reporters – and it continues to evolve as situations provide learning experiences to both the media and the military.

The first weeks, however, were frustrating to reporters, who were given little access and even less information.¹⁸ The base was teaming with Special Forces from numerous nations, but one of the rules was that reporters were not allowed to speak to any of them, even if they found themselves next to them in a chow line. At night, reporters could hear helicopters coming and going, carrying the Special Forces on various missions, but they were not allowed to ask questions or report what they saw. A few reporters ran afoul of the military's guidelines and were ejected from the base, although the exact nature of their infractions was not always made clear.

It was six months into the war on terrorism, and back in Canada, reporters were still arguing for more information. Finally, on 5 March 2002, General Henault held a press briefing in Ottawa and answered questions on what Canadian military personnel were doing. Asked why there hadn't been more briefings, General Henault replied, “we have provided access continuously to our troops in the field, and quite frankly, our personal view is that the best spokespeople for the Canadian Forces, especially those that are deployed in operations, are those people in operations.” He was overstating the case in terms of access, but more to the point, he was also ignoring a more likely reason for opting not to provide regular press briefings for the first six months: reporters are easier to manage on a one by one basis. A press conference has a dynamic that builds and cannot easily be controlled, as reporters tag on to each other's questions and compare answers to their independent research. The questioning can get very uncomfortable.

Fortunately, the commander of 3PPCLI, Lieutenant-Colonel Pat Stogran, recognized the importance of keeping the public informed and gave reporters access to his soldiers and operations. The embedded reporters – there were twenty to thirty of them from February to August 2002 – were able to give the public a soldier's-eye view of the army's operations. But the focus on the details of the combat activities tended to obscure some of the larger issues which needed to be examined. For example, during Operation Anaconda, Canadian Press (CP) reporter Stephen Thorne identified the importance of air support to Canadian expeditionary operations when he noted that “the Canadians were almost totally dependent on U.S. logistical support, and didn't get enough. Rations – food and water – were critically thin by the time resupply arrived two days later. Air support was minimal and airlift was undependable.”¹⁹ However, it would be another three years before airlift became a talked about priority for the military and an issue of interest to the general media.

While the combat operations were of interest, it was the first Canadian casualties – four soldiers killed by friendly fire from a United States F-16 aircraft – which really captured the media's attention. The tragedy was the top story for days afterwards, receiving lengthy and extensive coverage from every angle as reporters attempted to put a human face on the cost of war and to find out how it happened, how it could have been averted, and what would be done to prevent it from happening again.

The rest of the mission went without major incident or analysis, with the troops coming home in July 2002.

Deputy Prime Minister John Manley had a unique take on why so little information was released on the army's operations in Kandahar – he said it was directly proportional to Canada's small role in the war on terror. He told *Global News* in Montreal to “check the ratio in terms of the troops that are there. You will see that, in terms of information that has flowed from National Defence in terms of where our troops are, what they are engaged in doing, it's probably equivalent.”²⁰

¹⁸ See Mitch Potter, “Kandahar, Inside and Out,” *Toronto Star*, 10 February 2002.

¹⁹ Stephen Thorne, “A Trial by Fire for Canada's Troops,” *Globe and Mail*, 18 March 2002.

²⁰ Tim Naumetz and Mike Trickey, “General Says Canadian Casualties ‘a Likelihood’,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 6 March 2002.

While that argument might suffice for the army – Canada's army contribution to the war was arguably the minimum it could reasonably send, and it arrived after Kandahar had been secured by the United States – Manley's rationale falls apart when it comes to the navy. Canada's naval contribution was substantial – one-third of its surface fleet and command of coalition warships – yet very little information was provided to the media.

The navy's involvement in Operation Apollo ended 1 November 2003 after two years of operations in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Press releases put out by the navy with every ship deployment and homecoming during that time emphasized the numerical aspect of the mission cited in terms of numbers – the number of ships deployed, the miles traveled, the number of boardings conducted – but there was little attempt to put the mission into context. As the last ship, *HMCS Calgary*, began its journey home, its captain, Commander Dan MacKeigan, remarked to reporters; “Did we have an effect on the bad guys? A lot of that is obviously classified, but I tell my crew that we made a very distinct difference, and we could see we were making a difference.”²¹ Unfortunately, the Canadian public could not.

Not Peacekeeping – 2003 through 2005

Prime Minister Jean Chretien's surprise announcement on 12 February 2003 that Canada would be deploying a battle group to Kabul as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in August 2003 worried army commanders. There were rumours that Lieutenant-General Mike Jeffrey, then Chief of the Land Staff, was so opposed to the mission that he might resign, and he did raise some of his concerns in various interviews.²² But it was not until 2006, when he appeared before the parliamentary committee, that he was most candid. “For that mission at the time, I perceived a lack of clear political objectives, an uncertain command and control structure, and limited strategic support for the job, all of which created, in my personal view, high risks. To be blunt, I was not in favour of going.”²³

In the months leading up to the deployment, the military's concerns over the mission made their way into the media and the army's capabilities became a key issue, especially since its deployment to Kandahar had been limited to six months in 2002 because it was overstretched. Now the government was sending the same army back to Afghanistan, in larger numbers, and for twice as long. The media jumped on the capabilities story, not as a long-term, strategic issue, but as part of more immediate concerns – for example, as part of a discussion regarding whether or not Canada had the resources to take over command of the ISAF mission.²⁴ Other, longer-term impacts, such as the army being unable to take on future commitments,²⁵ were raised, then forgotten. Issues such as command and control were confusing and were overshadowed by the more visible, physical aspects of the mission.²⁶ During the preparations for the August deployment, details of those physical aspects began to filter out, and it became apparent that the mission was going to be a lot riskier than portrayed by the government and that it would be mislabelled “peacekeeping” by many in the media and the DND.²⁷

²¹ Chris Wattie, “Gulf Role Ends as Last Warship Heads Home,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 31 October 2003.

²² Sheldon Alberts, “Mission Will Worsen Troop Burnout: Commander,” *National Post*, 2 April 2003.

²³ Standing Committee on National Defence, *Evidence*, 27 September 2006, p. 1.

²⁴ Canadian planners were concerned that the CF did not have either the financial or personnel resources to operate a brigade-level headquarters and field hospital, and also manage the logistics, security, and air traffic control. A leaked memo from Vice-Admiral Greg Maddison, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff, to General Henault suggested that “If NATO and/or another nation contributed forces to offset the deficiencies ... inherent to the option of Canada as lead nation, a bi-national lead nation structure could be developed to make this option viable.” See, “Canada Asks NATO to Assist on Afghan Mission,” <CTV.ca> 22 February 2003; See also, Sheldon Alberts, “NATO Role in Iraq Could Impede Afghanistan Mission, Ottawa Says,” *National Post*, 19 April 2003. Ultimately, a Canadian did assume command of the ISAF mission when Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier took over in February 2004, but Canada did not become the lead nation with the myriad responsibilities that accompany that role.

²⁵ “Afghan Mission Will Drain Military's Strength: Chief,” *CBC News*, 21 June 2003.

²⁶ See, for example, Sheldon Alberts, “Canada, U.S. Seek NATO Control in Afghanistan,” *National Post*, 22 February 2003, and “NATO Role in Iraq Could Impede Afghanistan Mission, Ottawa Says,” *National Post*, 19 April 2003.

²⁷ Tim Naumetz, “Army Prepares for Worst on Kabul Mission,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 25 June 2003; Lewis MacKenzie, “Let's be Clear about Our Afghan Mission,” *National Post*, 24 July 2003; DND News Release, “Strategic Reconnaissance Team Departs for Afghanistan,” NR-03.021, 25 March 2003.

The danger was a prime focus of media coverage, both in terms of the perceived inadequacy of the equipment and of the casualties. Less than two months into the mission, two Canadian soldiers travelling in an Iltis jeep were killed by a land mine. That incident and one in January 2004 in which another soldier was killed, precipitated brief flurries of stories on the suitability of the unarmoured vehicle for the Afghanistan mission.²⁸ The military continued to defend the use of the Iltis, but it began using the armoured Bison for patrols in more dangerous areas, claiming the threat had changed.²⁹ At the same time, the CF shipped more light armoured vehicles (LAV III) and Bisons to Kabul, and the government rushed through an order for new Gelaendewagen light utility vehicles (G-wagons) to replace the Iltis. Only a few reporters were aware that the project to replace the Iltis had been started ten years before but was delayed owing to government interference in the procurement process.³⁰

Lieutenant-General Mike Jeffrey admitted, three years after the fact, that the Iltis had not been up to the job, "but we had to deploy it because that's all we had. It wasn't that we didn't recognize that it was inadequate." However, plans to replace it with the G-wagon were behind schedule.³¹

Overall, the CF received positive media coverage regarding its Kabul operations,³² but the embedding program³³ was still being refined and was not without problems. Chris Wattie of the *National Post* relayed his experience in a speech he gave in 2004.

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. Documents were delayed, our arrival on base was pushed back several times, and approvals were slow to arrive. After more than a week of stalling, the reporters actually organized a revolt, telling DGPA in Ottawa that unless we were embedded the next day, we were leaving the country. I showed up at the front gate with my luggage and dared them to throw me out; they let me in, to my immense relief.³⁴

Once at Camp Julien, access for embedded reporters was not guaranteed and was very much a function of the commanding officer's knowledge and personality. Early on in the deployment, Wattie included a fact in his story that the military considered a breach of operational security and was given a very loud, long, and public dressing-down by Major-General Andrew Leslie, the deputy commander of the ISAF. He was then left to worry about whether or not he would be escorted off the base while the general took twenty-four hours to think about his next move. Wattie was allowed to stay, and in an ironic military about-face, given access to a key reconnaissance patrol.

Canadian Press reporter Stephen Thorne had enjoyed good access to Lieutenant-Colonel Stogran and the 3PPCLI in 2002, but he complained about reporters being shut out of directed operations in the spring of 2004.³⁵ Writing in the *Canadian War Correspondents Association Newsletter*, Thorne said "Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier, who headed the International Security Assistance Force for six months between February and August, and his counterpart at the Kabul Multi-National Brigade, Brigadier-General Jocelyn Lacroix, shut down all media access to raids involving Canadian troops after a suicide bomber took out a Canadian jeep last Jan. 26 [2004], killing one." In a classic media relations misstep, Lacroix refused to meet with Thorne or his predecessor, CP reporter Les Perreux, "yet readily granted an associate professor from Columbia University an hour-long interview on spec for the *New York Times*."

²⁸ See, for example, Paul Koring, "U.S. Warned Canadians Not to Use Flimsy Jeeps," *Globe and Mail*, 4 October 2003; and Chris Wattie, "Ageing Iltis Not to Blame, Experts Say," *National Post*, 28 January 2004.

²⁹ Matthew Fisher, "Iltis Pulled Off High-Risk Patrols," *Ottawa Citizen*, 12 October 2003.

³⁰ David Pugliese, "Critics Assail Eggleton Vehicle Program Move," *Defense News*, 7–13 December 1998.

³¹ Standing Committee on National Defence, *Evidence*, 27 September 2006, p. 9.

³² Major J. Janzen, "Op Athena Roto 0 – Embedded Media," *Canadian Army Journal*, Fall/Winter 2004.

³³ From July 2003 through to August 2005, about 65 reporters were embedded, but not necessarily 65 different reporters. Some reporters sent were embedded more than once.

³⁴ Chris Wattie, speech to the Royal Canadian Military Institute, January 2004.

³⁵ Thorne was referring to planned raids involving both ISAF troops and Afghan security forces. Thorne's complaint is echoed by Paul Koring who writes that Lieutenant-General Hillier, commander of ISAF, "banned 'embedded journalists' from all such operations shortly after he took over command of all NATO forces in Afghanistan in February." See, "Canadian Forces Help to Capture Terrorism Suspect," *Globe and Mail*, 14 April 2004.

An angry Thorne concludes that the officers' actions "gave the impression that the military was willing to cooperate as long as things went smoothly but, as soon as things went wrong or contrary to the military – never mind the public – interest, then the co-operation would be withdrawn."³⁶

Once again, the media, both embedded at Camp Julien and back in Canada, tended to concentrate on the immediate physical elements of the mission, while giving short shrift to the more strategic or theoretical aspects, such as the impact on future capabilities, "mission creep," and sustainment. While these issues were occasionally raised, they did not have the news legs to sustain long-term investigation and reporting. Moreover, as the mission moved into a second year, it became smaller – 900 soldiers instead of the original 1,800 – but more and more complex. Canada's commitment was separated into numerous different parts – a reconnaissance squadron attached to ISAF in Kabul, an infantry company to a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) with Operation Enduring Freedom in Kandahar, JTF2, training of the Afghan National Army, a civil-military co-operation team – thus making it more difficult to keep track of and to explain.

But even if the larger issues about CF capabilities and Afghanistan prospects were not covered in any great depth, the public affairs officers dealing with the embedding program were happy with what they had accomplished. One public affairs officer (PAffO) commented that embedding created a pro-military bias and positive news stories. But as he also noted, "measuring embedding on the basis of press clippings is an error. The real success is the growth of understanding in the media."³⁷

Back to Kandahar – 2006 to the Present

The government had hoped to find another NATO nation to take over its role in Kabul after the first twelve month deployment, but ended up keeping troops there – albeit a smaller number – for another year and then accepting a more dangerous assignment to the Kandahar region for 2006. The Kandahar option was first mentioned in a February 2005 AP story out of Munich at the end of a NATO defence ministers' meeting which suggested the Canadian commitment would be 700–1,200 soldiers plus a PRT. Defence Minister Bill Graham told the reporter that "if we were to put the additional brigade in, obviously it would be part of Operation Enduring Freedom."³⁸ Although the media (and the public) might have been interested in more details, the government was loath to provide them. When Graham appeared before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs on 16 May, he left out the reference to the U.S.-led OEF. In addition, over the succeeding months, the size of the commitment changed several times with little explanation. By the time the soldiers deployed in February 2006, the commitment had increased in size from 1,200 to 2,300, but no one was questioning why or whether this size of commitment could be sustained.³⁹

The announcement of the new mission was followed by numerous stories in the media about the dangers inherent in the new area of operations and the increased possibility of Canadian military casualties. Concerns over the public reaction to combat deaths prompted the Minister, Lieutenant-General Hillier, and his senior officers to dispense with the reassuring vocabulary of peacekeeping associated with the Kabul mission⁴⁰ and start speaking plainly about what the Canadians would be expected to do in Kandahar.⁴¹ Old myths die hard, however, and some people were still having trouble understanding the difference between Afghanistan and peacekeeping.⁴²

³⁶ Stephen Thorne, "The Enemy Within," *C.W.C.A. Newsletter*, Fall, 2004.

³⁷ Off-the-record interviews with Officer A.

³⁸ "More Troops to Afghanistan," *Toronto Star*, 13 February 2005.

³⁹ For a good overview of how the Afghanistan commitment has evolved over the past couple of years, see David Pugliese, "Canada Goes to War," *Ottawa Citizen*, 25 March 2006, and "Operation PR Blitz," *Ottawa Citizen*, 26 March 2006.

⁴⁰ For example, Canada's Task Force Kabul was described as "one of the major contingents in ISAF. As well as their routine patrolling duties in and around Kabul, the Canadians are involved in civil-military cooperation projects that are conducted to improve living conditions for the local people." DND, "Troops from Petawawa to Deploy to Afghanistan," *News Release*, 12 November 2004.

⁴¹ Chris Wattie, "Prepare for Casualties, Colonel Says," *National Post*, 16 July 2005; Daniel Leblanc, "JTF2 to Hunt al-Qaeda," *Globe and Mail*, 15 July 2005; Mike Blanchfield, "Afghanistan a Deadly Place, Graham Warns," *Ottawa Citizen*, 25 September 2005.

⁴² Brock Harrison, "Peacekeepers Leave Canada for Kandahar," *National Post*, 27 July 2005; Dan Gardner, "You Can't Fight this Myth," *Ottawa Citizen*, 14 July 2006.

The prospect of increased risk and potential combat brought the media to Afghanistan in droves.⁴³ By this time, however, the embedding agreement had been substantially revised, and had become much more specific regarding what information was releasable and what was not. The non-releasable information included: specific information on troop strength and equipment, names of military installations or specific geographic locations of military units, information on ISAF or coalition special operations units, information regarding force protection measures, and the identity or specialist trades of soldiers who kill or injure anti-coalition militants.⁴⁴

The reaction of the media to the Canadian embedding program is generally enthusiastic. The *Toronto Star's* Mitch Potter, who was embedded in the spring and fall of 2006, says the media was given "extraordinary access" to the military. He suspects, however, that when he was there in March 2006 "that was the peak of the willingness of the Canadian military to give unlimited access ... I think a lot of people feel that that has been reeled back a little bit."

One incident in particular sparked a new rule governing the media's access to the soldiers: the 4 March 2006 axe attack on Captain Trevor Greene. After the attack, the reporters pushed to speak to someone in the unit and were allowed to do so through a satellite phone link. They spoke with the platoon commander, Captain Kevin Schamuhn. The shocked soldier's detailed description of the event contained details the public affairs officers felt should not be revealed, such as a description of Captain Greene after the attack, the number of shots fired, and the names of the soldiers who killed the attacker. The reporters were asked to remove those details from their stories.⁴⁵ The incident underlined the difference in perceptions between the military and the media. Reporters saw the story as an incredible demonstration of how, in the wake of a terrifying attack, the soldiers' training had kicked in, but according to one reporter, the military seemed more concerned about the Canadian public's perception that their soldiers were killing people.⁴⁶

Naval Captain Chris Henderson, Director of Public Affairs Plans, says the incident "underscored the necessity to insulate soldiers involved in combat operations from media contact in the immediate aftermath of that action." He suggests that "media contact should be avoided at least until affected soldiers receive critical-incident stress debriefing" or an assessment by the chain of command "of the soldiers' capacity to conduct media interviews while remaining within the bounds of operational security and propriety."⁴⁷ Reporters who had been embedded in spring 2006 were surprised to find an amendment to the embedding agreement which called for a twenty-four hour cooling-off period after a fatality when they went back in the fall.

Despite this, reporters were given tremendous access to the soldiers they were covering. Reporters at Kandahar Air Field (KAF) could attend a formal briefing and then wander over to the soldiers' tents for more details or personal observations. Reporters who opted to accompany troops on missions were gradually accepted and trusted by the soldiers. Les Perreux of the Canadian Press says they start to figure out "when I have this guy with me, people back home see my picture in the paper and start to understand a bit better what I'm doing here." During Operation Medusa, Perreux and Graeme Smith of the *Globe and Mail* had expected to be out with the troops for two to three days, but "we were out there for probably two weeks ... because the guys didn't want us to go!" says Perreux.

The military can accommodate up to sixteen embedded journalists at a time at KAF. Getting them embedded with the troops on operations is a little more difficult because it depends on the availability of space. Major Mario Couture, an army public affairs officer, says "this is difficult because we always need

⁴³ From January 1, 2006 until April 13, 2007, there had been 230 embeds, with an average of 80–90 embeds per rotation. Graeme Smith of the *Globe and Mail* was on his 7th embed, each one lasting 4–6 weeks. In total, about 40 different media outlets had embedded reporters with the CF.

⁴⁴ Commander, CEFCEM, Op Athena – Media Embed Program Instructions, February 2007. Downloadable from: <http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/newsroom/mep_e.asp>

⁴⁵ Chris Wattie, "'Vulnerable' Soldier Attacked with Axe in Taliban Ambush," *Ottawa Citizen*, 5 March 2006; Mitch Potter, "Ambush in Afghanistan," *Toronto Star*, 5 March 2006.

⁴⁶ Off-the-record interview with Reporter C.

⁴⁷ Captain(N) Chris Henderson, "Reporting Live from Kandahar," *Canadian Military Journal*, Summer 2006, pp. 85–88.

to carry ammo, we need to carry supplies, and it's easy to make the case for more ammo and more fuel and more water.”

Reporters who did go out with the troops were gambling that there would be an interesting story to tell during the course of the mission. But whether or not a reporter would be invited to go on a particular mission depended not only on available space, but also on military spin, and it was strongly suspected, on personal acceptability.

The military has its own public relations agenda and attempts to steer the media to particular stories. In the fall of 2006, word came down that the government wanted more reconstruction and development stories. “We've been invited on countless village medical outreach visits, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and similar events,” said one reporter.

There are also attempts to block a reporter from a particular story “in which the military will promise to push a journalist out to the front lines and instead sideline the reporter in a unit that is holding a blocking position, or running a checkpoint in a safe area, or firing artillery from a distance.” While the reporter concedes that such actions could be the result of happenstance, “it happens so often that I suspect it's the result of the military bureaucracy's natural inclination to choose the safest option.”⁴⁸

Another reporter who crossed swords with the military very early on in his six-week embedding assignment by filing a story the military disputed was not given any further opportunities to accompany troops outside the wire. He had not breached the ground rules, so he could not be thrown off the base, but he was essentially ostracized. In this instance, the military held all the cards, and there was no avenue of appeal.⁴⁹

Print and radio reporters had more flexibility to go outside the wire than did television reporters with their large amounts of equipment and huge electrical requirements, as well as demands from assignment editors back in Canada for the correspondent to be available for nightly newscasts.

Mitch Potter's idea was that the reporters from the different media outlets should spread out, taking their chances on getting great stories, but ultimately providing Canadians with the broadest possible coverage of the mission – “This was the last place we should have pack journalism,” he says. To that end, he would opt to go on the longest patrols the military had to offer, knowing that the wire service reporters would still be available to cover any breaking news in Kandahar.

Other reporters, however, didn't see it the same way. Captain Doug MacNair, a public affairs officer with the CEF/COM, says that after the Canadian troops arrived and began operations in February 2006, “we started to offer journalists opportunities to go outside the wire, and they declined them, particularly when the casualties started to occur.” He says the reporters told him that their editors wanted them to stay at KAF “in case another person gets killed so I can cover the ramp ceremony.”⁵⁰ The reporters could keep an eye on all events from KAF because everything would filter through there, he says. If an incident occurred in the field, “the media event and the briefing and the information on what happened is all collated at a tactical operations centre at Kandahar Air Field. That's where the wounded are brought back, where the dead are returned to, where briefings happen, that's where a clear picture of what happened develops. So media became reticent to leave Kandahar Air Field.” MacNair says initially he blamed the reporters for this, but he came to realize it was the editors and the outlets in Canada, “the people who decide what stories get covered and what don't.”

The editors, however, may be responding to what the Canadian public appears to want. At a conference last December, CTV journalist Lisa Laflamme said she had numerous ideas for covering humanitarian aid and reconstruction stories “but it's a question of whether the viewer is absorbing them.” She said polls

⁴⁸ Off-the-record interview with Reporter A.

⁴⁹ Off-the-record interview with Reporter B.

⁵⁰ This was known as “the death watch.” See blog by Bill Roggio at

<http://counterterrorismblog.org/2006/06/print/deathwatch_in_action_real_acti.php> and David Common, CBC News, *Afghanistan Diary*, 9 June 2006, at <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/reportsfromabroad/common/20060609.html>>

show that such stories just do not seem to register with the Canadian public – there is always more interest in stories about Canadian casualties.⁵¹

Other considerations regarding whether or not a reporter will accept an opportunity to travel outside the wire with the troops include story potential, personal safety, and elapsed time. Chris Brown from CBC television said he did not accompany the troops on operations “in part, because the places they were going to (forward operating bases mostly), simply had a lot of routine stuff going on that my desk wasn't that interested in. It is still very dangerous to go out with the military, and my feeling is that unless the desk wants a story, I'm not going to put myself and my cameraman at risk for a story they may or may not run. It has to be worthwhile.”

MacNair says that “the biggest military-media relationship challenge we have is ... the fact that reporters are just a small cog in a big machine. And they are asking people in Canada, most of who have either never been to Afghanistan or have not been there recently, or have no meaningful understanding of what's really going on there right now, and they say, 'no, that's not a story. Don't cover that'.” He says this is frustrating for both the military and the reporters.

“Early in 2006, our senior public affairs officer ... reported back that he was getting concerned about the development of what he called a 'bureau mentality,’” says MacNair. “He was saying that 'this is the Kandahar bureau for these guys. They have an office, they have phones, they have Internet, and they're sitting around declining opportunities to go outside the wire in the company of soldiers and develop an understanding of what's really going on'.”

Chris Wattie of the *National Post* agrees. “The military is acting host to the biggest Canadian news bureau outside the country.” He went on to say that “generally, news outlets are not sending their most experienced military reporters to cover this because it's an on-going, long, drawn-out [war], and they're rotating people in and out” – often young, inexperienced people who do not recognize the importance of getting out into the field and gaining the trust of the troops.

By last September, Captain MacNair says the public affairs officers “started to confront media outlets when the reporters were declining opportunities to go outside the wire. When the news has been sufficiently compelling, that is, heavy kinetic ops like [Operation] Medusa, they go. I respect them for it.” But he says the frustration stemmed from the fact that “the kinetic side of the mission was all that the media were interested in presenting.”

By October 2006, both the government and the senior military officers were getting fed up with the kind of news stories that were being generated – a result of the media's obsession with combat and casualties, rather than the development projects and progress being made in Afghanistan. Scott Taylor, editor of *Esprit de Corps* magazine, listened to General Hillier's complaints about the press and decided to look into his accusations that the media was not giving a balanced view of the mission.

Taylor talked to Senator Colin Kenney, Chair of the Senate Defence Committee, who told him he'd asked for information on development projects but had received nothing from the DND. “They have a map showing the location of each and every one of our casualties,” said Kenney, “but they have nothing which shows the schools built or the wells which they've dug? I find that difficult to comprehend.”

Next Taylor went to the DND photographic website, “Combat Camera,” and found tributes to the soldiers who had been killed but “I could locate just one set of school photos dated back in April 2006 ... The school was not Canadian-built, but our soldiers were outside protecting it. The search for images of wells drew a blank, and any pictures of 'roads' invariably showed combat convoys rather than construction crews.” Taylor concluded that “DND was equally to blame for emphasizing the same negative issues that caused Hillier to denigrate the media.”⁵²

⁵¹ Canadian Journalism Foundation conference on “The Media, the Military, and the Pollsters: Who's Got the Story in Afghanistan?” 7 December 2006.

⁵² Scott Taylor, “Hard to Report on Achievements yet to be Made,” *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, 23 October 2006.

Observations

In the fifteen months since Canada took on the Kandahar commitment, there has been a plethora of stories covering everything from the intensity of combat operations, to the frustration of trying to change a country drowning in fear and corruption, to the environmental, physical, and emotional challenges of soldiering. Reporters have talked to Afghans, visited reconstruction projects, and looked into the dark, dank corners of hospitals and prisons. Reporters who went to Afghanistan as military neophytes are returning for a second or third time, bringing a greater depth of knowledge and understanding to their stories.⁵³

But there is still a sense that the story is not being told properly. Major Couture says that “a lot of the media coverage was incident driven. It gives an impression that the whole place is falling apart, and it is total hell over there, and there's no progress being made. So the main focus was always the bloody stories, the sad stories, and the negative stories.” He says, “It makes you wonder, is it all worth it?”

Some of the public's confusion over exactly what the military does and what it is trying to accomplish, stems from the military involving itself too much in the “why” of military commitments and not enough in the “how.” Supporting the Canadian government's decision to support the Afghanistan government and rid the country of the Taliban is one thing, but actively engaging in speaking tours to promote the policy is confusing to the public. The government should not be relying on the military to “sell” the mission. It ties the military up in politics, resulting in accusations that Canada's involvement in Afghanistan is “Hillier's war,” and it foments fear that the military is aggressive and just wants to engage in battle. If the military wants Canadians to understand the broader outlines of what it is doing, it must be prepared to describe its activities and explain exactly how that will accomplish the objectives.

How much information the military is willing to part with depends on where you are – in Afghanistan or in Canada. The media has learned that the further away from Ottawa the military is, the more open it tends to be. Most senior officers in Ottawa are political animals, watching over their shoulders for any sign that their words have caused concern amongst their political masters. Consequently, most try to say as little as possible.⁵⁴

The tendency within the DND's public affairs section has been to introduce procedural changes that, while perfectly reasonable on the surface, usually result in tighter control of media access. Mr. Norbert Cyr, Public Affairs Advisor to the Strategic Joint Staff, says the whole of the department “now thinks on a combat footing; it has a completely operational mindset” and is far more responsive to media requests, getting answers to questions within minutes or hours. While that may be the case for straightforward, factual questions, requests for interviews with specific individuals are often slow, or denied, or funneled through a third party.⁵⁵

In the months following 9/11, the government released very little information to the media.⁵⁶ Mr. Don Roy, Public Affairs – Plans, Doctrine, Exercises, and Lessons Learned, says there was no change to the 1998 openness policy, and “if the perception in the media was that information was slow in coming, it wasn't our policy to do that.” However, he says that the media may have felt that the information was not coming fast enough because the DND was in the position of having to wait for the Americans to act before giving information on how the CF would be reacting.

Roy says that when Canada is working with coalition forces, the CF has to follow coalition doctrine. Although Canada has its own doctrine and media policy, it has to negotiate a middle ground with the

⁵³ See, for example, anything by Graeme Smith in the *Globe and Mail*; also see John Cotter, “NATO Forces Kill, Capture, Key Taliban,” *Canoe Network – cnews*, 31 March 2007, downloaded from <<http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/Canada/2007/03/31/pf-3880240.html>> and Jonathan Fowlie, “No Taliban Offensive, Soldiers Say,” *National Post*, 13 April 2007.

⁵⁴ General Rick Hillier would be an exception to that generalization, but his outspokenness is part of the problem described in the previous paragraph.

⁵⁵ Personal experience of author.

⁵⁶ Although the DND provided daily briefings to the media during the 1999 Kosovo bombing campaign, one departmental insider says the DND was not comfortable doing that for the war in Afghanistan. “We were in charge in Kosovo, we knew who was going to be attacked, by which plane, when, etc., and no one was able to hurt us. We never lost anyone in combat,” he says, but “in Afghanistan, there is much less control over the action, so we're not briefing everyday, even though the operation is much more complex, much bigger.” (Off-the-record interview with Officer B.)

allied countries who may not be as open. Countries develop a joint standard operating procedure for dealing with different media situations, says Cyr, but individual countries can put in caveats. For example, Canada has an embedding program that few other NATO countries have; of those that do, Canada's is one of the most open.

The reporters who have embedded in Afghanistan with the CF have been generally impressed with the military's openness. Les Perreux says the military does "withhold information under the rules of operational security, but compared to any other military, or paramilitary, or even civilian government organizations that I've worked with, I find they are very open, considering what the stakes are. The fact that they even let you go out with their soldiers on operations, I mean, your average government organization won't let you talk to a bureaucrat who's working on a science project." He does not find the operational security restrictions "that onerous because people don't need to know the kind of specifics that are covered by that."

When operational security does cause dissent, it is generally because the reason for it is not well explained, thus it appears arbitrary. For example, one reporter says in November "the military took the folks from a Canadian television outlet for a ride on their Hercules plane doing air-drops of supplies. Afterwards, a military officer reviewed the tape for op sec reasons. He watched the tape, and stopped them at one point, saying, 'Okay. I'm happy right until that point. That ridgeline is very distinctive, and I don't want the locals seeing that.' As if, somehow, the illiterate Afghans with no electricity would be monitoring Canadian television for intelligence, or as if the Taliban would use an international network of spies to help them find the giant, noisy cargo planes that were swooping low over their own heads."⁵⁷

Military issues are difficult to cover. The jargon, the force structure, the equipment, and the tactics all take time and effort to learn and become comfortable with. Few media outlets have a dedicated military specialist, and most reporters cover defence as one of several beats. It becomes easier to cover the more familiar – the human interest story (casualties, separation from family, living conditions, etc.) or the political angle (government duplicity or dithering, ministerial mismanagement) – than it is to cover the unfamiliar, such as military capabilities, changing tactics, and sustainability.

Few reporters understand military terms like integration, joint ops, interoperability, and command and control. The issue of command and control was particularly confusing, because there were so many aspects and components – Operation Enduring Freedom, ISAF, NATO, lead nation, brigade HQ, Task Force Afghanistan, Kabul Multinational Brigade, PRT, and Regional Command South. Reporters kept confusing the terms, and finally, as time wore on (especially in the complex 2003–05 deployment) often resorted to just using the generic term "commander" to describe an officer's position within the network.

This problem is exacerbated when the military talks to the media, because it does not always explain things well, and the media has a tendency to repeat their jargon without questioning it. Dr. Gimblett thinks Canadians should have been made aware of the navy's key role in the Arabian Gulf, but little was written about it. When the United States changed its focus to Iraq, a Canadian commodore was given command of the coalition forces in the Arabian Sea theatre, but "the navy is not explaining to the reporters that they're in charge, or if they are, they're not explaining it in terms that the media can understand."

The Afghanistan mission has caused a huge upheaval in the CF equipment plans and a rethink of its overall transformation. None of this has been adequately explained to the media; everything is being dealt with piecemeal.⁵⁸ Neither the military nor the media attempt to put it into the context of an overall plan. When the CF decided to do away with tanks in favour of a new mobile gun system, the then-Chief of the Land Staff, Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier, wrote a detailed defence of the decision.⁵⁹ Yet when the army decided it needed tanks in Afghanistan, it first lied to the media about it,⁶⁰ and then pushed for

⁵⁷ Off-the-record interview with Reporter A.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Chris Wattie, "Kandahar Mission May Get Bigger Bang," *National Post*, 6 September 2005.

⁵⁹ Lt.-Gen. Rick J. Hillier, "Our Transformed Army," *Ottawa Citizen*, 17 January 2004.

⁶⁰ David Pugliese, "DND Denies Rumour Aging Tanks Bound for Afghanistan," *Ottawa Citizen*, 24 August 2006, and "Canada Ratchets Up Force, Sends Tanks to Afghanistan," *Ottawa Citizen*, 9 September 2006.

government approval of a new tank purchase without any attempt to explain the abrupt change of plan to the public and its effect on the forces' long-term plans.⁶¹

While the military occasionally gets caught in a lie, most of the reporters who embed with the military in Afghanistan expect to be told the truth.⁶² Mitch Potter says he trusts what he is being told by the military "because if there's something they don't want to tell us, they just won't tell us." However, "if the information they're giving us conflicts with other information we have, I think that more often than not, it says something about the quality of the information than it does about the honesty of the person giving it." For example, the information the military has may be preliminary observations of an incident, and as further facts become known, they may contradict the earlier assessment. However, he also notes that "the military will try and see things through a positive light."

Another reporter agrees. "My experience is that the information you get inside the wire tends to suffer from excessive optimism."⁶³ For example, a third reporter points out that in March 2006, the Canadian military gave a press conference saying the Taliban were on the run.⁶⁴ Subsequent events have discredited that early assessment. Given that things can change quickly in war, the CF briefer would have been wiser to give a less optimistic interpretation of events pending the passage of time and the accumulation of more evidence.

A consistent irritant in Afghanistan is the issue of body counts. The Canadian Press' Les Perreux says that during Operation Medusa, the military gave body counts of more than 1,000 Taliban, but "where we were with Canadian troops, there were not bodies strewn all over." He says reporters were being promised photos of the dead or of mass graves but they never received them. They were told that the Taliban had been chased out into the desert and mowed down by air support, but the areas were inaccessible to the media. Consequently, whenever Perreux and the *Globe and Mail's* Graeme Smith mentioned the body count that NATO claimed in their stories, they included the fact that there was no evidence. Other reporters accepted the NATO figure without question.

The issue of Canadian casualties was also a major irritant. The media became entranced by them, reporting in detail and at length on every death.⁶⁵ And with every death came the inevitable questioning of the mission. Yet Lieutenant-General (ret.) Mike Jeffrey, former Chief of the Land Staff, told the parliamentary committee that "yes, we've had casualties in Afghanistan, but casualties are an inevitable part of the conflict and of what we do as soldiers, and in my mind, given the kinds of operations we've been in, the casualties are relatively light."⁶⁶ Commander (ret.) Peter Haydon, writing in the *Canadian Naval Review*, came to the same conclusion.⁶⁷ What is shocking to the public of a country that has not known war⁶⁸ for over fifty years is less so to military commanders who understand military operations and have studied history. That type of context was missing from the breathless stories filed from Afghanistan and taken up with great focus and energy by the editors in Canada.

The need for greater context of the military's actions in Afghanistan is an overriding concern for most observers.⁶⁹ Getting the context, however, can be difficult. Some reporters – notably Graeme Smith of the *Globe and Mail* – displayed tremendous energy and courage in moving beyond the military's embedding program to seek information on the mission from the Afghani perspective.

⁶¹ National Defence, *News Release*, NR-07.22 – 12 April 2007.

⁶² Ottawa-based reporters, dealing with the bureaucracy and the politicians, are generally more cynical.

⁶³ Off-the-record interview with Reporter A.

⁶⁴ Off-the-record interview with Reporter B.

⁶⁵ Bruce Cheadle, "Media Reports 'Over the Top,' Vets Say," *Toronto Star*, 24 April 2006.

⁶⁶ Standing Committee on National Defence, *Evidence*, 27 September 2006, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Peter Haydon, "Are We Overreacting to the Afghanistan Casualties?" *Canadian Naval Review*, 2, no. 3 (Fall 2006), pp. 2–4.

⁶⁸ Although the Canadian Forces have been involved in limited wars such as the Persian Gulf and Kosovo,

Afghanistan is the first protracted conflict involving large numbers of ground troops and combat deaths.

⁶⁹ See, for example, the questions posed by Scot Robertson, "Covering the Afghan Mission: A Lament on the Fourth Estate," *The Dispatch*, 4, no. 3 (Fall 2006).

Getting out in the field is much more difficult to do than is an embed, says Mitch Potter; “Going in and only doing an embed, and saying you were in Afghanistan as a reporter, I think, is kind of a lobotomized way of doing your job.” He also noted that “it’s the safest way, however. When you leave the base, as a visible westerner, you have to be constantly vigilant ... and it’s a much more difficult place to travel than it was five years ago when I was first there.”⁷⁰ Regardless of the danger, he says, “I wouldn’t think of not doing reporting in the fashion we call unilateral reporting on a trip to Afghanistan,” because it’s important to see the conflict through the eyes of the Afghani people.

But it is not just getting outside the wire that provides context. The public needs more than reports from journalists in Afghanistan to understand the wide-ranging impact of the mission. It needs media outlets to pull together other information such as analyses of Afghanistan’s geographic and political importance, its economic prospects, and its international connections. The public needs information on military strategy and tactics, the different approaches that different armed forces take to the mission,⁷¹ and the importance of air power, as well as maps to be able to locate places such as Kandahar, Kabul, Howz-E-Madad, and Sablaghai. It needs information on the Canadian Forces as a whole, and the less obvious aspects of the mission, such as sustainment and training, and the roles performed by the navy and the air force.

In summary, the public needs help understanding the intellectual underpinnings of the mission, not just the physical aspects. Dr. Gimblett says that “what the navy does is so important, but it happens more on an intellectual level. But the public, which the media feeds, can relate to the physical stuff more than they can to the intellectual.” So soldiers climbing in and out of large helicopters and scouring the mountains around Kandahar for al-Qa’ida terrorists may not be more important than the navy’s ships, but their physical actions are much more compelling. The perception is that the soldiers are more at risk; the flat, open ocean does not look nearly as dangerous.

Conclusion

The media and the military will never have a harmonious relationship, given their differences in culture and mandate. As Dr. Denis Stairs wrote,

The media’s representatives are “open” (although not always about themselves). They think things are best when it all hangs out. The military, by contrast, are given to secrecy, or if not to secrecy, then certainly to discretion. Their business is “security,” after all, and their masters are politicians.

The media, moreover, are public-oriented. They have in mind the citizenry at large – citizens with power and without power alike – and the discourse they feed is the discourse of public debate. Their audience is everybody. The military, by contrast, are corporate-oriented. They have in mind the performance of their own missions by their own people in accordance with their own traditions, and these they regard as largely tried and true.⁷²

So there is never going to be a perfect relationship in which *all* information is shared. But it is not unreasonable for the media to ask for *more* information than what the military would deem an acceptable release. And it is not unreasonable to expect the media to try to understand the bigger picture of what it is presenting to the Canadian public.

Overall, the embedding program has been a positive development for both the media and the military, educating both the media and the public in arcane military matters and providing the military with insights into the journalistic profession and its place in a democracy. Early criticisms directed at the embedding program centred largely around the possibility that the media would be co-opted into supporting the military perspective, and while there is certainly some foundation for that fear, there is a bigger issue.

⁷⁰ After the recent kidnapping of an Italian reporter and the release of three Taliban by the Afghan government in order to secure his release, journalists in Afghanistan have even more reason to worry about their safety. The result will likely be reporting that is even more constrained.

⁷¹ A good example is Graeme Smith’s “Doing it the Dutch Way in Afghanistan,” *Globe and Mail*, 2 December 2006.

⁷² Denis Stairs, “The Media and the Military in Canada,” *International Journal*, Summer 1998, pp. 544–53.

The media has generally always suffered from tunnel vision, pouncing on each individual event as it occurs and focusing all its energies on that one small morsel, with little attempt to place the incident in context or evaluate the situation as a whole. Embedding has exaggerated that tendency.

Embedding must be recognized for what it is: an intense, narrow focus on a single aspect of a wide-ranging mission. Unfortunately, media outlets too often feel they have covered the Afghan question if they have an embedded reporter filing regular reports. And the military seems to think that if it has an embedding program, it reduces the need to keep the Canadian-based media informed.

Both professions need to re-assess. The Afghanistan mission is a huge undertaking with long-term repercussions. It reaches beyond the immediate deaths or the inadequate equipment into the future structure of the Canadian Forces. It has sucked up resources and refocused planning beyond what anyone expected five years ago. The military needs the media, and through them, the public, to understand the choices that are being made and still need to be made. The media needs to continue to question those choices in order to make sure the public gets the whole story.

The Canadian public certainly has a thirst for military information, as Major-General (ret.) Lewis MacKenzie discovered during the Kosovo bombing campaign in 1999. "I wrote an article a day for the *Citizen* from my reporting location for CTV in Belgrade. Of all the articles written, one received more favourable comment than all the others put together. It was titled 'Army 101' and explained in easily understood terms for you civilians how an army is organized and what rank commands what sized organization."⁷³ MacKenzie's observation suggests the media could be doing a much better job of covering the basics of military operations and setting the context for stories. Reporters and editors who focus on little but funerals and roadside bombs transform the mission into a caricature and do the public a real disservice. By the same token, if the military wants to see its mission and its future receive serious, nuanced treatment in the media, then it must be willing to impart more information. Exactly how much more will always be a balancing act.

What is needed is more imagination, both in the way potential stories are developed and in how the military responds to demands for information. Inevitably there will be mistakes, both in interpreting information and knowing whom to trust. The greater good, however, is a well-informed public.

Notation: This paper is part of a book that the author is writing on the topic of media-military relations.

⁷³ Lewis MacKenzie, "Let us Give Tanks," *Ottawa Citizen*, 23 April 2007.

ACRONYMS

CEFCOM	Canadian Expeditionary Force Command
CF	Canadian Forces
CP	Canadian Press
DND	Department of National Defence
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
JTF2	Joint Task Force 2
KAF	Kandahar Air Field
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
PAffO	Public Affairs Officer
3PPCLI	3 rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team

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