Herding Cats: The Evolution of the ADF’s Media Embedding Program in Operational Areas

Lieutenant Colonel Jason Logue

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HERDING CATS

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Land Warfare Studies Centre

The Australian Army established the LWSC in July 1997 through the amalgamation of several existing staffs and research elements.

The charter of the LWSC is to promote the wider understanding and appreciation of land warfare; provide an institutional focus for applied research into the use of land power by the Australian Army; and raise the level of professional and intellectual debate within the Army. The LWSC fulfils these roles through a range of internal reports and external publications; a program of conferences, seminars and debates; and contributions to a variety of professional, academic and community forums. Additional information on the centre may be found on the Internet at <http://www.army.gov.au/Our-future/LWSC>.

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Executive Summary

Like other Western military forces, the ADF has used deployments since Vietnam to develop appropriate mechanisms to support media access to its operations. The ADF’s advances in this regard, like those of the US and UK, are almost solely linked to political and strategic direction issued on the cusp of operational deployments requiring last-minute adjustments to policy, procedures and processes. The nature of the ADF’s recent commitments to larger, long-term coalition operations has allowed commanders and planners to observe multiple approaches to battlefield media access and, in turn, develop a formalised Australian approach.

The ADF’s current approach involves a media embedding program which was established in 2010 following a trial event in 2009. The program seeks to provide media agencies coordinated access to ADF elements in remote and contested areas. Media embedding exposes journalists to the conduct of operations by ADF personnel at the tactical level with some scope for the provision of operational-level context by senior commanders. The media embed program is not designed to ‘create’ newsworthy events for journalists in a traditional public relations sense. Instead, it is simply the attachment of media personnel to tactical units on operations in much the same way other elements of the force may be attached for specific missions. Tactical units continue to operate as they would and incorporate media embeds into their daily program. It is the rawest view of ADF personnel on operations currently available to non-Defence employees.

From a purely ADF perspective, the conduct of the media embed program, particularly its rapid expansion and advancement in the past two years, has done much to enhance the often maligned military-media relationship. Media embedding in Afghanistan and on other minor operations is the only current, regular interaction between journalists, commanders and junior ADF personnel. The program has done much to humanise what is perceived as an increasingly clinical and sometimes detached way of waging war.
Media embedding, correctly implemented, offers an opportunity for the ADF to appropriately manage the principles of communication by building both credibility and trust with the Australian public.¹ Ultimately, the program must be about sustaining public understanding, not just facilitating media demands. While there are numerous risks associated with the program, the greater risk lies in *not* granting access to the media. At present, the ADF’s approach to media embedding offers the best access to operations in Afghanistan to date and, from all accounts, is largely meeting the requirements of participants.

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Introduction

‘Embedding’ journalists with combat units does provide the media with unprecedented access to the day-to-day reality of soldiers’ lives in the war zone. It is a complex juggling act: providing access for the press; ensuring that their safety and the safety of the soldiers they are with is not compromised; and protecting operational security without inappropriate restrictions on correspondents’ copy. I believe we are on the way to getting it right; I’m confident that journalists on future ‘embed’ tours will let me know if they think we’re getting it wrong.²

Senator John Faulkner, Minister for Defence
C.E.W. Bean Foundation Dinner Address
24 February 2010

The media coverage of the coalition invasion of Iraq on 20 March 2003 introduced several new terms to audiences around the world. In amongst the ‘shock and awe’, ‘thunder runs’ and ‘decapitation strikes’, one word featured in almost every news report filed from the coalition side of the fight — ‘embed’. At times, ‘embed’ was worn as a badge of honour by those journalists who experienced modern combat alongside soldiers and Marines. At other times, however, it represented a term of derision used by those who criticised the program as a propaganda coup for the US military. Over the course of its military life, the term ‘embed’ or ‘embedded’ has had multiple meanings, but in recent times it has most often been associated with the media on military operations.

While hosting media agencies in operational areas was not a new concept, the US Department of Defense program to embed 692 reporters, photographers, videographers, producers and technicians for the opening

phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom represented the largest undertaking of its kind attempted by a military force.³ From the outset, the focus of the embed program was to expose journalists to the tactical level of operations while maintaining a degree of operations security for military commanders. It was, by its very nature, a compromise between the principles of two often diametrically opposed organisations.⁴

The ADF has only recently embraced formalised media embedding in areas of operation. Embedding, as it is now understood, was not implemented by the ADF in Operation Slipper until August 2009 with the commencement of an operational trial. It was a further eight months before the program began in earnest with rapid expansion during the following 18 months. In 2012 the media embed program stretched the support capacity of units assigned to Operation Slipper and media nominations came to exceed available positions by a factor of three.

While the ADF’s current approach to formalised media embedding has drawn lessons from coalition partners and recent experiences, its development was tempered by institutional aversion to media and lingering bias. In many respects, 2011 was a watershed year for the media embed program with commanders at all levels seeking to maximise the opportunity that exposure to ADF personnel on operations overseas offered. This paper seeks to place the ADF’s now standardised approach for Operation Slipper media embedding in both its historical and global context, understand the impact of 2011’s embed program, highlight the significant lessons learned since the formalised program was instituted and posit concepts for further development.

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A short history of media embedding among principal security partners

The US approach

The US embedding program in Iraq was based on lessons learned from far smaller and constrained media activities in Bosnia during the 1990s and in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom in 2002. Its genesis, however, occurred in the often adversarial efforts by media agencies and the US military to operate in conflict zones following the Vietnam War. Operation Urgent Fury, the 1983 mission to depose the military government in Grenada, presented the first opportunity for the US military to consider media involvement in an operational area since Vietnam. As could be reasonably expected from an organisation that perceived media coverage as one of the reasons for domestic opposition to the US war in Vietnam, invasion planning focused on ‘control’, with a limited press pool system established. A press pool identified a small number of journalists and media crews representing the major agencies who would be hosted by the military. Variations on this program were also employed in Panama and during the 1991 Gulf War. At the peak of the Operation Desert Storm air phase, General Schwarzkopf registered his concern over the more than 1000 media representatives in his area of operations, of whom only 75 could be supported through established pool arrangements. He also believed that the media presented the best

7 Ibid., pp. 39–40.
8 Ibid., pp. 40–46.
intelligence source for the Iraqi military and issued Commander’s Guidance that all but stifled effective tactical media engagement, instead elevating media responsibilities to his senior commanders whom he held personally accountable.\textsuperscript{10} By the close of the ground campaign however, more than 1300 journalists and media representatives had made their way independently into Kuwait, overwhelming the stringent pool arrangements.\textsuperscript{11}

The uniformed ascendancy in the often ill-described ‘military-media relationship’ continued until the humanitarian crisis in Somalia required United Nations (UN) intervention under Operation Restore Hope. For the first time in recent history, media agencies preceded a military operation en masse, resulting in the now famous footage of US Marine Corps Force Recon and US Navy SEAL teams dazzled by cameras as they came ashore on a Mogadishu beach.\textsuperscript{12} Somalia offered post-Vietnam military commanders tangible experience of the lack of control their Vietnam-era predecessors had exerted over contemporary media. It also heralded the modern rise of the unilateral media agency on the battlefield. The humanitarian nature of 1994’s Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti allowed military commanders to close the gap that had arisen the previous year by seeking greater cooperation with media agencies operating on the island.\textsuperscript{13}

Allied commanders planning the intervention in Bosnia, particularly US Task Force Eagle in Germany, developed a concept to ‘embed’ media agencies within military units for the upcoming operation. The embed program included pre-deployment activities with the Task Force’s units and insertion into the area of operations with the security force. The embed program supported 24 media agencies for a period of approximately

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 381.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 467.
six weeks.¹⁴ Now described as ‘proto-embedding’ in light of the expansive program employed in 2003, Bosnia’s Operation Joint Endeavor planners and commanders broke with conventional wisdom and accepted considerable risk in adopting the new strategy. This risk was plain for all to see only days into the operation when a US Army battalion commander was quoted at odds with the US President concerning the expected length of the humanitarian mission. The issue was given further prominence when the Commanding Officer’s opinion was publicly condemned in the New York Times by an unnamed White House official.¹⁵

Despite the best efforts to further develop the embed concept, 1999’s Operation Allied Force in Kosovo, predominantly an air operation, essentially precluded the type of reporting available in Bosnia. An increased requirement for operations security as a result of sophisticated Serbian successes led commanders to limit media access and resulted in many media agencies unilaterally entering Kosovo, inadvertently contributing to the highly developed Serbian information operations campaign designed to turn world opinion against the continuing air strikes.¹⁶

The initial Special Forces and other government agencies’ response to the 11 September 2001 attacks on mainland America, Operation Enduring Freedom, for the most part precluded further development of the embed concept as all commanders felt the operations security risks posed by embedded media outweighed the benefits of reporting from the battlefield. Special Forces operations and embedding — as the US military had come to understand it — were deemed incompatible. Even the option of a Pentagon Press Pool failed to materialise during the opening phase of the conflict.¹⁷

The impact of denying media access required a senior Department of Defense official to publicly apologise to Pentagon Press Pool members for

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¹⁶ Paul and Kim, Reporters on the Battlefield, pp. 48–50.
the lack of access during the first phases of the campaign.¹⁸ The introduction of conventional forces did, however, allow a small embed program in Afghanistan to commence and those tactical lessons were applied to the planning for Iraq.

On 10 February 2003, the Assistant Secretary for Defense (Public Affairs) released a 13-page unclassified signal providing formal guidance on the media embed program for possible operations in the Central Command Area of Responsibility.¹⁹ The guidance, issued with the full authority of the White House, was uncompromising in its direction to military commanders but carefully explained why the concept was so important:

We need to tell the factual story — good or bad — before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions, 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 alongside the troops … To accomplish this, we will embed media with our units. These embedded media will live, work and travel as part of the units with which they are embedded to facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage of US forces in combat and related operations. Commanders and public affairs officers must work together to balance the need for media access with the need for operational security.²⁰

The guidance also clearly described the rules to be applied and, for the first time, defined a media embed as ‘a media representative remaining with a unit on an extended basis — perhaps a period of weeks or even months.’²¹ Most importantly, the guidance clearly articulated security requirements for embedding and sought a commitment from media agencies to comply with that agreement. The agreement accepted impressive risk in that it emphasised security at source to maintain operations security and stipulated

¹⁸ Paul and Kim, Reporters on the Battlefield, p. 51.
²⁰ Ibid., pp. 1–2.
²¹ Ibid., p. 2.
that there would be no requirement for mandatory review of content before dissemination, except for specific circumstances that required agreement by both parties before implementation.\textsuperscript{22} The guidance for embedding also granted leeway to tactical commanders regarding the use of media escorts during the conduct of embedding, but highlighted that ‘the absence of a PA [Public Affairs] escort is not a reason to preclude media access to operations.’\textsuperscript{23} Perhaps most importantly, the guidance articulated for commanders an understanding of just how much physical risk media embeds could and should be exposed to. Increased risk of death or injury through military action was no justification for preventing a media embed from closely observing the actions of unit personnel. If the worst should eventuate, the guidance also provided direction on what unit commanders should do if a media embed was killed or injured.\textsuperscript{24} Seventeen journalists or media representatives were killed in Iraq between 22 March and 6 July 2003.\textsuperscript{25} Of these, four were embedded with US units when they were killed — one in a vehicle roll-over while under fire, two in an Iraqi rocket attack on a US position, and the fourth, an Australian national, from wounds sustained in a grenade attack while accompanying US troops clearing an area. The remaining 13 journalists or media representatives were operating independently at the time of their deaths, which occurred mostly as a result of coalition direct fire.

It is worth noting that no operations security breaches were committed by journalists formally participating in the expansive media embedding program. The most widely cited example of a security incident occurred when Fox News’ Geraldo Riveria was operating independently inside Iraq. He reported live on the intentions of the 101st Airborne Division, drawing a basic sand map showing

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., pp. 11–12.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 6.
general dispositions and planned movement. He was subsequently escorted from the area of operations by the military and returned later in the campaign.

The British approach

Without the experience of Vietnam to guide their approach, the British Ministry of Defence has undertaken a similar journey to that of the US in recent years, albeit on a much smaller scale and from a different starting point. ‘The Troubles’, marked by the deployment of British troops to Northern Ireland in August 1969, resulted in more than 34 years of security operations in Ulster. The first 15 years of this campaign possibly represented the nadir in the British military’s understanding of the role of a free press. Media agencies were never supported by the military and acted largely unilaterally in the conflict area. When media agencies began to question the official description of significant events such as ‘Bloody Sunday’, the relationship between the military and media agencies moved from tenuous to openly hostile. Several major incidents highlighted attempts at manipulation or outright deception by military forces in their dealings with media representatives, destroying what limited trust existed between the two organisations. Like their US contemporaries, the British approach to media on operations involved seeking total control over their reporting.

During the 1982 Falklands War, the British military at first sought to deny journalists and media agencies access to the operation. However the military’s approach was politically untenable, and government direction immediately prior to the departure of the flotilla forced the military to rapidly develop a pooled embedding approach with approximately 32 media personnel attached to the joint task force deployed to the South


Atlantic under Operation Corporate in 1982. The practical application of embedding during the Falklands campaign created significant distrust, nearly always the direct result of strong censorship by the military. The Falklands conflict also generated the now famous, but erroneous, example of operations security risks associated with journalists accompanying military units. As commanders in the 2nd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment revised the plan for an assault at Goose Green, the BBC World Service broadcast to friend and foe alike that ‘a parachute battalion is poised and ready to assault Darwin and Goose Green.’ While the BBC broadcast is often recounted as the ‘classic example’ of media agencies breaching operations security, London’s Fleet Street publishers had spent the week preceding the assault attempting to gain an advantage over their rivals by including greater levels of specificity in reporting. The day before the assault was to commence, one London paper even identified the specific rendezvous location of the Parachute Regiment as it prepared to consolidate prior to H hour. What is often left untold is that none of these operations security breaches were perpetrated by the media embeds attached to the unit. Those journalists, including a BBC representative, quite rightly recognised the risk to British servicemen and ultimately themselves in disclosing future plans. The specific coverage was instead the result of political and departmental leaks in London. The only confirmed operations security breach came late in the campaign with British forces poised to enter Port Stanley. Embedded journalists in one unit utilised a local landline to call colleagues attached to a flanking unit to discuss the impending assault plan. Respected journalist Max Hastings described this incident as an ‘imbecile moment’ which, coupled with the Goose Green incident, highlighted to military commanders that reporters ‘could not be trusted with operational information.’ A post-conflict

29 Mark Adkin, Goose Green: A Battle is Fought to be Won, Leo Cooper, London, 1992, p. 98.
30 Ibid., p. 99.
parliamentary inquiry into the campaign heavily criticised the British forces, particularly the Royal Navy, for a campaign of ‘manipulative censorship’ against the embedded media through inconsistent approaches to vetting material and attempts to ‘censor by delay’ by adopting cumulative clearance processes which impacted on the timeliness of reporting. The lessons of the Falklands experience led to the development of the ‘Green Book’, a formal policy stipulating the requirements for British military and media interaction during times of crisis.

The specific requirements of the ‘Green Book’ were relatively untested until Operation Granby, the British commitment to the 1991 Gulf War. Operation Granby saw British acceptance of a US-dominated pooling system that completely exceeded the capability of the military organisation to support it. At the commencement of Operation Veritas in Afghanistan in 2001, the UK faced the same concerns as its US allies given the predominantly Special Forces commitment, and denied media access to the battlefield except under the most tightly controlled, short-visit pooling arrangements. During initial planning for Operation Telic in 2003, the US plan for expansive embedding forced a re-evaluation by British planners and, by the time British units crossed into Iraq, media embeds were part of the operational environment. Approximately 150 media embeds were hosted by British units during the ground combat phase of the campaign. Like their US coalition partners, the British have sought to understand the impact of embedding and to apply any lessons to continuing operations in Afghanistan under Operation Herrick. The eighth version of the ‘Green

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Book’ was released in January 2013 and, at the time of writing, remains the current British policy guidance for media embedding on operations.³⁶

The Australian approach

The ADF, through professional military education, exchanges and liaison, absorbed many of the lessons concerning media in operational areas from its American and British allies in the post-Vietnam years, albeit with little opportunity to operationally test these concepts. The large-scale deployment of ADF personnel to Cambodia between 1991 and 1993 under Operations Goodwill and Gemini did little to test the ADF’s developing concepts as the deployed force operated under a highly restrictive UN media policy.³⁷ Australian journalists were present in the area of operations and small ADF Military Public Affairs teams participated in the deployment, but the ADF did not take a leading role in supporting the media.

Australia’s contribution to Operation Solace, the UN-authorised humanitarian intervention in Somalia in 1993, provided an opportunity to put into practice international lessons and those gained from the ADF’s own experiences in Cambodia. On 12 January 1993, a RAAF C130 carrying a detachment from the ADF’s Media Support Unit and 23 journalists departed Australia for the new operational area. The vast majority of the Australian journalists remained in the care of the Media Support Unit for only two weeks before returning to Australia and none remained for the complete deployment.³⁸

The turning point for the ADF was the 1999 deployment to East Timor under Operation Warden. For the first time the Australian Government, the Department of Defence and the ADF were responsible for setting the


³⁷ Young and Jesser, The Media and the Military, pp. 248–49.

policy on media interaction in a defined area of operations. The response to the East Timor crisis and Australia’s role as the lead in a 22-nation coalition meant the ADF’s existing policy concerning media on operations needed immediate revision. To say the media interest in the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) shocked the ADF was an understatement. Hundreds of reporters squeezed into the RAAF Base Darwin theatre on 19 September 1999 to be briefed by the then Major-General Peter Cosgrove on the imminent deployment and his last-minute flight to Dili to advise senior Indonesian officers and officials on the scope and role of INTERFET.³⁹ The lack of understanding by military planners when developing the force flow for INTERFET played out on the morning of 20 September 1999 when political and strategic direction forced air-load and operational planners to quickly reprioritise manifests for C130 flights from Darwin to allow the Media Support Unit, 41 journalists and five tonnes of stores to be inserted into Comoro Airfield on the leading edge of the initial 25 waves of aircraft.⁴⁰ The Media Support Unit operated for 60 days from the burnt-out Tourismo Hotel on the eastern edge of Dili providing a base of operations for journalists and Defence Public Affairs teams. While the initial 41 journalists were selected for the early flight in, media credentials were sufficient to gain accommodation and basic assistance from the Media Support Unit during its deployment.

The lessons of East Timor led Defence to significantly rethink the requirements of its uniformed Public Affairs element and how it would support the media into the future.⁴¹ A key lesson from Operation Warden was the understanding that the media were permanent actors in the modern battlefield. As a result the ADF decided that it could reduce the level of its life support functions to media and instead equip the military to interact with journalists who would routinely be present in the area. This led to the disbanding of the Media Support Unit and the creation of the smaller 1st

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⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 41.
Joint Public Affairs Unit to focus on capturing, compiling and releasing ADF-developed imagery product rather than relying on commercial media. In the following years, the relative ease with which Australian media could access East Timor allowed the ADF to confirm the lessons of 1999 with repeated personnel and functionality reductions at the 1st Joint Public Affairs Unit removing any capacity to provide logistic support or security to unilateral or accredited media in an operational area.

The late 2001 deployment of Australian Special Forces to Afghanistan under Operation Slipper and the larger deployment of ADF personnel to the Middle East for Operations Bastille and Falconer in 2003 highlighted the ADF’s lack of capacity and intent to effectively support the media in areas of operation that were far from home. The ADF response to political and strategic demands for media access was limited to conducting activities derisively known by participating media as ‘bus tours’ based on their experience of political campaign activities in which busloads of journalists follow a campaigning politician on the electoral trail. The most famous of these events was the deployment of a small group of journalists accompanying the then Minister for Defence into the Al Asad Airbase in the western desert of Iraq a few days after Australian Special Forces had secured the abandoned base. The hour-long stop allowed the media to breathe in the dust, kick the dirt and speak to a couple of dishevelled men who had spent a month on continuous combat operations before then reporting on their ‘experiences’ of Australian operations.42

Despite the obvious differences between the ADF, US and British approaches to media access in Iraq, Australia continued with an expanded ‘bus tour’ concept of multiple media agencies on a fixed program right through the commitment to Iraq and for most of the ongoing campaign in Afghanistan. The decision to operate this way made sense during the initial phases of the conflicts with their heavy Special Forces presence, but once large bodies of conventional troops were on the ground, Defence’s ongoing

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justification became untenable. The negative comparison between the coalition approaches became the subject of increasing political pressure. It was not until mid-2009, at the direction of the then Minister for Defence, that the ADF trialled media embedding as a concept in Afghanistan. Since formal implementation in 2010, the ADF has refined the program and increased its tempo to the point that the 2012 embed program sometimes exceeded the administrative capacity of tactical supporting elements.

The ADF’s media embed program

The ADF’s slow road to media embedding has, in retrospect, allowed the organisation to carefully construct a program and achieve gradual organisational acceptance rather than unilaterally introducing a new policy on the eve of an operation. A ‘media embed’ with the ADF is one of several ways journalists or representatives of media agencies can gain greater access to ADF units on operations. Currently, the ADF offers the following access arrangements for Afghanistan:

- **Media embed:** The media embed program is a logistically supported ADF program that sponsors access to an area of operations by representatives of accredited media agencies for a fixed period. A small number of placements are reserved for emerging journalists nominated by media agencies, those beginning their career with a likely future covering Defence issues.

- **Documentary embed:** The documentary embed is an ADF program that provides logistic support and sponsors access to an area of operations by individuals or teams producing a documentary or feature for a fixed period or series of fixed periods over the deployment of a major troop rotation.

- **Regional media embed:** The regional media embed is also logistically supported and is an ADF program that sponsors access for a fixed period to an area of operations by representatives of selected and accredited media agencies representing publications and programs based in the region from which the major component of deployed personnel originates. A single regional media embed is deployed for each major rotation of personnel.
• **In-country media embed**: An in-country media embed is a partially supported ADF program that sponsors access to an Australian area of operations by accredited media who have made their own way to the operational region for a fixed period. In-country embeds are only accepted if the media embed program allows and the tactical commander agrees. These media embeds are accredited through the parent coalition headquarters.

• **Media participation in VIP visits**: Media participation in VIP visits occurs under a supported ADF program that sponsors access to an Australian area of operations by representatives of accredited media agencies who accompany visiting dignitaries (military or civilian) on short visits. Participants in this program have little scope to conduct activities outside the defined program for the visit.

• **Media participation in arts/cultural tours**: Media participation in arts/cultural tours occurs under a fully supported ADF program that sponsors access to an area of operations by representatives of accredited media agencies who accompany visiting arts/cultural activities such as Forces Entertainment tours or the Australian War Artist program. Participants in this program have little scope to conduct activities outside the defined program for the visit.

A media, documentary or in-country embed is attached to a tactical ADF element on operations. The program is not designed to be a government-sponsored entree into a remote locality from which journalists can then act unilaterally, nor is it an opportunity to leverage ADF access to local officials. Media embedding at its core provides journalists exposure to the conduct of operations by ADF personnel at the tactical level. The defined scope of the program means that inherent tensions remain between the ADF’s mission and the media agency’s goals, as access to events, activities or personnel outside the ADF’s operational scope cannot be routinely supported. ADF personnel will not be exposed to greater risk to facilitate a media agency’s independent requirements. The media embed program is not about creating newsworthy events for journalists in a traditional public relations sense. Instead, it is simply the attachment of media personnel to tactical units on operations in much the
same way other elements of the force may be attached for specific missions. Tactical units continue to operate as they would and incorporate media embeds into their daily program. It is the rawest view of ADF personnel on operations currently available to non-Defence employees. Media embedding allows today’s journalists the option of collectively following in Charles Bean’s tradition and ‘seeing every trench and battlefield’ for themselves.⁴³ Former Minister for Defence, Senator John Faulkner, noted that:

Neither government ministers nor military officers should expect the heirs to C.E.W. Bean to consider it their job to make us comfortable. Their responsibility to hold us to account, to tell the truth, and to expose lies, is an indispensable safeguard of the democratic contract between government and citizen. There have been times when governments have failed to recognise the importance of that safeguard, or swept it aside as an inconvenience. There have been times when journalists have not lived up to the responsibility, the heavy responsibility that rests on their shoulders.⁴⁴

From the Defence and ADF perspective, the formalised embed program is useful for three reasons. First, it allows a level of coordination with tactical elements who are concentrating on their mission and sets a sustainable threshold for embedded media at any one time. This has become particularly important as the ADF no longer has a dedicated, deployable media support function, and individual units must incorporate this function into their normal operations. In Afghanistan, Defence currently plans its media embed program around a maximum of two separate agencies attached as media embeds to tactical elements at any one time with a third coming into or out of the theatre of operations. In addition, a single documentary or in-country embed may be attached during this period if tactical commanders believe he/she can be appropriately supported. This level of media embedding is well beyond that undertaken by the ADF’s coalition partners in Afghanistan in terms of the journalist-to-troops ratio. The separation of embed types is useful

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⁴⁴ Ibid.
in ADF planning because it allows tactical elements to allocate the attachment to support the unique nature and requirements of the agency involved.

Second, the formalised embed program allows Defence and the ADF an opportunity to appropriately manage risks to the force, particularly in terms of operations security. In order to participate in the ADF media embedding program, journalists and their agencies are required to sign a Deed of Agreement with Defence. The deed outlines the terms under which a media embed is permitted into an area of operations. It incorporates duty of care requirements for both parties, prerequisites such as medical checks that must be met and a range of restrictions on content and timing of release for operations security reasons. For Afghanistan, ADF media embedding participants are also required to achieve Headquarters International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) media accreditation that covers many of the same requirements.\textsuperscript{45} Recently, participants in the media embed program have also had to register with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan if they wish to interview any Afghan officials.\textsuperscript{46}

Historically, it has been the management of operations security that has been the most problematic in dealing with media representatives. In this regard Australia is not alone. The ‘bus tour’ concept and pooled attachments which have been so common throughout the development of military-media processes since Vietnam highlight how governments and the military have struggled to move beyond the inherent desire to control both the content and flow of information. The media embedding concept takes the opposite approach. It seeks to broaden access as much as possible while also prolonging exposure to personnel and activities at the tactical level. The risk to the force is managed appropriately through specific agreement rather than through broad and often misunderstood ‘guidance’. It relies heavily on early education of media embed participants to explain the reasoning behind an operations

\textsuperscript{45} Headquarters ISAF, \textit{Media Visit Information}, 1 May 2011, retrieved 27 May 2012 from ISAF: http://www.isaf.nato.int/media-visit-information.html

security restriction rather than on traditional censorship before filing. In the same way that ADF personnel practise security at the source by understanding that information, technique or capability must be protected, the media embed program seeks to develop a similar understanding in participating journalists. Since committing to media embedding the ADF has only had to deal with one significant operations security breach in a published report. On investigation it was identified that the media embed participants had, in fact, been given approval to release the material. The problem lay not with the media, but with the ADF’s own poor understanding of operations security requirements. More importantly however, the fault lay with an ADF officer assigned to escort the media embed, who was ignorant of the operations security requirements and actively facilitated the media’s coverage of a certain aspect of operations in Afghanistan.

Risk to the mission is, however, far more complex and covers tactical through to strategic and political issues. Tactical considerations of this risk can be appropriately managed through operations security agreements. Strategic risk is far more problematic and often beyond the control of personnel on operations. From the ADF perspective it is important to recognise that the Australian Government has accepted this risk, first through directing the media embed trial and then in accepting the continuation of the program. The then Minister for Defence, Senator Faulkner, even went so far as to state that ‘Australian journalists involved in future “embed” tours with the ADF will continue to be critical, questioning, and sceptical.’ He recognised that the credibility of government announcements regarding deployments was critical and saw media embedding as one way to strengthen this credibility. Second, media embedding, in conjunction with the ADF’s own release of operational information, is entirely consistent with the Australian Government’s

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
Declaration of Open Government issued on 16 July 2010.\textsuperscript{50} Most importantly for the ADF however, is the critical role an established, effective and respected media embed program plays in achieving the principles of communication.\textsuperscript{51} These principles, developed as an adjunct to the better known principles of war, seek to ensure organisational credibility in the alignment of words and deeds. Adherence to the principles of communication, as opposed to other more prevalent concepts which focus on the information itself, recognises that the balance point between organisational credibility and public trust is the centre of gravity for effective communication. In short, an appropriately managed media embed program, sustained over time, reinforces credibility for the organisation and its message.

The formalised embed program allows Defence and the ADF to ensure that fair representation of all media agencies is achieved across a calendar year. With limited places on offer due to logistic constraints, management of the embed program equips Defence to ensure that all agencies are offered the opportunity to participate. It also allows media agencies to prioritise access for their own programs, publications or individual journalists. Non-embedded media are not prevented from entering a defined Australian area of operations and can continue to perform their role but will not have access to ADF facilities, resources or support. A unilateral journalist generally achieves interaction with ADF personnel through encounter rather than planned engagement. To date this has been rare in Afghanistan but, with a burgeoning number of Afghan media agencies and Afghan journalists working for international media companies, the likelihood of an encounter is increasing. In other operational areas such as Timor-Leste, an encounter is very likely for the deployed force. To gain access to an increased level of interaction, a unilateral journalist operating in the defined area of operations can apply for an in-country media embed for a set period.


Afghanistan’s 2011 media embed program in review

The information environment

Even a cursory glance at media reporting during 2011 highlights the complexity of the information environment within which Australian personnel operated. Significant incidents and events within the Australian area of operations and well beyond it contributed to the public understanding of Australia’s commitment to ISAF. Many of these events were well beyond the remit and responsibility of the ADF’s tactical and operational commanders yet significantly impacted on understanding and opinion of their mission. The second highest annual casualty figures for the Australian force, following that of 2010, prompted an underlying questioning of the mission itself. The murder or attempted murder of ADF personnel by their Afghan partners left many questioning the continued Australian and ISAF presence. Public support for the ongoing ADF commitment reached its lowest point to date and remained there for the year.52 Media reporting in Australia reflected a strong mix of these strategic, operational and tactical events (see Figure 1). It is against this background that the efficacy of the 2011 media embed program is reviewed.

The media embed program

In 2011 the ADF supported an increased number of media activities in Afghanistan under an expanded media embedding program. During 2011 media embeds represented every major Australian television network and

Kabul-based Australian freelance journalist Jeremy Kelly participated in several in-country media embeds, slightly skewing the weight of print media attachments towards News Limited. In total, the ADF facilitated ten media embeds into Afghanistan, one documentary embed, two regional media embeds supporting multiple agencies and seven shorter term in-country media embeds. The 2011 media embed program was significantly expanded beyond 2010 and was almost cumulatively greater in media agency access during a single 12-month period than all the preceding years combined. The 2011 media embed program is illustrated in Figure 2.

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53 Less the ABC who utilised Kabul correspondent Sally Sara several times during the year via the in-country media embed arrangements.
Analysis of coverage

Analysing media coverage provides, at best, indicators of audience-wide cognitive understanding following exposure to content; at worst it is a self-reinforcing measure of performance. During the course of the media embedding program, Australian Military Public Affairs officers have been exposed to the wide variety of methods media agencies use to analyse their own coverage. Most of these are based on audience numbers and include such methods as minute-by-minute analysis of news programs to identify which individual stories retain viewers or turn them away. In the commercial environment that predominates within the Australian media landscape, audience reach is king. Audience reach for the ADF however, is simply a measure of performance — it does little more than provide some statistics on the potential number of Australians exposed to media embed generated content. Through a series of algorithms, this potential audience

**Figure 2.** Media embedding program for 2011.
reach, coupled with the popularity and timing of the program or publication, can produce another statistic which remains a public relations industry favourite: the advertising dollar equivalent. In simple terms this figure tells organisations how much they would be required to pay for the equivalent in advertising at the same time and on the same program or within the same publication. These factors form an important element of the quick-look summary developed at the conclusion of every media embed, although they do little to actually analyse the impact of the embed program. It is this level of analysis that Australian commanders repeatedly seek in order to justify the media embed program’s impost on their operations.

To truly understand the full impact of coverage from media embedding would require access to focussed audience polling that is prohibitively expensive or covered by media agency commercial-in-confidence arrangements. Instead, the ADF uses a commercial agency to analyse media content to provide a series of indicators on the impact of media coverage. These broad indicators seek to quantify the leading messages in coverage and also provide a degree of qualitative analysis on how audiences receive those messages. The ADF-commissioned independent quarterly analysis of selected press, broadcast and internet media coverage of operations commenced in early 2010 and is the only longitudinal study of its type.\(^5\) The analysis produces an assessment on the perceived favourability of the reporting based

on a proprietary system, CARMA. In short, this analysis allows the ADF to determine the likely impact and effect of media content. While limited in its depth, it is the next best thing to audience polling, the cost of which cannot be justified. Through 2011, eight leading messages were identified in analysed media reporting. The analysis of this reporting, in particular the number of times the messages were identified within coverage, and its favourability are depicted in Figure 3.

The April–June 2011 analysis period included the highest amount of content since the ADF commissioned the analysis program in February 2010. While the longitudinal data does not cover the period when government decisions to deploy ADF force elements were made and the expectant increase in media coverage at that time, the analysis does provide good context for the current phase of the Afghanistan campaign. The significant unfavourable spike in the April–June period is the result of four ADF operational deaths, particularly the impact of Lance Corporal Jones’ murder at the hands of an Afghan National Army colleague. In all media coverage, these Australian incidents were further characterised in the context of the wider campaign, particularly the death of Osama Bin Laden during a US Special Forces raid deep into Pakistan, the escape of hundreds of insurgents from Kandahar’s Sarposa Prison, the lingering reporting from the previous period’s significant but inconsequential attack outside Multi-National Base Tarin Kot and

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55 The CARMA® methodology is to qualitatively analyse media coverage by taking into account multiple variables. These include: the placement of media reports (front page or lead item in broadcast media and websites); positioning of organisation discussion (headline, prominent mentions, passing mentions); image (photos, illustrations, charts, cartoons, or the image content of video); topics discussed in the media and their relative importance to the client organisation; messages, both favourable and unfavourable, communicated in media reports; sources quoted (both organisation representatives and other individuals who make relevant comments in the media); and tone of content (extreme language, adjectives and adverbs, metaphors or similes and other figures of speech). An aggregate score is calculated based on these multiple variables and presented on a 0–100 scale where 50 is neutral. This is an overall rating of the favourability of each media report towards the client organisation (and, if relevant, other organisations or competitors). This aggregate score is called the CARMA® Favourability Rating. The average favourability is the aggregated rating of the media coverage analysed. This can identify the potential impact of media reporting, and can be used to identify trends and establish benchmarks for future data.
finally President Obama’s announcement that the withdrawal of US surge forces from Afghanistan would begin. Another significant factor in the unfavourable reporting during this period was the Director of Military Prosecution’s decision to take the case against the Australian Special Forces soldiers involved in an incident on 12 February 2009 to court martial. The unfavourable coverage was, for the most part, based on the conglomeration of tactical, operational and strategic events into single reports. Surprisingly, this reporting period also included the largest spike in favourable coverage of ADF activities in Afghanistan for 2011. The favourable coverage was the result of widespread reporting on Anzac Day in Afghanistan, the Queen’s Birthday 2011 Honours List, and details of Sergeant Wood’s bravery and leadership shortly before he was killed. The unfavourable spike in the last

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57 Ibid.
quarter of 2011 is the result of the attacks on ADF personnel by Afghan National Army colleagues at Patrol Base Sorkh Bed and Patrol Base Nasir.58

During the 12-month analysis period, the overall trend of Australian media reporting concerning operations in Afghanistan was favourable. The 12-month analysis also shows that, when there is a spike in unfavourable coverage during a reporting period, it is generally offset by a similar spike in favourable coverage. This longitudinal view is important as ADF personnel and commanders are quick to react to perceived negative media coverage. For this phase of the campaign at least, it is hard to characterise Australian media coverage as anything other than balanced. While individual journalists or publications/programs may adopt a strongly critical approach, it is often offset by favourable reporting. The 12-month favourability trends for 2011 are illustrated in Figure 4.

Source of coverage and the impact of the media embed program

A key requirement for commanders continues to be justification of the media embed program as positively contributing to their campaign. While it could be argued that simply having an effective program is mission success, those at the operational and tactical levels want and, at times, demand reporting that justifies the continuing impost. Management of the program, like all visits, has become a cottage industry on operations with increasing control mechanisms put in place to ensure ‘success’. A deeper level of content analysis during the 2011 period has identified that coverage sourced from media embed participants, a relatively small percentage of overall coverage, was of significantly higher favourability than reporting from afar. Taken individually, material generated by media embeds who represented major Australian television networks had the highest audience reach of any Afghanistan coverage. The analysis of coverage source and its favourability is depicted in Figure 5.

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Content analysis of individual media embed generated reports showed a strong correlation with the identified favourable messages (Figure 3) of the ADF supporting its personnel, the military/personal conduct of ADF personnel as ‘beyond reproach’ and that ADF operations were making progress toward strategic goals. The single unfavourable message in the last quarter concerned the ADF not adequately supporting its personnel based on widespread coverage of a media embed’s report on newly purchased Crye Multi-Cam trousers failing in the harsh Afghan conditions. This story was initially published after the completion of the media embed but based on material, particularly imagery, gathered at that time. In light of the many significant events of 2011, this story dominated Defence’s media operations for several days, ultimately resulting in a Ministerial response, highlighting perhaps the great fear of commanders and politicians concerning longer

Figure 4. Favourability trends in analysed 2011 media content.59

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60 Ibid.
term exposure to personnel on operations. Events and issues which, in the context of the campaign, are relatively minor or inconsequential (in this case there was no impact on the Mentoring Task Force’s ability to provide security) can achieve a disproportionate level of prominence. The Commanding Officer of Mentoring Task Force 2 identified this imbalance as one of the most significant issues he observed in the media embed program his unit supported.

A first-order analysis of the media embed program reveals that it achieved significant favourable coverage for the ADF, albeit focused on tactical-level operations. This coverage, however, did little to shift the strong unfavourable domestic narrative that questioned the ongoing strategic sense in continuing the Afghanistan commitment. Reports emanating from the media embed program were assessed as having a much higher favourability when compared

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61 Ibid.

with broader reporting on Afghanistan because, for the most part, they focused on using soldiers and tactical commanders as the source. Most importantly, however, the media embed program offered journalists the opportunity to closely observe a professional force in a complex operating environment. The professionalism of ADF personnel became the defining narrative of the media embed program.

A review of coverage by individual journalists found no significant difference in favourable reporting between those who had embedded and those who had not. This individual analysis found that Defence reporters from multiple agencies were generally aligned in their favourable and unfavourable reporting on Afghanistan across the year indicating that coverage is reflective of events, international commentary and political statements rather than any inherent bias. A content analysis did find that those who had embedded were more likely to contextualise their reporting against conditions on the ground. Currently, there is insufficient long-term data to understand at what point in time a journalist’s contextual understanding becomes outdated due to changing circumstances on the ground; however anecdotal evidence from participants indicates that eight to twelve months is the limit. It is unlikely that the program in isolation will arrest the continuing decline in public support for the deployment of ADF personnel to Afghanistan; however, in line with the principles of communication, the continuing media embed program will enhance the credibility of information emanating from the operational area thereby maintaining public trust in the performance of the ADF.

Lessons for the ADF as a result of media embedding

Enhancement of the ADF’s media embed program has not been without its challenges. In the previous two years those charged with conducting the program on behalf of commanders (generally personnel from the Military Public Affairs field) have trialled various approaches to achieve the optimum mix between reducing the impact on personnel conducting operations, meeting the media’s insatiable need for access, and maintaining a focus on operations security. While many of the lessons that have resulted from the program relate directly to the
knowledge, skills and attributes of Military Public Affairs personnel, several are applicable to the wider ADF and offer a more appropriate doctrinal approach to media access in contested environments into the future.

Assessing the risk

The ADF invests heavily in training commanders and personnel to understand risks and treat them appropriately on operations. When working with the media and the passage of information in an operational area, however, the concept of risk is widely misunderstood. Commander US European Command, Admiral Jim Stavridis, observed that:

The enormous irony of the military profession is that we are huge risk takers in what we do operationally — flying airplanes on and off a carrier, driving a ship through a sea state five typhoon, walking point with your platoon in southern Afghanistan — but publishing an article, posting a blog, or speaking to the media can scare us badly. We are happy to take personal risk or operational risk, but too many of us won’t take career risk.⁶³

When it comes to media embedding, a risk management approach is often all but forgotten with all participants considered under the single broad category of ‘media’ and therefore mislabelled as high or even extreme risk. This approach results in personnel-intensive measures devoted to alleviating that risk. A better approach is to look at each media embed as an individual activity and, based on understanding gained through pre-briefing with the participants, appropriately manage the true risk rather than a perceived one. Assessing media embedding risks can be achieved through a simple approach which analyses risk sources such as:

- the immediacy of information release
- knowledge and experience of the participants
- the style of content to be generated
- the size of the media embed team and its associated equipment
- activities requested during the course of media embed

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Using this information and applying Defence’s own risk management approach is an effective way to appropriately treat such risk. A tabloid print journalist who has never previously been to Afghanistan embedded with a Mobile Mentoring Team and intending to file a comprehensive story supported by images at least daily offers greater risk than an experienced photojournalist on assignment for a specialist publication that will go to print in two months. If risk to the force is essentially based on maintenance of operations security, the longer the time between exposure and publication, the greater the range of responses to any observed breach that can be implemented. Understanding the individual participants and adjusting mitigation measures based on their experience is also useful. Military Public Affairs staff, in conjunction with operations staff, must conduct a risk analysis for individual media embeds so as to provide better advice to commanders at all levels on appropriate risk treatments.

*The use of escort officers*

The ADF currently assigns an ‘escort officer’ to each media embed as a risk mitigation measure. These escort officers have come almost exclusively from the Military Public Affairs area and so have a broad range of backgrounds and experience in media-related fields. Both arms corps and non-arms corps officers and soldiers have also been utilised in this role. Experience during the past 24 months has identified that a poorly prepared escort officer introduces far more risk to the force and mission than the participants themselves. In fact, simply calling them ‘escort officers’ poses problems as it immediately implies that the person is a minder watching the media embed’s every move, rather than a facilitator between the media embed and the tactical elements. A far better term is the oft-used ‘liaison officer’ which implies simple liaison between the media embed and the unit on the ground. An absolute requirement for a media embed liaison officer is current situational awareness, a comprehensive knowledge of the ADF’s past operations in the area and a good understanding of the overall history of the region. An effective liaison officer needs to be knowledgeable about the mission, the area of operations, the equipment, the personnel, and the area’s population. To be truly effective,
the liaison officer needs to be able to offer the embedded media participants as much assistance as possible thereby reducing the impact on tactical commanders who are concentrating on current operations. The liaison officer also needs to have sufficient ‘presence’ to quickly gain the cooperation of the tactical element. Most importantly however, the liaison officer needs the knowledge, skills and attributes to assist media embed personnel with some of their basic requirements at the same time as being accountable to an ADF chain of command. A media embed liaison officer’s principal tasks are to:

- act as an appropriate translator between the ADF and media embeds
- coordinate and integrate the media embed with tactical elements in accordance with the commander’s intent by focusing on planning arrangements at least 48 hours in advance
- assist in the application of security at source by the media embed participants through education and advice to enhance operations security management
- brief commanders on and during the conduct of the media embed

Operations security

Maintenance of operations security is regularly used as an excuse for reluctance to support a media embedding program. Defence and the ADF have worked to develop a Deed of Agreement which provides the appropriate legal coverage for all parties in this regard. The ADF’s current Deed of Agreement applies a level of control beyond that employed by our coalition partners and, in some respects, is at odds with the requirements established by ISAF, particularly in relation to capturing imagery of detainees and requirements for product clearance. This increased control mechanism is a by-product of a generally poor operations security understanding across the Australian force and an often political appreciation of media coverage by Defence’s policymakers. Experience during the media embed program has repeatedly highlighted that what is often lacking in those responsible for implementing the program is accurate knowledge of what must be protected and why. A detailed Essential Elements of Friendly Information (EEFI) list is an absolute requirement for a media embed program to be successful.
The EEFI list must function as a check for tactical commanders (at the lowest level of command) to understand what can and cannot be communicated from within the area of operations. Generic EEFI lists have proven time and again to be open to interpretation and to result in a lack of consistency in the management of operations security. Maintenance of the list over time is also important as information on various capabilities, locations or activities is officially released into the public domain and hence no longer needs protecting. Consistency in the application of operations security restrictions is critical to the success of the program. The ADF must, however, do more than simply censor or ‘sanitise against’ an EEFI list. Investing time with media embeds prior to their insertion into the tactical area of operations to explain not only what must be protected but why and the potential impact on ADF or partner force personnel if it is breached has underpinned the most successful embeds. Crucial to this activity is fully explaining why the ADF differs from coalition partners concerning the release of information on certain capabilities. This includes utilising ADF imagery specialists to explain photography and filming techniques that are useful in protecting sensitive equipment or techniques to media embed personnel.

The media embed team should be completely familiar with the operation’s security requirements before insertion, thereby limiting the often tense discussions on filing that occur when the ADF seeks to have an aspect of a story removed. Managed effectively, it should also allow the ADF to move from 100 per cent review of all media embed participant material before filing. Australia is the only nation in ISAF that still requires this level of oversight. A proactive, educative approach on operations security will shift the process towards self-censorship by the embed participants and can lead to an increased understanding among ADF personnel on what can and cannot be publicly released. In a perfect scenario, the operations security review should be limited to those specific areas of concern as identified by the media embed liaison officer. This approach was successfully applied during a month-long ABC 4 Corners documentary embed in 2010, in which only eight minutes of footage, from among multiple hours of content, was sanitised in
theatre.\textsuperscript{64} This approach worked because the journalists themselves recognised the impact of a key piece of footage on operations security, and tactical commanders highlighted this in situational reporting.

\textit{Reputation management}

One pitfall of the operations security approach is its application to coverage that is clearly related to reputation management. While commanders might believe that the release of negative information concerning the conduct of their own personnel or those in their partnered force poses a risk to the mission, under the operations security agreement such information cannot be withheld. To attempt to do so is not only legally questionable, but also inconsistent with Defence’s approach to transparency. Instead, commanders should focus on what the reputational issue actually means within the force and take proactive steps to address it, including advising media embeds of those steps. The most significant failures in communication from Afghanistan have resulted from a disconnect between the narrative and the observed situation on the ground — not from misreporting by embedded media. To date the media embed program has also highlighted a strong willingness by participants to self-sanitise for minor infringements which could have a negative impact on an individual, albeit little impact on the operation itself. While under the Deed of Agreement Defence is ultimately unable to prevent the public release of reputation-damaging imagery, a conversation between tactical commanders and media embed participants has almost always resulted in an agreed and positive outcome. The ADF should not, however, rely on the good grace of media embed participants to sanitise their reports and commanders at all levels must instead focus on maintaining standards.

\textit{Synchronisation of information release}

Media embed participants have the advantage over their domestic Australian counterparts in terms of access and awareness when a significant incident

\textsuperscript{64} Chris Masters, ‘Analysing \textit{A Careful War}, presentation to the Lowy Institute, 2 August 2010, retrieved on 1 December 2012 from http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/analysing-careful-war
occurs. Effective synchronisation of information release in Australia and for those participating in media embeds is crucial if the program is to remain successful and it is this area that has created the most tension since media embedding commenced. Under the Deed of Agreement, media embeds are held to specific information release timings in the event of ADF casualties. Their colleagues in Australia, however, are not and pressure from organisations for more information from those on the ground is readily apparent during such incidents. The key is to work within the guidelines of the Deed by facilitating the media embed participant’s news requirements prior to the lifting of transmission restrictions so that the public announcement in Australia is the trigger for the release of material from the area of operations. The most successful media embeds have used their increased access during casualty events to accurately portray events on the ground by speaking with local commanders who are uniquely placed to contextualise an incident. This on-site material has been incorporated into wider domestic coverage from announcements in Australia. The optimum approach is to provide media embeds with access that is complementary to information released in Australia, rather than echoing the same information. An excellent example of this occurred in 2011 when a media embed was assisted in accessing senior Afghan National Security Force commanders following the murder of Lance Corporal Jones. Having announced the shooting and Lance Corporal Jones’ death, Defence sought to include elements of the Afghan National Army response in all information released. This element of the narrative received little media traction in Australia until the media embed participant published a story based on an interview with Commander 205 Corps.

*Flexibility is the key*

Media agencies, particularly traditional print, radio and television agencies, work to a long-established production schedule. From the outset it is important that participants are aware that sustaining a demanding production schedule while embedded with ADF personnel in remote locations, despite the advent of portable satellite communications, is often difficult. Expecting to file a large piece every day during the period of an embed is somewhat naïve and it is far
better that all involved understand the nature of the operational environment prior to departing Australia. Similarly, the ADF is conducting complex military operations in a dangerous environment. It is not conducting public relations activities to enhance the popularity or profile of an embedded media representative. The most successful media embeds to date are those in which the participants remained highly flexible and maximised the opportunities presented through the course of their attachment, rather than those who arrived in theatre with a minute-by-minute schedule and long lists of story demands.

The optimum approach is for tactical commanders to incorporate the media embed team into their daily synchronisation briefings thereby providing participants the option to select their preferred tactical venture for the following day. In Afghanistan in 2011, a Mentoring Team Headquarters located in a remote patrol base would often coordinate multiple patrolling activities, a key leader engagement support task, a logistic task and some specialised training within a single 24-hour period. By discussing the opportunities, the associated physical risks and estimated timelines for each individual activity, the ADF commander provided the essential information for the media embed participants to choose the event that best suited their requirements. Granting a degree of participant ownership in decisions on activities is the simplest way to sustain conducive working relationships. This approach also allows tactical commanders to explain why a certain activity may be considered too risky for the attachment of the media embed team and permits both the commander and the participants to discuss options for covering the event. Despite the commanders’ best efforts however, there remain multiple influencers to any plan, not least the adversary, and a high degree of flexibility is important to gain the most from opportunities as they occur. The cancellation of a planned patrol, while disappointing, should be regarded as an opportunity to gain greater access to and insight from soldiers and junior commanders remaining at the patrol base.

Developing the long-term narrative

With limited positions available each year, Defence should seek to balance the opportunity to enhance the knowledge of a wide pool of Australian
journalists against the requirement to ensure that those who regularly comment on operational issues do so with the benefit of current context. The media embed program lends itself to a campaign approach with journalists or agencies regularly refreshed through attachments rather than seeking to identify a range of new participants each year. In 2012, Defence managed the Operation Slipper media embed program by calling for expressions of interest and then allocating available positions in a priority order. Refreshing regular commentators was an important consideration in setting this priority.

In addition, the current scope of the program and its inherently tactical focus provides an ideal opportunity for the ADF to develop a product that provides wider context to media embed reporting. A media embed’s two or three-week experience is a snapshot in time of a certain phase within a tactical operation. The ADF has the opportunity to focus longer term and build a narrative for the operation rather than just individual missions. Revisiting areas that received significant coverage weeks or months earlier is an important element of telling the whole story and placing ADF actions in the context of the campaign.

Understanding the participants

A sound understanding of media requirements is crucial to a successful embed program. Experienced Military Public Affairs personnel are a key resource for commanders in managing this aspect of program planning. The requirements of different media must be factored into planning if participants are to remain satisfied with the program. It is pointless for example, to offer a television news crew a meeting that they can only observe and not film due to local sensitivities if there is no appropriate spokesperson for interview afterwards nor an opportunity to gather related vision in order to create a story. A print journalist could, however, effectively cover that event. Similarly, developing a program that has every sub-unit of an organisation covered but allows no time to actually develop stories is a wasted opportunity that will only serve to increase tension between the media agency and the ADF. The best approach is to allow the participants themselves to decide what they wish to cover. This requires a briefing on all options, including the risks associated with
each activity, from which the participants make their own informed decision rather than being forced into a previously devised program. The media embed liaison officer should seek this information from tactical commanders to develop options approximately 48 hours in advance.

The competitive nature of today’s news media should also be recognised. Placing two competing agencies in the same place at the same time increases tension among the participants and their agencies in Australia. The ADF should split multiple embeds among different sub-units to ensure that each agency is developing its own unique stories rather than seeking a different angle on something developed by a competitor. As part of this process to provide ‘unique’ coverage, media embed participants and their parent agencies must also clearly understand that tactical circumstances, particularly the availability of protected transport, may prevent an immediate redeployment to another location should an incident occur and a competitor happen to be in the right place at the right time for the story.

Interagency and coalition/partner force coordination during operations

The ADF has worked closely with other government agencies/departments in Uruzgan since 2006 and, since that time, a large number of non-Defence personnel have witnessed the ADF’s media embedding program. Unfortunately, despite the whole of government nature of the operation, incorporation of media embeds into the non-security line of operation has been almost solely confined to ADF-managed works programs. While Defence expends considerable effort in sustaining inter-departmental situational awareness and offering opportunities, the Canberra-centric communication culture of the ADF’s partners, based on central departmental media hubs with only senior officials authorised to speak to the media, has often prevented the effective telling of the whole of government story in Afghanistan. This is an area in which Defence now has significant experience and should seek to assist its whole of government partners to fully develop agreed interagency protocols. A key issue for further development is an agreed approach within agencies and departments on how to effectively respond to requests for interview from media embeds when an incident involving non-Defence
personnel occurs. This issue was highlighted when an AusAID development advisor was seriously injured in a suicide attack on 26 March 2012. The ADF was hosting two media embeds in Uruzgan at the time who quite rightly considered the attack and wounding of an Australian of significant news value. However the management of this incident saw centralisation of all media comment in Canberra, resulting in two extremely frustrated journalists on the ground. Currently the ADF’s tactical commanders will engage with media embeds during the cycle of an incident in order to place that event in context. For the most part, interagency personnel have been prohibited from doing the same, creating significant tension with embedded media participants. This tension is further exacerbated by the fact that ADF personnel cannot speak on behalf of another department or agency.

Similarly, exposure to coalition elements and partner forces by media embed participants requires significant coordination as no two nations approach media access to their personnel the same way. The ADF must clearly articulate the restrictions inherent in opportunities with coalition elements and partner forces so as to reduce friction during the conduct of a media embed. The ADF cannot compel partner organisations to engage with an ADF media embed or to support the program through tactical attachments.

*External impacts on an effective media embedding program*

Defence currently accepts the organisational risk for media embeds attached to its operations. It addresses this risk by ensuring that media embed participants are as well prepared as possible for activities in hazardous environments. For Operation Slipper this included ensuring media embed participants complete the reception, staging, onward movement and integration (RSO&I) program and are equipped with ADF-standard personal protective equipment before entering Afghanistan. Up to early 2012, in-country media embeds were accepted as long as they met ISAF’s media embedding arrangements. At that point, the accreditation requirements included provision of their own personal protective equipment and the meeting of all costs associated with entering and exiting Afghanistan. However, since the promulgation of the 2012 Work Health and Safety Act and Work Health and Safety Regulations, the ADF has
generally not supported the in-country media embed option unless participants have been willing to return to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and complete the ADF’s RSO&I requirements. This has resulted in several high-profile media representatives repeatedly requesting access to ADF personnel but then declining the opportunity when costs in time and money are explained.

The disparity between ISAF and national requirements is the single biggest issue facing the future of the program in Afghanistan, particularly when an agency has fully funded its operation in country. This is further compounded by the view of some media organisations concerning what they consider to be five days of non-productive time in the UAE. Perhaps coincidently, the work health and safety legislation appears to have also resulted in significant increases in insurance costs for media agencies seeking to allocate personnel to media embed opportunities. While this issue is currently specific to the Operation Slipper area of operations, consideration must be given to potential future operations in which an in-country approach will predominate. Discussions with media agencies over who ‘owns’ the media personnel risk for work health and safety purposes remain in their infancy.

*Continued enhancement of the program*

Just as no two operational areas are the same, no two commanders are the same and ultimately the success of the media embed program is dependent on the attitude of commanders. The media embed program will continue to evolve as ADF commanders become more attuned to the opportunities the program offers and better understand its risks. The use of dedicated liaison officers is one area that requires continued development as there are not enough Military Public Affairs specialists in the ADF to support the increased program. Other options include simply attaching media embed participants to a sub-unit headquarters or utilising other officers in the area of operations as ad hoc liaison officers. The future of the media embed program once ADF elements are no longer partnering or directly mentoring their Afghan colleagues will also require careful consideration. Formalising basic media embed operations as doctrine, a standard operating procedure and within operational orders will also assist commanders to maintain consistency over time.
Conclusion

If interest is any measure of the success of the ADF’s media embedding program, the ADF is doing extremely well. Expressions of interest for the 2012 media embed program generated more than 70 applications covering a wide range of Australian and international media agencies. The continued high level of interest, however, is dependent on the way the program is executed and the perceived benefit for resource-constrained media agencies which have to manage losing staff for several weeks at a time.

From a purely ADF perspective, the conduct of the media embed program, particularly its rapid expansion in the past two years, has done much to enhance the often maligned military-media relationship. Media embedding in Afghanistan and on other minor operations is the only current regular and sustained interaction between journalists, commanders and junior ADF personnel. The program has done much to humanise what was increasingly regarded by elements of the public as a clinical and sometimes detached way of waging war. Media embedding, correctly implemented, offers an opportunity for the ADF to appropriately manage the principles of communication by building both credibility and trust with the Australian public. While the risks associated with the program are plentiful, the greater risk lies in not granting access to the media. Put simply, if the ADF is proud of its personnel, the organisation should not be afraid of media reporting of their actions.

The ADF’s current approach to media embedding offers the best access to Australian operations in Afghanistan to date and, from all accounts, generally meets the requirements of both participants and deployed commanders (see the selection of comments from military commanders and media representatives at Appendix 1). It is important to build on these successes and further enhance the opportunities inherent in media embedding. Key to further enhancing the program is the philosophical shift required to ensure that the program supports ‘facilitated access’ rather
than focusing on increasingly difficult to sustain ‘control’ measures. In this regard, understanding risks is vital and requires more than just a superficial or cursory review. Commanders have specialists on their staff to provide the level of advice required for appropriate decisions to be made on media embedding. It is crucial that they seek the detailed understanding necessary to support a successful program and push their Military Public Affairs officers to analyse the information environment when providing that advice. The starting point should be to view each media embed as an opportunity rather than an embuggerance imposed by higher command.

Media embedding has now become the ‘norm’ on operations and the ADF’s participation in coalitions of the future will ensure a continued requirement to support it in some form. Continued development in this area since the conclusion of the Vietnam conflict would indicate that the 2011 program is just the latest iteration of a constantly morphing approach. The ADF must stay engaged and continue to adjust its processes into the future.
Appendix 1
Comments on media embedding program

This appendix contains a collection of comments on the media embedding program from both the key JTF633 commanders during 2011 and several media participants. The comments are provided to add context to the description of the media embed program.

Commanders’ perspectives

Commander Joint Task Force 633, Major General Angus Campbell, AM, DSC

As the commander of all ADF personnel in the Middle East Area of Operations during 2011, I paid particular attention to media reporting of our activities. I was, and remain, particularly interested in an outside observer’s perception of events on the ground. Often, I would find that reported events, while based on facts, lacked context in the sense of the campaign ADF personnel and their Afghan partners were undertaking. Media reporting can, often through lack of regular exposure and understanding, place isolated or individual events at odds with gradual success in the wider campaign.

I saw media embedding as an opportunity to ensure those who regularly reported or commented on our operations did so with an enhanced contextual understanding. I deliberately spent time with each of the embedded media representatives on their way into and out of the area of operations to explain the campaign and to put their experiences in context. From my perspective, the opportunity to inform and educate on our military operations is a key benefit of the media embed program. In fact, it is this enhancement of the journalist’s understanding, which endures well after the journalist has left the theatre, that I believe is the most important aspect of the program.

More importantly, I consider that media embedding is no longer an option for ADF operations. It is an absolute requirement and should be factored into
planning from the very beginning. As Australians we live in a democracy and in that democracy, media agencies play a key role that has been acknowledged by the government and population we serve. There is an expectation, a reasonable one in our society, to engage with media. We have no choice but to do so.

I readily acknowledge that sometimes media reporting on Defence is underwhelming. It would, however, be more underwhelming if we chose not to engage. I also acknowledge that for some, the value in media embedding may not be readily apparent. Seeking to assess value in the program is, I believe, a moot point. We, as an army and defence force, are required to engage with the media, to enable the media and to interact with the media. We learn more through engaging in the process than we do by criticising media reporting after the fact.

Finally, I would suggest that it is time to consider moving beyond the term ‘media embedding’. Observations of the wider coalition effort since the invasion of Iraq have varied and a perception of control or even co-option remains among some. What Army and the defence force really does, within the agreed bounds of operations security constraints, is ‘media enabling’ to assist media access to report independent perspectives on military operations in a contested and dangerous environment.

Put simply, war is sustained through public support which, in turn, is enabled through regular and consistent contact with the media. It is simply unreasonable to not engage because to not do so will damage the campaign. I believe the Army and ADF must focus on providing an opportunity for the campaign to be fairly reported and the enhancements to the media embed program provide a great opportunity to do this.

_Commanding Officer Mentoring Task Force 2, Lieutenant Colonel Darren Huxley, DSC (since promoted)_

During the course of Mentoring Task Force 2’s 2010/2011 deployment we hosted three media embeds, a regional media embed with media representatives from Darwin and several in-country embeds from Australian journalists based in Afghanistan. The tempo of the media embed program
increased significantly after we handed over the area of operations to Mentoring Task Force 3.

The media embed program can be confronting, particularly its ability to have strategic agencies reach down into tactical matters because something was observed on the news. This is a frustration for the staff dealing with countless requests for information. But, for my soldiers, having journalists ‘muck in’ beside them and share some of the hardships was immensely important. It also proved particularly important to the families of the task force. The beauty of the media embed program is that, if an agency is willing to participate, the content their representatives produce while embedded will be used. There is simply a financial incentive to do so. This makes the regional media embed program so useful in ensuring that families feel that the work of their loved ones is recognised.

From a command perspective, I believe it is always a balancing game when we invite strangers (and that’s what embedded journalists are) into our house. Perhaps they will play by the rules and respect the effort that went into preparing for the mission and the difficulty of the task we are trying to execute or maybe they are just exploiting the opportunity for their own profile and professional gain. Obviously, in a liberal democracy, it is absolutely correct for us to be open to scrutiny, but it will never be easy to depart from a view that media embeds are generally looking for failure on which to report.

From what I saw, modern Aussie diggers have the same effect on journalists that the 1st AIF had on Bean — it is hard not to be infected by their enthusiasm, their sanguine approach, and their genuine desire to help (or win) the conflict they are engaged in. The difficulty becomes one of perspective for journalists. Embedded media representatives either look too high at the strategic conduct of the war (for which we have little ownership) as they try to make sense of our activity or too low at the creature comforts (boots and ice cream) because they fall in love with the Aussie digger. Both approaches unfortunately misrepresent the ADF’s operational contribution to the general public.
I had no problem managing any of the media embeds who accompanied Mentoring Task Force 2. The media liaison officers did all the hard work and were as keen to get into the field as the journalists were (including Captain Maggie Nichols spending a good deal of time in a very rudimentary platoon house with a section of poorly groomed 5th Battalion gentlemen for company).

I would have liked to support individual embeds for a longer period of time so they could appreciate the monotony of our work rather than a few patrols here and a few patrols there, but I acknowledge they are curtailed by their own job timelines. The short time-frames of the media embed program can result in them wanting to be battlefield tourists and see as much as they can. A military historian/journalist deploying with the unit (like Bean did) would have been a great experiment in continuity of reporting rather than a new 60-second view every few months.

Nevertheless, any chance to have a public appreciation of the conditions under which we operate and the daily challenges that face our young men and women in a conflict zone is more than worth the small disruption to our operational activity.

Commanding Officer Mentoring Task Force 3, Lieutenant Colonel Chris Smith, DSC

My experience of the media embed program at its peak in 2011 was extremely positive. I saw the program as an opportunity rather than a burden or a risk. The journalists were easy to care for and demanded little. Their exposure to disciplined soldiers doing good work created a favourable impression which made its way into their reporting. Moreover, the opportunity for the journalists to see the progress in Uruzgan Province for themselves caused the vast majority to refine their narratives, either changing them completely or making them more nuanced and accurate. The greater sophistication and nuance in the reporting on Australia’s involvement in Afghanistan in the latter half of 2011 was directly related to the exposure of journalists to the operations in Uruzgan Province through the embed program.
Military professionals ought to seek the truth no matter how awkward or uncomfortable it is and support the media in reporting that truth. If the truth is unfavourable then we should not be surprised by the unfavourable response of the public to such reports. Quite simply, if you want the media to report on success, be successful. If you are losing a war, then the media will try to identify why things are going wrong and report on the possibility of losing. If we change the rationale for going to war halfway through, then the media will get confused or question the motive for changing the goals. If your soldiers are poorly disciplined, racist, or misogynistic then this truth will be revealed sooner or later. It’s all fairly simple. Work on getting real things right, invite the media in to see it and let them report what they see.

Media embedding participant perspectives

*Mr Nick Butterly, reporter, The West Australian*

ADF media embed 2010, ADF VIP visit 2010, NATO Media Opinion Leaders’ Tour 2011

The conflict in Afghanistan has been one of the biggest news stories of the past ten years, but covering the war has been a major logistical, financial and at times ethical challenge for Australian news companies. I have been lucky enough to make three visits to Afghanistan since 2010. My first was as part of the official ADF media embed program, my second was a very brief trip accompanying the Minister for Defence and the third was as part of a US government-organised press tour.

In March 2010, I took part in a four-week embed with the ADF along with photographer Lee Griffith, also from *The West Australian*. The decision to take part in the embed was a major exercise for *The West Australian*, not only because of the huge expense (insurance is a killer for newspapers going to Afghanistan) but also because the paper had to take two staff members out of their regular jobs for a month. It was also a major ethical issue for the paper to agree to allow a Defence media liaison officer to take a look at all copy before it was filed home to Australia. But the reality was that this
agreement had very little impact in practice. Most of the red flags my media minder raised about my copy were about the capabilities of equipment such as night vision sensors — very technical stuff that few readers would have taken an interest in anyway.

I have to emphasise that I believe I was also incredibly lucky to have been partnered with the media liaison officer I was given. He was keenly interested in newspapers and always wanting to push the bounds of the embed as far as we could. In a way he acted more as an interpreter between me and the Defence machine than a censor. I have since heard some horror stories of other reporters being saddled with media liaison officers who saw their jobs purely in terms of shutting down awkward stories and pedalling positive ones. This tactic never worked in the long run as the reporter simply became more determined to write the story they wanted to write. Often their copy was poisoned by the bumbling efforts of their liaison officer.

My second trip to Afghanistan was in September 2010 and lasted just two sleepless days. It basically involved running back and forward between helicopters and Hercules transports as we raced around trying to keep up with the Defence Minister. Funnily enough this mania produced one of the better stories I have written from Afghanistan when a young soldier confronted the Minister at Patrol Base Razaq and complained that the troops were spread too thin. There were no controls on our reporting, and our ability to file was limited only by the furious pace of the travel.

My most recent trip to Afghanistan was last year and lasted just over a week. The visit was organised by the US State Department for a group of reporters from NATO member countries. There were no restraints on filing and our minders took a largely hands-off approach, taking us to various provinces all over Afghanistan and lining up briefings with officials. By pure luck our group was stranded in Tarin Kot for two nights after insurgents launched an attack in Kabul. While this was a nightmare for the other reporters on the tour — most of whom were from countries such as Spain or Poland — it was a fantastic opportunity for me as it allowed me to get briefings from ADF officers and DFAT officials.
Each trip had its own set of restrictions and hurdles. But there was always a way to get around Defence bureaucracy or disingenuous media minders with a little initiative and creative thinking. My concern now is that the final leg of the story of Australia’s role in Afghanistan may not be properly told. Newspaper budget cuts mean most print reporters will be hard pressed to make it to Tarin Kot this year to document the withdrawal. There’s an irony in the fact that the media fought so hard for embedding with the ADF during the early years of the war, but having won that privilege might not make use of it in 2013.

*Mr Mark Burrows, reporter, Nine Network*

In-country embed 2010, ADF media embed 2011

I’ve had the good fortune to join two embed programs, in 2010 and 2011. As a general comment I’d say I was wrestling with two demands throughout. One was to judge the stories on offer from the ADF. Often they were topical, stories I knew I could sell to my news desk. Sometimes, however, they were too propaganda driven. So, fine for the ADF to suggest, but near impossible for me to sell. The other demand was covering the people and the events I had judged to be worthy. By and large I felt I was successful in this regard.

In 2010 my escort ‘got’ what I wanted and was acutely aware I needed stories with an edge. Days after the Battle of Derapet he facilitated a visit to Patrol Base Anar Joy.

As long as the ADF realises the competing demands of different media outlets the embed programs can work. In 2011 we were bundled with a newspaper reporter on a patrol. My observation is that it would always be preferable to separate organisations. They have such differing demands.

Fortunately in 2011 the Commanding Officer was Lieutenant Colonel Smith. I mention him personally because of his openness and willingness to introduce us to a wide cross section of ADF activities. His attitude allowed us to cover a lot of territory and generate a large number of stories, all of which were well received back home. He trusted us from the outset. We returned that trust by respecting certain confidences. Background briefings were treated accordingly. In my humble opinion, unless the Commanding Officer
is prepared to be frank and as open as possible, the embed will struggle. Of course the relationship cuts two ways.

The role of the media escort is a tricky one. I feel the working relationship we had in 2010 was a good one. He opened doors for us and didn’t close them. If we wanted to talk to an officer in charge, he made that happen. It was up to the officer to decide what he would say. In other words an effective escort is one who took a step back and allowed soldiers and officers to talk to us openly.

A key issue I have touched on is trust. This has been a stumbling block in the relationship between journalists and the ADF in the past. It’s been my experience over two embeds that, if the escort and Commanding Officer can trust the journalist, that faith will be returned in spades. Conversely, if trust is absent, the stories will suffer.

Embeds give the media the opportunity to capture a snapshot of the tactical activities of the ADF. It’s a chance to humanise a war that can be lost in the political rhetoric. It’s up to the journalist to turn what might seem to be a mundane patrol into a story. I doubt journalists will ever be completely satisfied with an embed. It’s likely a Commanding Officer will always have qualms about the stories told during the process. However the program has become the only real window we have in gaining insight into what our soldiers face during war.

*Mr Wes Hardman, producer, Nine Network*

ADF media embed 2011, ADF media embed 2012

I’ve been on a couple of ADF media embeds in Afghanistan and never had a problem that could not be solved, by and large, to all parties’ satisfaction. I’ve found that the commanders and troops have only ever been helpful and hospitable. And they are inclusive. Rarely is there a sense of ‘them and us’.

I thought I’d try — rather than espouse a grand theory — to just look at a couple of ‘nuts and bolts’ aspects of embeds. For instance, the media are often labelled by the public as ‘pariahs’, preying on the grieving, the abused etc. So there should be an understanding by Defence personnel that the media has pragmatic techniques we need to follow so we can tell a story, that there
are elements which need to be included for the report to ‘work’. Our tools, apart from pure information, are the drama, the pictures and the emotion. Sometimes how we go about getting those elements takes hard work that might look slightly cold-hearted and calculating. We might seem focussed on ‘the story’ but we believe the finished product will almost always reflect our own sense of morality and decency — and accuracy.

So there needs to be mutual trust.

Defence commanders are also pragmatic; they estimate casualties, have medical teams on standby, have procedures for role-switching if an element of a patrol is taken out of action. To some, that would seem ‘cold-hearted and calculating’ so, in pragmatism, we’re often in the same boat. But in both camps, it’s necessary. There is always a mix of candour and caution by commanders and troops towards the media. And that’s understandable. But ADF personnel should be aware that media can smell a mantra — the company line — at a thousand paces. It is enormously refreshing when we interview commanders who speak in real terms, not off the hymn-sheet. It becomes much more useable.

I’ve heard corporals, with composure and clarity and intelligence, put into a couple of sentences what a major struggled to enunciate because he felt he had to be cautious. Defence and the media need to — generally — agree that embeds are mostly a chance for journalists to report on the ‘theatre’ not the philosophy behind the overall ADF mission. Whether Australia SHOULD BE involved in Afghanistan or Iraq or wherever is going to be hard to judge from inside an embed. That should be mostly for discussion in Parliament, to be the subject of street protests, op-ed comment or for specific reporting at home.

Embeds, I believe, should be emphasised as an opportunity to report what our troops achieve and endure on the ground. Everybody has a personal opinion on whether Australia should be involved in any particular conflict. An embed is, perhaps, not the place to discuss it.

One small detail which emerged from my embed in May was a movement protocol. One member of my team was on the point of being abusive to a transport corporal. It was about the handling of cameras on board an aircraft.
I had a solution to suggest but my colleague launched into an attack on the NCO. Perhaps it could be emphasised to embedded journalists that any disagreements in procedure (transport or otherwise) should be quietly taken up with the media escort officer rather than lead to a public argument. It was a situation which became very embarrassing for me and brought on a fairly spirited argument later between myself and my colleague.

*Mr Ian McPhedran, defence reporter, News Limited Group*

ADF media embed (trial) 2009, ADF media embed 2011 (X2), ADF media embed 2012

Media embedding is a valuable tool for the military and the media provided it is just one of a number of methods used to cover a given conflict. Obviously in Afghanistan it is dangerous and difficult for the media to cover the conflict as so-called ‘independents’, so embedding becomes the only means of covering the war. During the conflict, several Australian reporters and photographers have had the chance to embed with US and British forces as well as with the Australians and this has provided an interesting point of comparison.

At the outset it needs to be stated that embedding is much more useful than not embedding. The key issue is that it must be treated as a true embed experience and not just a PR exercise whereby meaningless story ideas are thrust upon journalists who are at the mercy of the ADF public affairs officers present for the job and the broader military for their welfare and security.

Embedding when it is done properly is a terrific way for reporters to get into the story and into the heads of the diggers who are fighting the war. For example there is no point making embeds cool their heels in TK for days on end when there are patrols driving out the front gate every day. Embeds must be allowed to immerse themselves with units and that means spending time with them, getting to know the characters and reporting on what they do. If that means picking up the occasional negative story or being on the scene as an eyewitness to a particular incident then so be it. The Americans and the British don’t fear this.

Unfortunately many ADF commanders don’t understand this fundamental point. They want to control what is reported and to protect themselves and
their soldiers from undue public scrutiny. That misses the point of embedding and the depth of access that is provided for British and American reporters embedding with their units. Australian commanders have to be convinced that embedding is just that and is not designed for them to tinker with to suit their personal agendas. I know that the experience for reporters varies greatly depending on who the commander of Task Force 633 is at the time. Until unencumbered access is allowed then the tension between the media and the military will remain.

Of all the embeds that I have undertaken the most successful are those that allowed us to spend time on patrol with combat units. An analysis of the material reported from such embeds will show that the stories were overwhelmingly positive and insightful. The fact that they may have been mixed with the odd piece that the establishment didn’t appreciate shouldn’t be a reason for not providing such unfettered access.

*Mr Hugh Riminton, political editor, Network Ten*

**ADF media embed 2010**

With cameraman Chris Campey, I was embedded with the ADF in Afghanistan in November 2010. I had previously spent extended periods with Australian troops in Somalia, East Timor and the Solomon Islands. I had also experienced many short-term embeds with American forces in Iraq.

I was conscious that the Australian embed process had a poor reputation among journalists who took part in the first Afghanistan experiments but that the ADF was adapting the model. My experience was almost entirely positive. We received excellent briefings in the UAE from Acting MEAO Commander, Commodore David Johnstone, and RSM Don Spinks. Once in Tarin Kot, we also received frank briefings from Colonel Dennis Malone and Lieutenant Colonel Darren Huxley.

We wanted an unvarnished view of ADF efforts on the ground and to speak to and understand the perspective of our ANA partners. Well-briefed, we were able to target our field work to the then-current Operation Boston. We were well accepted by the troops we met and were given every assistance to get the material we needed. Our desire to see a new patrol base being
established was accommodated even though the logistics were testing for the ADF team. Similarly our wish to get to COP Mashal, which we identified from our early briefings as a potential site for strong stories, was met. Strong stories followed. The efforts of our Media Liaison Officer Captain Lachlan Simond were especially appreciated, as was the willingness of Captain Nick Perriman to make us welcome at Mashal and Major BJ Pearce in Dorafshan. Our desire to see the civilian aid effort through the PRT was also accommodated and resulted in strong stories and a nuanced understanding of the challenges of building up a fractured nation.

As is always the case, the interviews with the diggers themselves were a highlight. They remain the best sales team the ADF could ask for.

The one jarring note came at the end. While at COP Mashal we joined a patrol which ended with two local men being detained. The detainees were handled fairly and appropriately. It emerged they were suspected of leading the local insurgency and one was suspected of being a bomb-maker whose victims included two Australians. At no time were the detainees humiliated or paraded for our cameras. A request was made to us that their faces be blurred out. As a field operation we had neither the technical capacity to do that, nor the authority to censor material without it first being referred to our own news management. However, it was my view that blurring their faces was appropriate and I conveyed that that would be the recommendation I would make. The Defence request would also be conveyed to Ten management.

During the course of these conversations, a senior Australian officer based, we were told, in Afghanistan but not at Tarin Kot threatened to cancel our ISAF accreditation. This had particular application for Chris Campey who was planning to continue news gathering out of Kabul on his ISAF papers. This intervention was unnecessary and perverse. Journalists, quite properly, have their own processes and chain of command, particularly when it comes to sensitive matters like censorship. To threaten the cameraman, when he could have no ultimate influence over the matter under discussion, was mere bullying, demeaning the dignity of the ADF. The story was put to air with the faces blurred, as they were always going to be.
With that exception, the embed exercise was, from our perspective, a complete success. Ten ran prominently every story we filed. And we filed a lot. The field vision gave us a new bank of library material, enabling us to give context to other news of Afghanistan over the months that followed. Vision of a firefight at COP Mashal was particularly powerful, giving Australians an insight into the sacrifices, courage and stoicism of our troops in the field. An interview we conducted with Sapper Jamie Larcombe was also able to bring some small comfort to his family when he was killed a few weeks later.

The ADF, in my view, deserves credit for revising its early attempts at an embed program, adapting it according to feedback from journalists, and delivering a much improved system. This is a consequence of the serious engagement ADF personnel have brought to the task. It is appreciated by this practitioner at least.
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