

CF on the PR Offensive

“warts and all” coverage?

When the first flights of CC-130 Hercules began unloading members of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment battlegroup onto the tarmac of Kabul’s dusty, battle-scarred airport in the summer of 2003, the troops stepping off the ramp didn’t know it, but they were walking into two campaigns. On the surface, the mission code-named *Operation Athena* was to provide troops and eventually a headquarters to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the NATO-run force maintaining security in the Afghan capital and propping up the interim government of President Hamid Karzai.

But the Canadian contingent, which would eventually grow to more than 2,000 soldiers, were also on the sharp end of a quiet public relations offensive by the Canadian Forces: an attempt to raise the profile of our perennially hard-pressed, perpetually cash-strapped and often derided military. In a pair of battered modular tents, at the far corner of the irregular rectangle of Hesco walls, barbed wire and guard towers that surround the sprawling Camp Julien, a group of eight reporters set up shop – the first journalists to be formally embedded with a Canadian Forces (CF) unit in the field.

“We believe, by embedding, Canadians will learn and appreciate more of what it is we do,” says Col Brett Boudreau, director of public affairs planning for the Director General of Public Affairs in Ottawa and one of the early champions of the embedding process in Kabul. “It is very much an experiment.”

Although some senior officers – and more DND bureaucrats – were leery of the idea of opening an overseas mission to in-depth, daily scrutiny by reporters, the media jumped into the concept with both feet. Competition for the first eight embedding spots was fierce and left public affairs officers in the unaccustomed position of



PHOTO: CPL JOHN BRADLEY, 3 RRZER BN CG

16 July 2004 – Bison armoured vehicles from the National Support Element, transporting members of the 3rd Battalion Royal 22nd Regiment Battalion Group to the Kabul International Airport for the return home after the completion of their 6-month tour of duty in Afghanistan. Canada’s ISAF mission is to maintain security in Kabul and its surrounding areas so the Afghan Transitional Authority and UN agencies can begin rebuilding the country.

having to pick and choose among reporters to cover the first weeks of the mission.

More than 20 newspapers, television networks and wire services eventually participated in the embedding experiment, including reporters from *The Canadian Press*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Sun* chain, *Global Television*, the *CBC* and *CanWest* newspapers.

Even the francophone media, traditionally cool to the idea of covering the military, clamoured to join in when the soldiers of the Royal 22eme Regiment replaced the largely English-speaking contingent of Roto 0. RDI, the CBC’s French language all-news network, and *L’Actualité Médicale*, a Quebec health tabloid, have sent reporters, along with Montreal newspapers *La Presse* and *Le Devoir*.

Col. Boudreau says the idea of embedding – a term he admits makes him wince – is nothing new to the Canadian Forces, which has hosted reporters in its camps before in Bosnia in the 1990s and during the PPCLI’s mission to Kandahar in 2002.

But *Operation Athena* was the first time the practice had been formalized, a directive from DGPA approved by General Raymond Henault, Chief of the Defence Staff, authorizing reporters to live, patrol and work with the troops “in theatre” for

stays that lasted weeks instead of days or hours. The military was to provide food, shelter, protection and access to the soldiers, in exchange for reporters signing off on a long list of ground rules, including agreeing not to report anything that would violate the mission’s operational security.

“From the top, there is direction that this will occur and it’s up to the various levels of command to see to it that it happens and to make it occur,” says Col Boudreau. “We support it at all levels, strategically, operationally and tactically.”

Col Boudreau balks at describing embedding as a public relations offensive for the Canadian Forces, preferring to call it “warts and all” coverage of the army on an overseas mission.

The idea, he says, was twofold: to show the public how their tax dollars are being spent and to give soldiers’ families an idea of what their spouses, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters are doing in the often dangerous streets of a city halfway around the world.

But the results in the first months of the mission must have astounded even the most ardent proponents of embedding within the Canadian Forces. National newspapers, radio stations and television newscasts were filled with almost daily stories from Kabul, from descriptions of night patrols by reporters trudging through the streets with the infantry to critical reports on the state of some of the battle group’s equipment – most notably the much maligned Iltis.

Despite competition with major domestic disasters such as B.C.'s raging forest fires, and Ontario's power blackout, the soldiers in Afghanistan found themselves on the front pages of newspapers and on television screens across Canada.

The fatal land mine attack in October, that claimed the lives of two members of the battlegroup, and the suicide bomber that killed one more earlier this year helped keep the Afghan mission – and by extension the entire Canadian Forces – in the headlines.

And that can only help the military in its ongoing fight for badly needed funding from the government, says historian and military analyst Dr. Jack Granatstein.

"From the military's point of view, embedding has worked brilliantly. DND's gamble has paid off," he states. "Has it changed attitudes? I don't know. Has it made politicians think they should increase the funding of the military? I don't know. But any good publicity helps."

Most media coverage of the CF over the last decade has been critical, if not outright negative, says Dr. Granatstein. Embedding helped change that, he says, raising the military's profile and instilling a new-found pride among Canadians in their military. Given the CF's well-documented funding crisis, he says the good news stories have appeared none too soon. "The military is fighting for its survival. It needs more money, more people, and a policy that makes sense."

Embedding, as a concept, has become so popular that even before the federal government announced that 450 troops would be sent to Haiti late last year, half a dozen media outlets had already asked to be embedded with them. And in what can only be seen as the crowning achievement for embedding, *CBC Television* broadcast its national news show *The National* live from Camp Julien for one week in February, including sending anchor Peter Mansbridge out on patrol with a section of troops from 3 RCR.

Major Roland Lavoie, one of two public affairs officers in Camp Julien during the first rotation of troops in *Operation Athena*, is pleased with how well embedding has worked in Afghanistan.

"I would say, for us it has been fantastic, particularly if we compare it to an experience where we didn't embed media," he said. "When you push out the news, you give a brief, you hand out a fact sheet, and

then you say: 'Bye bye.' At first glance, you can control the information. Embedding does not offer that. The media are here with us. The controls are not on editorial criteria. The control we have is on operational security, but not on mission success."

Major Lavoie said embedding also deepened the media's understanding of things military. "After two days, embedded reporters have been 48 hours in a military environment. They are more knowledgeable about military culture, mentality, equipment and rank structure. They do news reports that are better researched and more meaningful," he said. "The gain is not specific to this mission, and over time, we have developed some experts in the media."

Embedded reporters are allowed to move freely from unit to unit. Initially, they were assigned to specific units, but because the Afghan mission is essentially defensive and therefore static, the military decided to be flexible and allow reporters to rotate between different companies in the battle group.

"Most media prefer to cover something different every day. It did not suit most media requirements to stay with one unit for the entire time," says Major Lavoie.

But not all of the news out of Camp Julien was useful, Dr. Granatstein says. Stories produced by embedded reporters about Iltis jeeps breaking down in dusty Afghan hills, or about the mission's "no fraternization" policy, or on the civilians doing the bulk of the cooking have been politically insignificant and missed the larger issues, he says. "I would say the hard reporting doesn't seem to be there. No one is asking the tough questions: Why are we in Afghanistan? Is it a good idea to be confined to Kabul? Is supporting the government of Hamid Karzai a worthwhile venture?"

Reporters are also required to clear any sensitive information with public affairs officers. The military retains the right to review reporting of "potentially operationally sensitive issues" before stories are released, and information about the exact strength of troops, special operations units, and specific location of military units is considered off limits. The rules left many reporters chafing at the bit. "I have the capability of being on air live, instantly – I don't like anything that restricts me at all," says Rob Gordon, a *CBC TV* reporter who

spent two weeks embedded with November Company of 3 RCR last August. "I believe in the free flow of information to me and from me. But if you want to be embedded, you have to play ball."

Still Gordon says he believes he would not have been able to do his documentary on the unit without staying in camp as an *embed*. "The only way to be a fly on the wall and to get these guys in their natural state was to be there and stay with them. In the end, I did what they did and I got a really good idea of life in a light infantry battalion. It helped me get close to them and their lives."

Embedding has its skeptics. Stephen Ward, an associate professor at the University of British Columbia School of Journalism in Vancouver and a former *Canadian Press* reporter who covered the 1991 Gulf War, says embedding is an attempt to put a positive spin on the military. "Journalists have to ask themselves: Am I independent here? Can I report what I see freely? If not, they need to break free of those constraints. There's always tension between losing access and doing your job. They hold all of the cards."

But there are signs that its public relations offensive in Afghanistan has stalled. Reporters with Roto 1 have complained about reduced access to the troops, including barring them from operations such as joint raids with the Afghan police on Taliban compounds in Kabul. One senior officer with the Canadian contingent to ISAF told a reporter point blank that he did not believe in embedding and would not help them if he could avoid it. And as a result, the flood of stories out of Kabul has slowed to a trickle. But Col Boudreau says the Canadian Forces remains committed to embedding, and with the first deployment to ISAF drawing to a close, the Canadian Forces has decided to extend the experiment to Roto 2, a reduced contingent of about 700 troops from PPCLI and the Lord Strathcona's Horse. **FL**



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