

PREPARING THE COMMANDER FOR A MEDIA INTERVIEW A Scheduled Media Encounter

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Media interviews with commanders, especially brigade commanders and general officers, often provide a stern preparation challenge for public affairs officers (PAO). We must recognize that it is also an excellent opportunity for commanders to tell their portion of the Army story. Commanders are sometimes wary of media encounters or, conversely, overconfident in their abilities to "handle the media." As PAOs we can greatly assist the commander as he prepares for an interview with a member of the media. The PAO must take the lead in creating a structure that will facilitate a meaningful encounter while minimizing the elements of surprise and anxiety.

Scheduled media interview topics are generally known before a visit takes place. PAOs can systematically address potential issues by producing some key staff products and training events. Creating **command messages** will establish the basis for the planning process. Developing an exhaustive list of **potential questions**, with an equally comprehensive list of thoroughly investigated **answers**, will enhance not only the commander's credibility, it will assist the media in getting an accurate story. **Rehearsing** for the interview, using the staff products above, will complete the planning process. The PAO role-playing the part of the media can give the commander a preview of what to expect from an upcoming engagement. Finally, an **after-action review** (AAR) following an interview will create a learning experience for the commander and involved staff and will provide an experiential learning product for the future.

Command Messages Provide the Blueprint

Command messages are the foundation necessary to prepare for a media interview. As a commander and his PAO prepare command messages, they should keep in mind a recurring theme to communicate to the American public: "Increasingly, Americans want to know why military forces are relevant to them . . . Americans want and deserve to know who we are, what we stand for today, and what sets us apart."²

In producing command messages, we must answer basic questions:

- What does the commander want the diverse public(s) to understand about this installation, exercise, operation, or event? What is the **intended message**?
- Who are the **key publics** interested in this subject?

- What is the higher headquarters **stated position(s)** on the possible subjects for discussion?
- Will all **potential interviewees understand** the messages and be able to internalize the main points?

Negative or inadequate answers to the above questions reveal a lack of readiness to face the media.

Articulating the commander's **intended message** is critical to a successful media encounter. Truth, of course, is our cornerstone: "The quickest way to destroy credibility is to misrepresent the truth . . . When credibility is undermined, communication becomes ineffective and it is impossible to achieve information objectives."³

Accordingly, a sharpened set of three to five concise messages that focus on a particular subject can greatly assist in interview preparation. (As a public affairs planner, point out to potential interviewees that **questions presented by either print or electronic media rarely appear in the finished product**. Focus answers for the masses and in the format you choose.)

For the PA planner, it is important to know the **key publics** as we begin to formulate command messages. The publics can include local or national political leaders, newspaper editorialists, military organizations, private groups with a military affiliation, the general public, military families, or other special interests. If we are focused on informing military organizations, for example, using references to military history or principles of war are useful and may be an excellent vehicle for conveying information. Using the same messages to inform a local environmental group, on the other hand, may prove useless. Know your audience and tailor accordingly.

As PAOs understand, our focus is on "achieving an accurate, balanced, and credible presentation of timely information that communicates the commanders (sic) perspective to enhance confidence in the force and the operation."⁴

To facilitate such confidence, commanders and PAOs must fully understand and incorporate messages previously **stated by higher headquarters**. This requirement does not indicate a "party-line" approach to media contact -- the truth is bedrock; rather it means we should seek to articulate command policies, mission statements, and ideas in the spirit the higher-level commander intended. (Later we will discuss preparation of potential questions and answers and rehearsals which can help address potential conflicts.)

Create the set of three to five command messages ensuring the commander, and other potential interviewees, can **understand and internalize** the main points. Do not attempt to appear clever or catchy but do strive to accentuate positive points. Preparation is key: "Develop your key messages in advance of the interview. These should be brief statements that make the point in an assertive manner."⁵

The commander, from whom you received your initial guidance, requires a firm understanding of each message and, more importantly, will need to articulate his points in the upcoming interview.

What follows is a scenario based example:

COMMAND MESSAGE EXAMPLES

The following examples are taken from a fictitious scenario that involves an interview with an environmental reporter. The reporter is interested in reasons behind a proposal to acquire a piece of land never before used for the new Tonkawa Scout Vehicle.

The commander and PAO seek to inform the reporter of the installation's notable environmental record. The commander has been disappointed by recent coverage in local media that says nothing about what Fort Davis has done in the past to ensure environmental concerns are adequately addressed.

While it is obvious from the messages below that the commander would need an in-depth knowledge of the installation to face detailed questioning, the purpose of the messages is to help ensure he can focus on what he wants the public to know.

COMMAND MESSAGES AND SUPPORTING BULLETS

Soldiers and Environment. Fort Davis spends \$14 million a year to protect the environment. That's the kind of investment in the environment we'll bring to this new, much-needed training area. **It also ensures that America's soldiers don't become at risk on the 21st century battlefield.**

- Cultural Protection Center. Fort Davis was selected as the site of the new Cultural Protection Center by the special Presidential Commission on American Issues due to its **outstanding environmental and cultural programs.**
- Cultural Sites. We have identified 12 sites on Fort Davis -- and 9 are in protected status. **We make a special effort to protect this valuable land.**
- Red Land Dog Protection. The 5,000 acres of land recently set aside for protection of the Red Land Dog comes at the expense of valuable training areas. **We are committed to protection of animal species on Fort Davis.**

Outside Authorities Support Fort Davis's Environmental Record. "The Red Land Dog and the Tonkawa Vehicle are coexisting beautifully. Military preparedness and environmental protection are being intertwined on the Army's Fort Davis" -- That's not what the Army says -- that's what Special Commissioner Henry Johnson said when he recognized Fort Davis's environmental program with the **Special Commission's American Environmental Award** last year.

- Red Land Dog (again). The Land Dog protection areas have produced an **85% survival rate among Red Land Dog pups versus a 19% survival rate in the wild.**
- Valley Boars. The population of Valley Boars has roughly doubled in the last two years -- this is a **cooperative effort** with the State Fish and Game Council.
- Loss of Training Area. Thirty-five percent of Fort Davis's land is not used for training. Among other factors, protection of vital environmental concerns has led to the loss of some training areas. **Our commitment to the environment has been steadfast throughout Fort Davis's history.**

Technology and Training. Information technology is revolutionizing the armies of the world -- we can't be left behind. **Fort Davis provides the most realistic location -- the only location -- where soldiers can train with this level of realism.**

Tonkawa. The new Tonkawa Scout Vehicle can see and fire to a distance five times that of the last scout vehicle. **We must have the capability to train in conditions as close to actual combat as possible.**

It is also worth noting that adapting command messages to new situations is a crucial combat task, and methods for message development are the same across the spectrum of military activities. Consider one of the three command messages developed for Joint Task Force (JTF 180) in preparation for the deployment to Haiti in 1994:

"Your mission in Haiti is:

- a. Neutralize Haitian armed forces and police to protect U.S. citizens and interests, designated Haitians, and third country nationals.
- b. Restore civil order.
- c. Conduct nation assistance to stabilize internal situation.
- d. Assist in the transition to a democratic Haiti." ⁶

The commander (and every soldier in the JTF) were clearly aware of their mission and were able to provide accurate, meaningful information to visiting media. (Historical note: Neutralizing the Haitian armed forces became a moot point when the military's leader opted to go into a negotiated exile and his forces surrendered without a struggle.)

QUESTION AND ANSWER DEVELOPMENT

A detailed list of **questions and answers** is an invaluable tool in preparing for the media interview. To prepare the question list, use a variety of resources:

- Read prior articles written by the reporter.
- Contact the subject-matter-expert (SME) on your staff to list potential issues.
- Put yourself into the position mentally of a reporter. Develop approximately fifty questions, attempting to thoroughly exhaust the subject.
- Investigate potential **answers** with appropriate staff agencies. Although the commander likely knows his unit very well, it is unrealistic to assume he knows every answer about the myriad of technical issues in his command. The staff agencies can provide the technical or professional (such as medical or legal) answers to a wide range of possible questions.

REHEARSAL

Conducting a **rehearsal**, if possible, will provide the commander a final opportunity to examine and refine his intended messages. Prior to the rehearsal (the needed time varies), provide the commander with the list of questions and answers for study. Assist him in using the answers and inserting command messages in each answer.

Select a secluded area for the rehearsal, free of distractions and interruption. (Admittedly this is difficult for senior officers.) Prepare yourself, or a media-trained surrogate, by asking the questions as a reporter would. The interview should be as realistic as possible: escort the role-playing interviewer and commander to the interview site, ensure the role-player is in civilian clothes, if a photographer (print or electronic) is to be present, bring a photographer along, set a definite time-limit, and conduct a rehearsal AAR.

The role-playing interviewer should act as the reporter is expected to act. If the reporter's methods are unknown, the interviewer must use logical news-gathering techniques:

- Ask questions in a logical pattern (not directly off the question and answer sheet); do not impose a stereotypical tabloid style of interviewing (more often than not it does not match reality).
- Ask tough questions and be prepared to follow-up as answers develop new areas of interest, and listen well to the answers. (Take notes as if preparing a story.)

- Following the rehearsal, provide the commander with a frank AAR using the same methods discussed below. This is no place to tell the commander what he wants to hear -- be honest and provide solutions to problem areas.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Welcome the reporter at the agreed upon place and time. Ensure the commander is available as agreed and that the area for the interview is adequate for the type of medium (print vs. electronic). Allow for a firmly set period of time for the interview, and make everyone aware well in advance of the time constraints. As PAO refrain as much as possible from interfering with the interview. (Occasionally it may prove prudent to intervene if the commander requires a technical answer.) Tape or take notes of the interview; be open about it. Secretly taping an interview helps no one. Notify the reporter and commander when the time has expired and promptly (and courteously) escort the reporter out.

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

Soldiers in combat units routinely conduct AARs as a way of capturing all aspects of an event that will aid personal and institutional learning. At an AAR three basic questions are central: "What happened? Why did it happen? (and) What should we do about it? Next, there must be a common understanding of what was supposed to have happened." ⁷

PAOs can adapt these simple guidelines in assessing the conduct of an interview.

Immediately following the interview, facilitate with your commander and other key staff officers an AAR that reviews the event. Discuss which messages, if any, came through in the interview. Talk about the adequacy of the preparatory questions and answers when viewed against the actual interview. If there were problem areas, discuss why the situations arose. And most importantly, decide what should be done in the future to improve.

Assess, also, the printed or broadcast outcome. Did the command messages come through? How much of the interview was used? Did the reporter's coverage accurately reflect what was said? If electronic media was used, did voice-overs dispute what the commander said? Were his facts correct? Answers to these questions may assist the PAO and commander in future encounters with the same reporter.

CONCLUSION

Planned media encounters, such as interviews with reporters, provide commanders a chance to tell a story in a way that is conducive to accuracy and clarity. By producing concise and meaningful staff products, including command messages, potential questions and answers, rehearsals and AARs, PAOs can greatly impact the command's ability to accomplish its mission. Well trained and equipped PAOs can assist the commander in getting out his message and provide the American public with accurate and complete information about its great Army.

1. Field Manual 46-1, *Public Affairs Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 30 May 1997), pg. 33.

2. Ronald T. Sconyers, Brigadier General , USAF, "Revolutionary Air Force Public Affairs: The Vision," *Air Power Journal*, Fall 1995, pg. 2.

3. Field Manual 46-1, pg. 18.

4. Field Manual 100-6, *Information Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, August 1996), pg. 3-14.

5. J.R. Babiuk, Major, Canadian Army, et al., "Media Relations," *Dispatches*, March 1997, pg. 17.

6. Damian P. Carr, Major, U.S. Army, *U.S. Army Public Affairs During Operation Uphold Democracy*, Master's Thesis, (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: 1996), pg. 60.

7. Gordon R. Sullivan, Michael V. Harper, *Hope is Not a Method: What Business Leaders Can Learn from America's Army*, (New York: Times Books, 1996) pg. 195.