

# 'Showtime'

## Embedded news media during Operation Iraqi Freedom

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### Introduction

'Showtime' was the first reaction of General (Ret) Tommy Franks, the famous commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), when he arrived in theater for leading the major combat operations of Operation Iraqi Freedom. And showtime it was, not only for the military, but also for the media and the American audience. The embedded news media program, which was introduced just before the start of the operation, contributed enormously to the Coalition showtime.

This article concentrates on one of the most crucial, but also one of the most underestimated features of the current battlefield: the military-media relationship. Both the military and the media try to serve the citizens, but their relationship was not always smooth. It started as an almost perfect symbiosis, but that changed over time to an adversary relationship.

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*Public Opinion wins wars.  
I have always considered correspondents accredited  
to my headquarters as quasi-staff officers.*

General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1945<sup>1</sup>

Colonel Barry Willey, former Deputy Public Affairs Officer of the U.S. Army, called Korea the transition and Vietnam the turning point in the military-media relations.<sup>2</sup> Today it is unthinkable to conduct a war without any real time news coverage by the media. Research journalist Robert Kaplan supported this statement:

*Be aware, the media is nowadays always in the center of the battlefield.<sup>3</sup>*

It is therefore that every soldier and especially every military leader, from the strategic corporal to the highest general, should have a profound understanding of the media. The purpose of this article is to research one of the latest developments in the military-media relationship: the embedded news media program.

Just before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and his Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Mrs. Victoria Clarke, introduced

the embedded news media program. In all, there were 662 news media people embedded in Coalition units, while another 2,000 unilaterals, who did not participate in the embedded program, stayed in Kuwait.<sup>4</sup>

The intention of the embedded program was to guarantee that the home front would see the same as soldiers at the front; no lies, no propaganda, no tricks; the camera was to register the battlefield. Some believe that the embedded program was a smart move of the U.S. Department of Defense; others think that it was an impulsive decision of Rumsfeld and Clarke.

There is not one vision on the embedded program. Many questions on the embedded program rose. One of these questions forms the main research question of this article: Was the embedded news media program effective before and during the major combat operations of Operation Iraqi Freedom from February through April 2003?



**Army Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of U.S. Central Command, speaks with reporters outside a hotel in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on April 27, 2003** (Photo Helene C. Stikkel)

The main research question can be divided into five subordinate research areas, which also forms the body for this article:

- *Embedded Media*  
What is embedded media? What was the media plan for Operation Iraqi Freedom?
- *Analytic Framework*  
What determines whether a media plan is effective?
- *Effectiveness*  
What happened to the military-media relations before and during the major combat operations of Operation Iraqi Freedom? Did it meet the standards of the media plan? What were the different perspectives on the embedded program?
- *Future*  
Is embedded news media a useful tool for future operations?
- *Relevance*  
What can the Netherlands Armed Forces learn from the American experiences with the embedded news media program?

### Some confines

Many views on a military operation are possible. However, this article addresses the American standpoint with regard to the military-media relationship just before and during Operation Iraqi Freedom. It will therefore not touch the legitimacy question of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The U.S. Department of Defense designed the embedded news media program for all four Services, but in practice mainly the Army and Marine Corps, and to a lesser extend the Navy, dealt with the program. That is a logical consequence. The Army and Marine Corps formed the advancing ground forces. They were not only the largest contributors to Operation Iraqi Freedom, but they were also more suitable to accommodate embedded journalists.

This article is in line with the practical use of the embedded program. It pays mainly attention to embedded news people in Army and Marine Corps units and a few glimpses of what happened aboard Navy ships.

The article is limited by time. It focuses on the period previous and during

the major combat operations of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The issuing of the *Public Affairs Guidance on Embedding Media* in the beginning of February 2003 is the start of this period. The end is marked by 01 May 2003, the day on which the President of the United States, George W. Bush, aboard the USS Lincoln, officially declared that the major combat operations had finished.<sup>5</sup>

The number of embeds decreased significantly soon after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003. The quantity of embeds dropped to a fewer than 190 during the third week of the operation.<sup>6</sup> At the end of April 2003 almost all embedded journalists had left their units.

*Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* explains that the word 'media' is not only the plural form of medium, but it has also its own meaning:

*the means of communication, as radio, television, newspaper, magazines, etc. that reach the very large number of people.*<sup>7</sup>

Today, the media comprises three different forms. The first form is the *print media*, which includes newspapers, magazines, and books. The second form is the *broadcast media*, which encompasses radio and television. The third form is *on-line media*, the internet, which is the newest version of media.

Most publishers and broadcasting services have their own website with a news page. There is also a new movement among common people to start their own news website. This last category does not involve journalists, so it is not part of this research. The term media in this article focuses on professional news media.

### Embedded Media

When Bob Wright, the Chairman of NBC, was asked to write a foreword to NBC's book *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, he described 'being embedded'

| Perspective         | Criteria  |
|---------------------|---|
| Military            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Accurate, timely and honest information</li> <li>2. Violation of OPSEC</li> <li>3. Good relationship to understand complex operations</li> </ol>  |
| Media               | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Elements of good journalism               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Truth and verification</li> <li>b. Independence and autonomous monitor of power</li> <li>c. Forum for public criticism and compromise</li> <li>d. Comprehension and proportionality</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Economic motives</li> </ol> |
| Public              | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Quality</li> <li>2. Objectivity</li> <li>3. Combat tiredness</li> </ol>   |
| International views | Standpoints from countries outside the United States  |

**Framework with criteria from different view points to evaluate the embedded news media program**

in plain terms: ‘journalists eating, sleeping, and moving in concert with their assigned combat units’.<sup>8</sup> Bill Katovsky went more in detail in the book *Embedded*, which he wrote together with Timothy Carlson:

*Embedded reporters ate, lived, traveled, and slept with the troops. They choked on the same sandstorm grit, and carried the same mandatory gas mask and chem. suits. They dined on the same MRES (Meals Ready to Eat), and bounced along the same rutted desert tracks. They faced the same enemy fire.*<sup>9</sup>

These two descriptions reflect the practical side felt by the media. The other side of the story derives from the U.S. Department of Defense. Colonel Melanie Reeder, a former U.S. Army Public Affairs Officer in Afghanistan, pointed out that it was sometimes difficult to get the media out in front with the troops during Operation Enduring Freedom, which started in 2001 in Afghanistan. Eight embedded reporters in Operation Anaconda<sup>10</sup>, which was part of Operation Enduring Freedom, helped blaze the path for a large-scale, embedded news media program in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Reeder inferred that

when journalists were provided access, the accurate story was told, but when they got information, the result was speculation, misinformation, and inaccuracy.<sup>11</sup>

On 30 October 2002, Secretary Rumsfeld unexpectedly attended a meeting of Washington bureau chiefs of major media companies. He promised them a public relations strategy of embedded media with warriors. If there were to be a war with Iraq, journalists would be with the troops.

His main argument was that in Afghanistan both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda showed great skills in news management. The best way to counter it was to have accurate, professional journalists on the ground. They could see the truth of the ongoing operation.<sup>12</sup>

Rumsfeld was faced with three courses of action. The first course of action was a continuation of Operation Enduring Freedom’s policy: limited media access to the battlefield and press briefings at the Pentagon and the military operational headquarters. The second course of action envisioned the return of the media pools as had been done during Operation Desert Storm. The third course of

action recommended that the military leverage the media by a new Public Affairs plan now referred to as the embedded news media program.<sup>13</sup>

Secretary Rumsfeld, assisted by Victoria Clarke, decided to implement the embedded news media program. Victoria Clarke told reporters that they would get more access than in Operations Desert Storm and Enduring Freedom.

*It is in our own interest to let people see for themselves through the news media, the lies and deceptive tactics Saddam Hussein will use.*<sup>14</sup>

Former TV Reporter Michael Burton presented a more critical view on the embedded concept.

*The idea originated with the Pentagon, where military and political strategists pitched the idea to editors last year as a compromise. The Pentagon strategists, already planning for the Iraqi war, wanted proud, positive, and patriotic coverage over national airwaves. If editors agreed to all their provisions for security reviews, flagging of sensitive information, limitations on filming dead bodies, and other restrictions, then journalists would be welcome. The editors not only went along – they accepted the ground rules without fight.*<sup>15</sup>

Before Operation Iraqi Freedom, Secretary Rumsfeld and Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a directive in which they emphasized that the goal of the Department of Defense was to get it right from the start of the operation.

The main purpose was to facilitate the press with firsthand impressions. The U.S. Department of Defense would assign news crews, journalists, and photographers to specific combat units for a longer period: days, weeks or even months.<sup>16</sup> The directive was the Secretary of Defense’s *Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) on Embedding Media*, which was issued on 10 February 2003.

## Analytic Framework

The nucleus of this article is to elucidate the effectiveness of the embedded news media program during the combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. This article uses a framework with criteria to evaluate the effectiveness seen from three different perspectives: the military, the media and the public. The reason for three different perspectives in stead of only a military point of view is that different views might lead to new conclusions and overlooked effects. Sometimes, the military think that what is 'good' for the military, e.g. certain decisions, may be 'bad' for the media and the public, but that is short-term thinking.

The long-term effect is that something worse for the media and the public will become worse for the military as well, frequently with more

negative implications. This is the so-called *media boomerang effect*.

The second reason is that opposing perspectives might encourage a dialectic approach of 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis,' which will contribute to the quality of the discussion on military and media.

### **Military criteria**

Let's start with the military perspective. Today, U.S. Joint Publication 3-61 *Doctrine for Public Affairs* (Joint Pub 3-61) gives the basis for how the U.S. military considers the military-media relation. The military must make a free flow of general and military information available without censorship or propaganda. Accurate and timely information is essential in times of crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Incorrect military terminology can lead to confusion in the public debate. It is the military's responsibility to

provide reporters with accurate, timely and honest information. The consequence of providing false information is severe. Judson Conner described it as an aspect of the mentioned media boomerang effect.

*It is usually very easy to lie to a reporter. But there is a catch to it once... The truth will come out eventually, and when it does, that reporter will never again believe anything you have to say, whether it is true or not. And no other reporters will either, for the word gets around news circles very rapidly whenever an official lied to the press.*<sup>18</sup>

It means that soldiers must be honest with the press. Likewise, Joint Pub 3-61 states: 'information will not be classified or otherwise to protect the government from criticism or embarrassment'.<sup>19</sup>



**US Marine Corps (USMC) Marine from the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), Special Operations Capable (SOC) advance on an enemy position at Az Zubayr, Iraq, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003**

(Photo B.L. Wickliffe; collection NIMH)



The Secretary of Defense's *Public Affairs Guidance on Embedding Media* was the only instruction for dealing with media during Operation Iraqi Freedom and additional to Joint Pub 3-61. It became therefore the most important military document on how the U.S. Department of Defense saw the cooperation between the military and the press. The most significant instruction in the guidance was:

*To tell the factual story – good or bad – before others see the media with disinformation and distortion, as they most certainly will continue to do. Our people in the field need to tell our story – only commanders can ensure the media get to the story.*<sup>20</sup>

This instruction supports the importance of giving accurate, timely and honest information to the press. However, there is military information that the military must not show openly. It is vital for success of the mission. Operations security, OPSEC, is a protection measure that identifies critical information and subsequently analyzes friendly actions attendant to military operations and other activities.<sup>21</sup> Military personnel may not give away vital and classified information.

Although the military has to offer the media accurate information, it is still not a guarantee that journalists are able enough to convert this information into precise reports and news coverage. The military must build a better relationship with the media to help the media creating a clearer picture of military operations. William Kennedy, professional journalist since 1945 and retired Army Public Affairs Officer of the Pentagon doubted whether journalism is able to oversee the complexity of military operations. He disputed that in cases like the Vietnam War and Operation Desert Storm, all essential facts were available and accessible in the public domain, but the press fell short to report matters of crucial importance.<sup>22</sup> Thus, providing the press with accurate information is not enough.

The journalist has to understand the entire operation with all its details and all its implications. The understanding is therefore a shared responsibility of journalists and the military. Consequently, it is essential for the military and the media to have a relationship of mutual respect. Colonel Barry Willey recommended:

*Learning to nurture that mutual enmity – building on similarities and mutual interests and recognizing differences – can create a trust and confidence between the two that results in fairer media coverage of the military and greater access by the media.*<sup>23</sup>



**Mr. M. Green, working for ABC News London, gives a gesture of support while embedded with US Marine Corps (USMC). On patrol along the border in Kuwait during Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003**

(Photo A.P. Roufs; collection NIMH)

There is still another measure that derives from the military. Mrs. Victoria Clarke made clear that one of the motivations to create the embedded program was to show people around the whole world how the U.S. forces conducted their operations in a very real and compelling way.<sup>24</sup>

Clarke's statement seems to be fair and innocent, but it leads to critical questions that needs an answer. Did the networks and publics from countries other than the United States welcome the reports of embedded media? And, were the American and British reporters favored above reporters from other countries? These questions justify a better look on the international views. The article will use the international standpoints as a separate criterion.

Summarized, the military criteria for assessing the embedded news media program are accurate, timely and fair information, no violation of the OPSEC rules, building a good relationship with the media to guarantee a better appreciation of complex military operations. The international perspective is a different standpoint.

#### **Media criteria**

The best way to start the media perspective is using the approach of how journalists see themselves in the ideal situation. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel clarified that the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing. They distilled a pattern of elements of good journalism to fulfill that task. These elements of good journalism form useful criteria to judge the embedded program.

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth in order to serve the citizens. A way of getting at the truth is verification, which is a process of stripping information of any attached misinformation, disinformation, or self-promoting information. As citizens encounter a growing flow of information, they have more need for someone, e.g. a reporter, who highlights

what is important and filters out what is not. In journalistic terms, verification is a process of testing and checking a story.

- Journalists must maintain independence from those they cover and they must serve as an autonomous monitor of power. Independency does not mean being neutral or impartial. Most journalists find facts and draw conclusions. Kovach and Rosenstiel realized that having an opinion is not only allowable, it is important to the natural scepticism with which any good reporter approaches a story. The autonomous monitor of power refers to the watchdog principle. It implies that the press should recognize where powerful institutions are working effectively, as well as where they are not.

- Journalism must provide a forum for criticism and compromise to contribute to the forming of people's opinion. Kovach and Rosenstiel expounded: 'the natural curiosity of humankind means that by reporting details of scheduled events, disclosing wrongdoing, or outlining a developing trend, journalism sets people to wonder'.

- Journalism must keep the news comprehensive and proportional. Kovach and Rosenstiel made a comparison with cartography: 'A journalist that leaves out so much of the other news in the process is like the map that fails to tell the traveler of all the other roads along the way'.<sup>25</sup> Proportion and comprehensiveness is the key to accuracy. A news story can only be accurate if a reporter places it in the right way in a larger context.

Kovach and Rosenstiel's elements of good journalism are useful criteria to assess the embedded program, but they are idealistic. It is utopian to believe that the press always endeavors to use these elements. News media is booming business. Media companies and networks are commercial institutions and their first concern is making money.

Media expert Dr. Carl Jensen stated that corporate media executives perceive their primary, and often sole, responsibility to be the need to maximize profits for the next quarterly statement and not, as some observers would have it, to inform the public.<sup>26</sup>

Eric Alterman is also convinced that the profit motive determines the content of the news. Factual news on politics is boring and does not sell very well. Today the public is more interested in glamorous and electrifying news leading to competition between the news networks, which will have the most exciting coverage of a news item.<sup>27</sup> The economic motive is therefore also a media criterion to judge the embedded program.

#### **Public criteria**

The public is an important party for judging the effectiveness of the embedded media, because they have to digest all presented information. The public's criteria are oriented towards the way the people perceive and appreciate the embedded program. Renowned research institutes like The Pew Research Center, The Columbia Journalist Review and the Project for Excellence in Journalism distinguish three different audience aspects during war coverage, which are meaningful measures to evaluate the embedded program.

##### *- Quality*

Quality is a broad and hard to define term, but the explanation of the term quality in this article is whether the public appreciates the way they get their information through the embedded reporters. The question belonging to this criterion reads: Did the public esteem the real time coverage of advancing Coalition units?

##### *- Objectivity*

The audience like to receive the news as objective as can be to form their own opinion. Although they realize that all media have their own target audiences, they prefer to have their news without major biases. But are embedded journalists able to cover

the news without any biases of the units to which they were embedded?

- *Combat fatigue*

Embedded journalists, especially those at the very front, did not have any time to edit coverage and reports on the war in Iraq. The result was that television newscasts in the United States daily broadcasted the war in Iraq for a very long period. Did the American people appreciate these lasting reports? Did the coverage lead to an overload of emotional information? Were the reports overvalued? In other words: was there too much, enough, or too little coverage of the war?

## **Assessment**

The next step in the research is using the framework with criteria to find out what the military, media and public effectiveness of the embedded program were during Operation Iraqi Freedom. It will also take a look at the international viewpoints. The assessment starts with the military effectiveness.

### **Military Effectiveness**

• *Accurate, timely and honest information*

Broadcast media, especially television, had a unique opportunity with the embedded program to show real time coverage of front scenes. The public could directly see front actions. There was no time for the editing of images. That made it easy for the military to provide timely and honest information. The print media sometimes had, due to the operational tempo, problems with typing a story and sending it to their home base.

On accuracy, Colonel Glenn Starnes, Battalion Commander within the Marines during Operation Iraqi Freedom, explained that embeds had access to the original plans and were aware of the commander's intent. Instead of criticizing the tactical situation as plans changed, embeds knew the whole story and reported about the modifications.<sup>28</sup>

The military involved in the media coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom were very satisfied with the quality of information shown in the media. It met their standards of accuracy, time and honesty. Secretary Rumsfeld also strongly approved the reports that came from the hundreds of journalists: 'They could see accurate presentations and representations and written accounts of what the men and women in uniform were doing'.<sup>29</sup>

The military had, during the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, some difficulties in providing complete information of the war. While the embedded TV journalists already showed snapshots of the war, CENTCOM omitted to give a broader view at operational level during the first days of the war. General Tommy Franks, Commander CENTCOM, did not like to deal with media, he told Secretary Rumsfeld.<sup>30</sup> For the first several days CENTCOM did not organize any briefings, leading reporters to wonder why they were invited.

Once the daily briefings began, the first CENTCOM briefers were evasive and defensive. This start cost the military some credibility of the press and the public. As the war continued, Brigadier General Vincent Brooks, CENTCOM's spokesman, cultivated a more balanced and phlegmatic demeanor and the briefings became more effective.<sup>31</sup>

• *Violations of OPSEC*

Lieutenant Colonel Larry Cox, chief of the press desk during Operation Iraqi Freedom, interpreted that fewer than half a dozen embedded news people were expelled. Out of a population of 662, that is less than 1 per cent. Part of the decision to dis-embed journalists was that the reporter said something over-the-line as far as ground rules go. Another part of the decision was a reflection of how intentional it was and how likely it was to happen again.

Most journalists did not realize that they passed the line. In only one



major case, the U.S. Armed Forces sent away a journalist. Cox added that the program worked, stating: 'Journalists are professionals, and inclined to give due regard to their own safety and the safety of the unit they're with'.<sup>32</sup>

Lieutenant General Michael DeLong, deputy commander of CENTCOM during Operation Iraqi Freedom, declared that CENTCOM was not so worried about embeds giving away secrets. Their biggest concern was the group of retired generals turned commentator that offered opinions and often false predictions on the operation in many news shows.<sup>33</sup>

The public was satisfied that journalists minded out the OPSEC rules. Consequently, it did not give the journalist extra incentives to violate the OPSEC rules. ABC news conducted a news poll before Operation Iraqi Freedom with reference to OPSEC. The poll showed that almost 70 per cent of the U.S. public said that the military





**US Army Soldiers assigned to the 4th Psychological Operations Group (POG) watch a news briefing using the Product Distribution System equipment at an undisclosed location in Iraq, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003**

(Photo A. Ansarov; collection NIMH)

*still not understand the meaning behind the action.<sup>37</sup>*

Where journalists complain about the poor quality, it is however not due to the embedded program. In most cases, journalists had full access to all the plans and intentions, but war is very complex and not easy to understand. The Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz already remarked: 'Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult'.<sup>38</sup>

**Unintended effects for the military**

The *Public Affairs Guidance on Embedding Media* did not only cause foreseen effects, but also two unforeseen effects. The first unexpected effect was that the embedded program had an enormous impact on the home front of the deployed soldiers. Members of the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division were euphoric about the way the embedded media contributed to their internal communication. Concerned family members were able to receive daily updates on their loved ones by the press, the Marines said in their evaluation report.<sup>39</sup>

However, this effect also has a negative side, told by Mrs. Nancy Chamberlain. After she received the formal confirmation that her son, a Marine Captain, was killed in Iraq, she reacted to NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw in his news show.

*I truly admire what all the network news and news technologies are doing today to bring it into our homes. But for the mothers and wives who are out there watching, it is murder. It's heartbreak. We can't leave television. Every tank, every helicopter, 'Is that my son?' And I*

should have the right to prohibit media disclosure to sensitive and secret information.<sup>34</sup> For most Americans OPSEC was more important than a free flow of all information on the operation.

**• Building a good relationship**

The relationship between the military and the media depended on the unit commander. Positive news coverage indicated that commanders were open and available to embedded journalists. Some of the embedded journalists had negative experiences. Washington Post's Lyndsey Layton, embedded to the USS Abraham Lincoln, was forced to sign an agreement that was more restrictive than the Pentagon's Public Affairs Guidance. The Commander of the USS Abraham Lincoln lifted the ad hoc constraints when Layton and her colleagues complained to Navy brass in Bahrain.

Most reporters were enthusiastic about their treatment. T. Sean Herbert, head of CBS News analyst's desk,

said that embeds and troops became a *band of brothers*, leading to giddy and excited reporting.<sup>35</sup> Lai Ling Jew, a NBC News producer embedded with 101<sup>st</sup> Air Assault Division, even spoke at the funeral of one of the killed soldiers, because soldiers asked her to do so. 'It was a strange responsibility for a journalist.'<sup>36</sup>

The embedded program in general contributed to a more respectful and trustful relationship between the military and the media.

Despite a better relationship, not all of the embedded journalists agreed that they were able to see the essence of the operation. U.S. News & World Reporter Mark Mazatti, embedded to 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Force's mobile command, admitted that it will take a lifetime to understand all the implications of a military operation.

*The press corps' poor performance in reading the Iraq battlefield indicates that you can be embedded all the way up to four-star generals and*



*just need you to be aware that technology is great. But there are moms, there are dads, there are wives who are suffering because of this.*<sup>40</sup>

Thus, instead of having only a positive effect on the home front, the embedded program can also lead to much stress among the home front and that can become counter-productive in the longer term. It might affect the fighting soldiers.

The second unintended effect of the embedded program is the use of embedded information as a tool for leading troops. Some think it is a positive aspect, but usually it becomes a negative one. This is best described by Bing West and Major General (Ret) Ray Smith in their book *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division*.

They wrote that Lieutenant General James Conway, the senior Marine commander, watched in his combat operations centre live CNN coverage of the fighting in East Baghdad. Conway was so impressed by the wide-open friendliness and lack of opposition that he immediately approved the division's request to let the battalions roll until they hit a defense.

The CNN coverage together with other live feeds from embeds encouraged Conway to speed the advance and to modify his plan. 'That's OBE – overtaken by events,' Conway said. Embedded coverage enabled Lieutenant General Conway to make a fast assessment and a change to his plan.<sup>41</sup>

Using opportunities during operations is always highly recommended, but there is a high risk in changing the plan because of embedded reports. Embedded journalists are not official operational intelligence sources and embedded pictures only show a very narrow view of a combat situation. Moreover, the way Lieutenant General Conway used the embed reports is not in line with a mission command culture, which accepts the uncertainty of war.

Mission command is a mechanism to direct operations through decentralized execution based on leaders at all levels in the organization that are willing to use initiative. It also requires an environment of trust and mutual understanding.<sup>42</sup>

Commanders, even at the highest headquarters, must trust their subordinate commanders on the scene in their decision-making.

In short, the military was positive about the embedded news media program. It met their standards of providing accurate, timely and fair information without violating the OPSEC rules. The program also contributed to a better relationship between the military and the media, which added to more complete and positive media reports on the military during the war. However, the military must realize that the embedded program had unintended effects: it can lead to stress on the home front, and the use of embedded reports as management tool, might be risky.

### **Media Effectiveness**

The journalistic perspective comprises two measures: the elements of good journalism and economic motives. This section starts with the elements of good journalism.

#### *Truth to serve the citizen and verification*

Because of the nature of embedded coverage, networks were not able to transform the coverage into the usual smooth fifteen-second shot with a catchy sound bite. The embedded program gave another dimension to verification, a more implicit one. The public could see directly what happened at the front. Personal observation of the fact became the ultimate verification. The embedded program linked the military performances directly to the public.

#### *Independence and autonomous monitor of power*

The loss of independence because of the embedded program was one of the main concerns of news producers and

experts, but reporters themselves did not agree with that opinion. Reporter Sam Howe Verhowek of the *Los Angeles Times* made clear that the embedded program created an inherent conflict.



*From the military's point of view, when you embed somebody in your unit, they become family. For the media side that's very tricky. You want to keep objective distance from your source.*<sup>43</sup>



Some media experts like Professor Michael Pfau of the University of Oklahoma, referred to the embedded program as producing a variation of the Stockholm syndrome.<sup>45</sup> Journalists became dependent for their survival on soldiers.<sup>44</sup> Thomas Ricks from the *Washington Post* understood the dilemma between affinity for protecting soldiers versus objectivity and independence but adds that reporters were never forced to participate in the embedded program. 'They were embeds by choice.'<sup>46</sup>

Robert Kaplan, embedded with the U.S. military in both Afghanistan and Iraq, believed that no journalist is independent and objective.

*A journalist may seek different points of view, but he shapes and portrays those viewpoints from only one angle of vision: his own.*<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, the military offered the press with the embedded program inside looks. Major Tom Bryant, who worked in the Public Affairs cell of 5th U.S. Corps, described the discussion on less objectivity versus participation in the embedded program.

*Bottom line is yes, they did lose a level of objectivity, and yes, we did use their presence [...]. What they cannot deny is they enjoyed a level of access – to classified briefings, plans, and combat operations – that was unprecedented. It's media cocaine for them – they need the access, want it more than anything, and can't stop themselves from actually learning to like the soldiers they're around – and they hate themselves for it.*<sup>48</sup>

The watchdog function, or autonomous monitor of power, did not work perfectly. From the start, the American media showed a clean war without casualties. Christopher Bollyn

**A view of the Ultra High Frequency (UHF) antenna mast operated by the US Army, Central Iraq, 2003**  
(Photo I. Paustovs; collection NIMH)

called it the sanitized view of the war.<sup>49</sup>

American media in general followed the guidance of the Secretary of Defense and became patriotic. That made the press less critical on one of America's most powerful institutions, the U.S. Armed Forces. Most major networks added nationalistic symbols, such as waving *Stars and Stripes*, to embedded pictures of advancing Coalition troops.

Some American news networks did not only show positive embedded pictures, but also gave floor to more critical voices against the war.<sup>50</sup> The general tendency among the major networks was to show a jingoistic report of the war, which made them less critical on the actions of the Armed Forces.

There was probably already some existing national sentiment among many media networks, but the embedded pictures of advancing U.S. troops made that feeling stronger. For three weeks in April 2003, the media portrayed Coalition Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, and Marines as the real heroes, helping to solve the *Global War on Terrorism* as seen by the Americans.

*Forum for public criticism and compromise*

The embedded coverage provided a lot of information for the public, but the information was only one-sided: the Coalition Forces. There were no western embeds with Iraqi units; a situation that was likely unfeasible. It needs more than only one-sided pictures to structure an opinion.

More balanced information with background reports from both sides would have laid a much better foundation. As CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour said, when asked about the embedded program:

*Yes, you get good pictures, but, no, you don't get great information. No, you don't get necessarily great journalism.*<sup>51</sup>

### *Comprehensive and proportional news*

The lack of comprehensive news was a big issue in the discussion on the embedded program. The reality of the war was much broader and more complex than shown in the embedded coverage and stories. CBS News President, Andrew Heyward, agreed that one of the immediate and major criticisms of TV embedding was that it provided a soda straw view of the war, devoid of context, perspective or a view from the Iraqi side. He retorts that if this was looking through straws, then before we had to be looking through toothpicks.<sup>52</sup>

Todd Gitlin, professor in journalism at the Columbia University, remarked that he was not concerned about the coverage and stories of the embeds, but more about how the networks processed all the information:

*I'm hard to remember anything out of the embeds which seemed to me particularly egregious. I was much more critical of what was going on with [network] headquarters commentary, which got into the celebratory shock-and-awe thing.<sup>53</sup>*

Another element of proportionality is that media, especially television, enlarges situations. A small incident can become a major issue on television with unforeseen effects. This phenomenon occurred on 23 March 2003. Reports about a British aircraft shot down by a Patriot missile, five American prisoners of war, and intense fighting around the city of Nasiriyah, aggravated a widespread belief that the operation was in danger.<sup>54</sup>

It means that embedded reports can lead to disproportional news coverage causing unintended effects. Skirmishes become big battles and the home front believes that the entire operation is in

**A US Marine Corps (usmc) Marine comes to the aid of displaced Iraqi civilians caught in a firefight north of An Nasiriyah, Iraq, 2003**

(Photo M.M. Gratz; collection NIMH)

danger. It shows the need for at least daily press conferences at the operational level, e.g. CENTCOM, to place the information in a broader and more balanced perspective.

### *Economic motive*

The economic motive is one of the most important media measures to evaluate the embedded program. Despite all the idealistic measures, media organizations and networks are still commercial corporations. The main effort of every commercial firm is to make profit and media organizations and networks are no exceptions to this rule.

Profit making in the media world is related to rating. After all, news shows that are watched by a huge audience or newspapers read by a large public yield more money and attract companies for advertisement. The media took enormous advantage of the war in Iraq. The ratings of the cable networks in the United States, such as Fox, CNN and MSNBC, expanded tremendously during Operation Iraqi Freedom in comparison with the weeks before the war. The long established newscasts, such as ABC, NBC and CBS saw a slight decrease in their ratings, but they still had a larger audience than the cable networks

comprising many million viewers.<sup>55</sup> They probably lost watchers to the cable networks.

The print media, especially the newspapers, had a slight increase in their ratings. This was partly due to the innovative approaches, like the embedded program, that resonated with the audience.<sup>56</sup>

In general terms, the media was very pleased with this offer of the U.S. Department of Defense. They took benefit of the war, because the embedded program provided many opportunities. It linked the war directly to the public, an innovation in war coverage. A great virtue of embedded program was that journalists could see the actions of Armed Forces from a very close distance and with their own eyes. Most of the journalists were impressed and used a positive tone in their coverage.

### **Public Effectiveness**

The public perspective is the third perspective to evaluate the embedded program. The perspective is restricted to the American audience. The international audience will be discussed later in this article. The public standpoint comprises three measures: quality, objectivity and combat fatigue.





### • *Quality*

The term quality is translated into appreciation. The Project for Excellence in Journalism, affiliated with Columbia University, conducted a content analysis of the embedded reports on television during the first days of the war. The researchers concluded that the American public found the embedded coverage largely anecdotal. It was exciting and dull, combat focused, and most information was live and unedited. The public concluded that much of it lacked context but was usually rich in detail.

Researchers of the project also found that the majority of the Americans said embedded reporters are a good thing. Of the 34 per cent who said it was a bad thing, most were worried that the embedded program was providing too much information that could help the enemy.<sup>57</sup>

### • *Objectivity*

Pew Research Center observed that 30 per cent of the American public indicated that they had a great deal of confidence in the press accuracy and 51 per cent said they had a fair amount of confidence, while 15 per cent said that they did not have much confidence. Pew Research Center concludes that only a few people thought the presence of journalists with Coalition forces would result in biased reports.<sup>58</sup> That means that the majority of the American public accepted the embedded news coverage.

### • *Combat fatigue*

Pew Research Center summarized that there are signs that 24/7 televised images of war took a toll on the audience. Research showed that most of the American population said the embedded media coverage was frightening.<sup>59</sup> Pew Research Center also determined that most Americans felt that the media gave the right amount of coverage on the war.

Those who said there was too much coverage far outnumbered the ones who thought that the war was under covered. By contrast, many people

complained that in comparison to other news issues in the spring of 2003, the war with its embedded coverage was overemphasized.<sup>60</sup>

By and large, the American public was positive about the embedded program. Their collective opinion is that it was a good thing that did not lead to biased information about the war. The embedded pictures scared most Americans, probably because it offered the American public a front seat. Embedded coverage did not cause an overload of war reporting, but it was not always in balance with other important news issues.

### **International standpoints**

It is hard to give one international perspective. Therefore, the international perspective in this article consists of the opinions of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany and some Arab countries. The reason for selecting these countries is that it gives a wide range of countries with different interests in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The United Kingdom was United States' closest coalition partner, while The Netherlands was a coalition partner without troops participating in the major combat operations of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Germany was against the war and Arab countries have other cultural and political patterns than the aforementioned Western democracies.

#### *The United Kingdom*

The people in the United Kingdom appreciated the embedded coverage, but were not as excited as the people in the United States. British Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon, acknowledged the effect of this way of reporting in appearing to reduce opposition to the war in the first days:

*The imagery they broadcast is at least partially responsible for the public's change of mood.*<sup>61</sup>

Both pro-war and anti-war sides attacked the *British Broadcasting Company* (BBC), the national broadcaster. British soldiers fighting in Iraq

were sometimes furious at the BBC for their coverage. They saw the BBC as too much pro-Iraq and they sometimes called the BBC: the Baghdad Broadcasting Company.

On the other hand, anti-war demonstrators accused the BBC of being biased by the embedded program. Senior managers of the BBC apologized for the use of bias terms such as 'we' and 'deliberate' in their embedded coverage.<sup>52</sup> The conclusion of the British Ministry of Defence was that the embedded program enabled the primary aim of their media effort: it provided the press and the audience with accurate and timely information.<sup>53</sup>

#### *The Netherlands*

The Coalition Forces did not allow the Dutch public broadcasting service, the *Nederlandse Omroep Stichting* (NOS), to participate in the embedded program. Dutch correspondent in Washington Charles Groenhuijsen was surprised to discover that mainly British and Americans were selected for the embedded program; even reporters of unexpected networks and magazines.<sup>64</sup> Did the policymakers oversee the international impact of this decision on the longer term?

The NOS was able to receive embedded pictures from the front through American or British networks, but that was not what they wanted. They wanted their own embeds. As an alternative the NOS tasked Dutch reporters to make contrasting docudramas in the United States and the Middle East on subjects related to Operation Iraqi Freedom.<sup>65</sup> After less than a week, the NOS decided to stop the newscast that lasted the entire day and went to their normal pattern of a few small newscasts per day. The rates of the viewing public did not show a peak.

#### *Germany*

German media researchers Raimund Mock and Markus Rettich deduced that the war was a mega media event in Germany. It exceeded that on the Kosovo war in 1999 in which the Ger-



**US Military personnel assigned to the 4th Psychological Operations Group (POG) broadcast television and radio programming from onboard an ANG EC-130J Hercules 'Command Solo' aircraft, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003** (Photo A. Ansarov; collection NIMH)

man Armed Forces played an active role. Private network *Radio Television Luxemburg* (RTL) was pleased to have an embedded journalist with allied troops and a reporter in Baghdad to cover both sides of the war.

The public broadcasters, *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* (ZDF) and the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundes Republik Deutschland* (ARD) primarily relied on their correspondents in Baghdad, who put their emphasis on the suffering of the Iraqi civilians rather than on warfare. Mock and Rettich conclude that the Baghdad coverage was more proper and politically correct in Germany than the embedded coverage since two German Baghdad reporters received the prestigious Hans Joachim Fried-

richs Award, annually given in Germany to courageous journalists with high quality reportages.<sup>66</sup>

#### *Arab countries*

Arab reactions to the embedded program were mainly negative. Not many Arab TV channels showed live embedded coverage. Al-Jazeera, in the Western World seen as the voice of the Middle East,<sup>67</sup> did not participate in the embedded program. They thought that might have given a one-sided biased view of the war. Faisal Bodi, a senior editor of Al-Jazeera, explained the official editorial line during Operation Iraqi Freedom:

*Of all the major global networks, Al-Jazeera has been alone in proceeding from the premise that this war should be viewed as an illegal*

*enterprise. It has broadcast the horror of the bombing campaign, the blown-out brains, the blood-spattered pavements, the screaming infants and the corpses. Its team of on-the-ground, unembedded correspondents has provided a corrective to the official line that the campaign is, barring occasional resistance, going to plan.*<sup>68</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The main research question for this article reads: 'Was the embedded news media program effective before and during the major combat operations of Operation Iraqi Freedom from February through April 2003?' The answer is simply yes. The embedded news media program was effective, because the military, the media and the American public were all happy with it and it also met the standards of the *Public Affairs Guidance on Embedding Media*.

Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his assistant Victoria Clarke initiated the embedded news media program. This initiative made the military the organizer of the embedded program with which the media was eager to cooperate. The embedded program became a new milestone in the military-media relationship.

Though Rumsfeld and Clark allowed journalists to embed with the Coalition troops during Operation Iraqi Freedom, there were restrictions in the guidance in how the journalists could report the war. By far most journalists complied with the restrictions.

Both relevant joint publications and the *Public Affairs Guidance on Embedding Media* spelt out that the military would benefit from timely, accurate and fair information without violating the OPSEC. This formula worked in nearly all cases. Journalists hardly abused the rules for OPSEC and accurate and fair stories were told. A good relation between embedded journalists and soldiers became an

important foundation for a successful embedded program.

Media experts and news producers were hesitant to participate in the embedded program. The embedded program would violate the rules of good journalism. It turned out differently. The embedded program enabled journalists to keep a tight rein on all military activities. The military gave journalists access to information and that had a fatal fascination for journalists.

Above all, the media took enormous economic advantage of the embedded program. News people saw in the embedded program a nice opportunity to sell news. A great virtue of the embedded program was that journalists could see the actions of Armed Forces from a close distance and with their own eyes. The embedded program linked the war directly to the American public. That was unique.

The American public was positive about the embedded program. It did not lead to biased information about the war. The embedded TV coverage scared most Americans, maybe because the public could see the front live on television. Most Americans felt that the embedded program did not lead to an overload of war coverage; only the amount of coverage was not in balance with other important news issues.

In the international environment, the embedded news media program was not as effective as it was in the United States. The international press and audience were less positive on the advance of the Coalition troops than their American colleagues. Networks in Europe showed more critical and balanced news, while most Arab media ignored the embedded program.

Overall, the lower interest in the international environment did not affect the effectiveness of the embedded program in the United States, but perhaps more international reporters participating in the embedded program

would have increased the international attention for embedded coverage.

Media watcher Danny Schechter does not concur with the conclusion of this article. He considers the embedded program as a well-organized propaganda machine. Schechter distinguished two different fronts:

*The Iraqis were targeted by bombs and information warfare while western audiences had a well executed propaganda campaign often posing as news directed their way.<sup>69</sup>*

Schechter sees the military and the media as one monolith targeting the American and international audience. That is far beyond the observations of this article.

Brookings Institution<sup>70</sup> Senior Fellow, Stephen Hess, agrees with the conclusions of this article. He called the embedded program a win-win-win situation:

*It's clear that journalists, who want access more than anything else, were given remarkably access. It seems to me clear that the military got much favorable coverage than they would have had had there not been embedding. And it's clear that the public saw a type of picture that they had never, never had an opportunity to see before.<sup>71</sup>*

### **Future operations**

One of the last research questions is whether the embedded news media program is a useful tool for future operations. The simple answer is again: yes. Today, war without media is unthinkable. Media correspondent of the Public Broadcasting Service, Terence Smith, thinks that the embedded program has set a new standard: 'I can't imagine in a future conflict not having this. [...] This will be the new model'.<sup>72</sup> In fact, if the military stops, the media and the public will view this as the military hiding information. That will damage the impro-

ving military-media relation. Though the U.S. Department of Defense never closed the embedded program officially, they consider revitalizing the initiative. After President Bush announced the end of the major combat operations in Iraq, the fighting did not stop. The Coalition Forces fought many significant battles since, most without any media, causing the media to start speculating and providing the adversary the opportunity to tell their propaganda stories.

These were the information aspects Mrs. Victoria Clarke tried to prevent with the embedded program. Prolongation of the embedded program with the size it had during the major combat operations of Operation Iraqi Freedom could provide an advantage for the military.<sup>73</sup>

It could also add to a better and a more balanced vision of the ongoing operation. John Walcott, the Washington Bureau Chief of Knight Ridder Newspapers, agreed that he was convinced that embedded program stopped too early:

*Some of what the Pentagon worried about originally is now starting to happen, and that is Iraqis describing versions of events where we don't have any reporters anymore present.<sup>74</sup>*

### **Relevance for the Netherlands Armed Forces**

An important part of this article is to consider the utility of the research results for today's situation in the Netherlands.

Overall, the embedded new media program worked very well in the United States previous and during Operation Iraqi Freedom. It also laid down a possible standard for military-media relations during future conflicts.

But, will embedded media work in the Netherlands and what does it mean for the Netherlands Armed Forces?



First of all, the Public Affairs Office of the Netherlands Ministry of Defence must realize that the embedded news media program set the trend for the coverage of future and even ongoing conflicts. Not all military operations and not all phases of a military operation will be covered by embedded media, but be careful. As mentioned by Colonel Melanie Reeder, if you provide reporters access to front units and headquarters, they probably tell accurate stories. If they receive second hand information on operations through public affair officers, they probably start speculating.

The Public Affairs Office of the Netherlands Ministry of Defence might consider developing a policy for dealing with embedded news media with clear selection criteria for reporters. Part of this policy is to make sure that the Dutch audience will see a comprehensive view of the ongoing operation and not only loose snapshots made by embedded reporters.

Embedded news media during operations can contribute to a better understanding of the Netherlands Armed Forces conducting operations. Consi-

der what the effect would have been in the Netherlands if some Dutch and international journalists had been embedded to *Dutchbat III* in Srebrenica during the spring and summer of 1995.

On the other hand, the military is not the only player in the embedded program. There are still a few important questions in this case: is the Netherlands political level prepared to start an embedded news media program? And, how willing is the Netherlands media to comply with such a program?

Second, embedded news media should become an integral part of unit training. Media is in most Dutch units already part of their training, but this is aimed on the media pool system. Training staffs must realize that units will not only be confronted with encountering media. Embedded reports, photographers and camera people will be part of the operation, especially when Dutch units are part of an American or British lead operation.

Third, the Netherlands Ministry of Defence created a well-organized family support system with all kind of

home front committees. As explained in this article, embedded reporting can have a negative impact on the home front. The Netherlands Ministry of Defence should consider, when participating in an embedded news media program, how to prevent this negative impact on the home front. The American military focused only on the positive side, but reality was different.

The fourth consideration for the Netherlands Armed Forces is a further analysis of the use of embedded pictures as a leadership instrument. Some people see this use as a positive development. Use all opportunities to run an operation is their creed.

Others do not agree. They see a tendency that the use of embedded pictures for running an operation is too risky and it might lead to micro-management.

It is hard to say in general how to deal with this information. It depends on the situation, but it is important to start a discussion on this topic in officer and non-commissioned officer career courses to get a better understanding of this effect.

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