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Military-Media Relations Come of Age

BARRY E. WILLEY

On 27 October 1983, two days after D-Day, the first group of journalists—a media pool to be precise—landed on the island of Grenada to cover what combat actions remained. These 15 journalists were understandably perturbed for having been excluded from the first two days of action. They were anxious to learn and report firsthand what was happening on that heretofore unremarked “isle of spice.”

No plans had been made to include the media in Operation Urgent Fury. When the decision was made at the highest levels of the US government to allow a pool from the nearly 400 journalists waiting on the island of Barbados to fly to Grenada, it fell to the Public Affairs Team of the 82d Airborne Division to coordinate support for the pool and arrange for as much access as possible within operational security constraints. As more journalists arrived and the area of operations gradually opened to all media, reporting of military operations on Grenada became widespread and, for the most part, accurate. Not all the action was over when the journalists arrived. The first group witnessed portions of a major Ranger airmobile assault on the Calivigny Barracks complex, including a massive artillery preparation of the objective. Another pool on 29 October drew sniper fire during a tour of the Frequent warehouse area, where stacks of arms and ammunition were being stored.¹

Much has happened since Operation Urgent Fury regarding media coverage of US military actions, and military-media relations have improved significantly in terms of cooperation and understanding. It has taken long months of work, planning, and interaction between the media and the military to achieve such improvement. Most significant in this evolution was the formation of the Sidle Panel following Grenada to review military-media relations and determine the feasibility of institutionalizing media participation in future training and contingency deployments of US forces. In response to the panel's recommendations, the military created the Department of Defense national media pool program. A pool has been deployed on eight occasions to

cover training deployments of US forces around the country and the world, including the March 1988 "show of force" to Honduras.

In July of 1987, after the tragic Iraqi attack on the USS *Stark* in the Persian Gulf and the decision to reflag Kuwaiti tankers with the Stars and Stripes, the Department of Defense deployed the media pool to cover the use of US forces, which involved the escorting of the first reflagged Kuwaiti tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, into the Persian Gulf, all the way to Kuwait. Though the passage through Hormuz and into the Gulf was relatively uneventful, the 10-member media pool and their military escorts from the Department of Defense and US Central Command witnessed the ominous and widely reported mine strike near the end of the transit by the supertanker *Bridgeton* on the 24th of July.

The plan for that pool deployment, including elaborate ground rules, was established by the Pentagon and the US Central Command—the unified command responsible for US forces deployed in the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, North Arabian Sea, and the surrounding region. The ground rules were understood and accepted by all pool members before embarking on any US Navy vessel. They included the need for a security review of all pool material at the source before release of news products to any interested media. The public affairs escorts would conduct the security reviews and expedite the dispatch of pool products (audio, video, print, still photos) from the ships by all feasible means. Two print reporters in that pool—Mark Thompson, Knight-Ridder Newspapers, and Tim Ahern, Associated Press—wrote accounts of their experiences in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (November/December 1987) and the *Washington Journalism Review* (October 1987), respectively. They expressed concerns about delays in transmission of pool reports, censorship of pool products, and difficulties in getting pool products ashore in a timely manner, among others. In fact, all pool products were reviewed for security and changes were recommended, if warranted. Premature release of operational information puts US lives at risk. There was concern by military escorts about the propriety of a potentially embarrassing reference within a pool print report, but it had nothing to do with security and was left in the story. Every attempt was made to get pool products ashore quickly. In one case, as AP's Ahern

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mentions in his article, one of the US warships delayed its scheduled movement while waiting to rendezvous with a vessel sent to pick up media reportage.

The pool deployment was not devoid of problems, but despite the complaints by members of the pool and some of their editors and bureau chiefs in Washington, the pool deployment was a success. Ahern said, "As far as I'm concerned, the pool's chief test came Friday, after the *Bridgeton* hit the mine. The story I filed was the first word released at the Pentagon."² Knight-Ridder's Thompson commented: "First and foremost, [the pool] had been a success inasmuch as our audiences were better served for our having been there, rather than at our Washington desks, and for having covered the escort operations, albeit under unusual conditions."³

Because of continued interest in Gulf operations, the Pentagon and US Central Command activated a DOD "regional" media pool, which rotated media representatives every three to four weeks from a base in a gulf littoral country for rapid recall and access to US military operations in the region. This pool was smaller (five or six) due to the limited number and capacity of escort vessels. Primarily, it pulled correspondents from bureaus in the Gulf region. Its purpose was to continue covering transits of reflagged Kuwaiti tankers and any other significant events that might occur in the region involving US forces.

But was this type of pool really feasible for the long haul and was it capable of covering hostilities, should they occur? The answer is yes. During the nine months between the first embarkation in July 1987 to the dramatic US reprisals against Iranian oil platforms on 18 April 1988—47 transits and 28 media pool activations later—there was a markedly successful evolution. To better understand the media's role in the US-Iranian hostilities by that date, some background leading to that event is necessary.

Early on the morning of 14 April of last year, during what was planned to be a routine embarkation of the regional media pool (consisting of AP Middle East correspondent Richard Pyle, CNN correspondent Taylor Henry, camera crew husband-wife team Steve and Anne Cocklin, and UPI photographer Tom Salyer) to cover a transit of reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, the pool boarded the USS *O'Brien* from the USS *Jack Williams*. The *O'Brien* was scheduled to escort the next northbound convoy, which would include, ironically, the supertanker *Bridgeton*.

While on the *O'Brien*, waiting to rendezvous with the Kuwaiti reflagged tankers, the pool received word by radio that the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* had struck a mine in waters of the central Persian Gulf. The pool and its escorts had visited that frigate just two weeks before, so the somber report of fires, flooding, and ten injured crewmen was hard to accept. In the short time the pool was aboard the "Sammie B.," it had become part of the ship's "family."

Based on the facts as then known, the pool's public affairs escorts drafted a statement concerning the *Samuel B. Roberts*' mine strike and

provided that to the media pool. Two hours later a message arrived from the Commander, Joint Task Force Middle East, with nearly identical information, thus validating the statement given the pool earlier. (The lesson here is that public affairs officers in the absence of official pronouncements should use available information—properly qualified!—to keep the media and the public apprised. Corrections, if indicated, can be issued later.)

The next 24-hour period was a whirlwind of logistical activity which saw the pool transferred from the *O'Brien* to the USS *Merrill* and then on to the USS *Wainwright*. The pool transfers were accomplished by a ship-based surveillance helicopter with room for only one or two extra passengers, necessitating the prioritization of personnel, baggage, and equipment. This plan ensured that the two pool photographers (still and video) were ready to go by another helicopter to the newly discovered mine danger area and photograph the recently laid mines and their subsequent destruction. The rapidity and efficiency with which pool members were transported to the scene of the action greatly impressed the media pool, inexperienced and veterans alike.

On 16 April, the pool observed and reported on the *Samuel B. Roberts* under tow by a contract tug and escorted by the *Wainwright* after the mine strike. Good still photos and video footage were obtained, but no interviews with crew from the *Roberts* were possible at that time. Transfer of media products was accomplished in an unprecedented link-up with an NBC helicopter based in the region which hovered over the *Wainwright's* deck, allowing same-day coverage in the United States via satellite. All concerned were impressed with the flow of information, access to fast-breaking news, and the support by the Navy. At this point in the operation, pool deactivation and return to shore appeared likely, but all members sensed that something else was in the offing.

By the morning of 17 April the pool had transferred back to the USS *Jack Williams* and the media escort officers received preliminary information about action to be taken by US forces as a measured response to the Iranian mines laid in international waters, one of which was struck by the *Roberts*. On the morning of the 17th, the pool was briefed in general terms by the Commander, Destroyer Squadron 22, also aboard the *Jack Williams*, on the forthcoming operation, dubbed "Operation Praying Mantis." The media's mission was to remain aboard the *Jack Williams* to cover the operation from the scene. Pool members and escorts then conducted a reconnaissance of the ship. Good camera angles were scouted and a preliminary setup was accomplished. Pool members were obviously psyched for the coming experience, and seemed to feel that this would be the ultimate test for the media pool. It was also viewed by some pool members as a recoupment for the missed opportunity in October 1987 when the media pool was not deployed for the naval shelling of the Rashadat oil platform.

Early on 18 April, D-Day, the pool was briefed "on background" with the understanding that an official announcement from Washington would be

forthcoming. Three surface action groups were formed, one each to destroy two Iranian oil platforms (which were being used to direct and coordinate Iranian military operations in the Gulf) and one to sink the Iranian frigate *Sabalan*. The pool was with the latter group—Surface Action Group D—aboard the *Jack Williams*. This group's mission was not revealed to the media initially, as it might not be executed and would therefore remain classified for possible future action. (The mission was later divulged by the Pentagon.)

H-hour had come and gone for the Sirri and Sassan platform operations. As reports came in on those attacks, the mission of Surface Action Group D, find and sink the *Sabalan*, appeared unlikely to occur. The pool accompanying was frustrated and felt left out of the action. As the pool waited, it took special note of the other action groups' activities. Of particular interest was the dramatic audio heard over bridge-to-bridge radio of the *Wainwright's* warning to an Iranian missile patrol boat interfering with the Sirri platform attack—"This is a warning. Stop and abandon ship. I intend to sink you." As information about the initial engagements of the platforms began to come in—first slowly, then in rapid succession—the "news" became almost overwhelming. The print and television correspondents were drafting their stories with moment-by-moment, real-time updates.

Meanwhile, Surface Action Group D had sailed into the Strait of Hormuz, with no contact or sighting of an Iranian warship to that point. As the group turned and headed back into the gulf, it received a report that the *Sabalan's* sister ship, the *Sahand*, was moving out of port and heading toward



DOD Photo

Captain William M. Mathis, commander of the guided missile cruiser *USS Fox*, answers questions during an interview by pool reporters. The *Fox* was escorting the reflagged Kuwaiti supertankers *Gas Prince* and *Bridgeton* during the first transit in July 1987.

the group with obvious hostile intent. The Commander, Joint Task Force Middle East, called the Commander, Destroyer Squadron 22, on the *Jack Williams* and passed on this elegantly simple order: "The *Sahand* is in your area. Take her." Action Group D maneuvered and awaited her arrival. US Navy A-6 Intruder aircraft from the USS *Enterprise* Battle Group in the Gulf of Oman, under the control of the *Jack Williams*, flew over the *Sahand* to reconnoiter, received fire, and returned it effectively with bombs and missiles.

The USS *Joseph Strauss*, a destroyer in Action Group D, also engaged the *Sahand* with a Harpoon surface-to-surface missile. The pool soon heard that the *Sahand* lay dead in the water; it would eventually sink. This missile firing was the first action that the media pool could observe, as the *Joseph Strauss* lay just ahead. Though almost 20 miles away and out of visual range of the *Sahand*, the pool could easily hear and feel primary and secondary explosions and shock waves from the stricken enemy vessel. The pool wanted to move in on the *Sahand* wreckage and get close-ups. That was not to be.

Instead, Action Group D had to respond to reports that the *Sabalan* was steaming just south of Larak Island in the Strait of Hormuz heading toward the group. The *Sabalan*, the group's original target at the outset of the operation, fired a missile at an A-6E aircraft, which missed but prompted the A-6E to engage it with laser-guided bombs. *Sabalan* was hit and heavily damaged.

While the ongoing actions were newsworthy events for the pool, they often did not provide good visual opportunities for the still photographer and television crew. This is an age of over-the-horizon naval engagements, and the pool got a taste of what it's like to cover high-tech combat involving long-range missiles, radar intercepts, and high-altitude aircraft sorties. The visual media representatives had to be content with what they could actually see from the decks of the *Jack Williams*.

About this time the first indications of some sort of incoming missiles were noted and passed to all on board the *Jack Williams*. The call of "Silkworm inbound" could be heard loud and clear several times over the next two hours. Iranian aircraft, including a four-engine C-130 cargo aircraft possibly directing the Silkworm strikes, reportedly flew near Action Group D. The ships responded quickly and effectively. Clearly evident to the media pool were the ships' defensive maneuverings, chaff-dispensing (designed to deflect incoming missiles), and surface-to-air missile engagements by the *Jack Williams* and the other ships in the group. (Of particular interest is that the initial ship's report indicated the missiles were Silkworms; the media accounts accurately reflected what the ship had reported. The Pentagon has since stated that there is no evidence that Silkworms were fired at the action group.)

The video and still cameras and crews, with military escort, maintained a position on the O-3 level, the very highest observation platform on the ship. Lieutenant Commander Mark Van Dyke, staff public affairs officer for the Commander, Joint Task Force Middle East, remained on the bridge

with the wire and TV correspondents. These locations proved to be optimal in view of the audio, visual, and command and control aspects of the operation that were readily observable. Also evident were the fear and confusion that can be expected in any hostile environment. But the crew and pool members took it in stride. All did their jobs coolly and professionally under intense pressure. Print stories were filed continuously from the *Jack Williams*, while television and still photographic products were prepared for transfer ashore at the earliest possible opportunity.

The eventful day of 18 April 1988 ended as the *Jack Williams* was directed to remain in the area to patrol, observe, and assist in the search for a Marine helicopter reported missing that evening with two crewmen aboard.⁴ These two were the only US casualties that day. Later, the Commander-in-Chief, US Central Command, upon discovery of the wreckage, stated that there was no indication the helicopter had been hit by hostile fire. Efforts soon began to move the pool to other vessels or back ashore, pending further hard-news opportunities. The pool's experience on the *Jack Williams* had been cordial, cooperative, and unforgettable, but it was time to move on. Pool members and escorts transferred to the USS *Lynde McCormick* on the evening of 21 April. Here was an excellent opportunity to get a new perspective on other activities of 18 April, as the *Lynde McCormick* had participated in the attack on the Sassan platform. Several more stories and video tapes resulted from this short but valuable visit.

Finally ashore the evening of 22 April, pool members rested and reflected on the previous 11 days—the longest media pool deployment since its formation. Pool accomplishments during this activation included over 2000 miles traveled, ten ships embarked, six helicopter transfers, four small-boat transfers, 14 print reports, six television scripts filed, 600 minutes of videotape, 18 rolls of still film, and three ship-to-shore transfers of pool material. Pool members described the experience as “awesome.” This deployment clearly demonstrated the essential value of the pool and the military's ability to coordinate challenging pool logistical requirements without significant impact upon operations or security.

A key to the success of this pool deployment was the continuing close interaction between the pool members and their military escorts. Answering questions in a timely manner and ensuring that each pool member was kept abreast of activities, even when new information was not available, helped considerably in assuring pool members that the military was looking out for their interests, both professionally and personally. Additionally, timely information and support from the public affairs staffs of the Joint Task Force Middle East, US Central Command, and the Department of Defense were invaluable.

If there was any chronic problem encountered during the deployment of the pool, it was getting print reports and photographic products—video and

still—off the ship in a timely manner. As has been mentioned, video and still products were flown off by civilian news helicopters for further transfer via satellite or mail to all interested media. The helicopter linkup was a practice that had not been authorized to this point, but soon became an approved and accepted means of transfer once it was successfully tried. Operational requirements precluded quick transfer of products immediately following the 18 April action, but that was understood and accepted by all media pool members. The soonest a video and still product transfer could be made was on 20 April, again by news helicopter.

Print reports from the wire reporter were filed by the standard method used since the first pool deployment—immediate precedence military message to both the Pentagon and US Central Command, who in turn distributed it immediately to all media. Delays come from the fact that a ship's operational message traffic goes out by the same system. Thus when news breaks and stories are filed, generally operational messages are also going out and take priority. Again, when all was said and done, the pool members understood and accepted the system. The command/control vessel *Jack Williams*, even with so much important operational message traffic to be sent, was willing to dedicate a word processor and operator solely to media pool print reports, shortening the waiting time for reports to be typed and coded into message format. The bottom line—print reports got off the ship as soon as operationally feasible.

The end result of this whole experience for the pool was wide and accurate reporting of events as they occurred. The fog of war is always present in hostile actions, and events tend to become clear only incrementally, as more information is received from different sources, but the pool was constantly updated and accurate follow-up stories resulted. As evidence of the close pool interaction with the ship, when the *Jack Williams*' skipper expressed concern that he was unable to communicate frankly with his crew over the intercom without risk of being quoted, the pool agreed that no one would report anything the CO said over the intercom and did not want reported. This is probably unprecedented in media-military relations, at least since World War II, but reflects the compromises that often occur in order to get the job done. That it happened is a credit to the professionals in the pool.

But what about future media involvement in ground operations with Army or Marine forces? Aren't those types of media deployments very different and more difficult to control than maritime operations, where a media pool can be held incommunicado aboard a ship, with their reportage virtually hostage to the ship's captain and his mission? Yes. Certainly there are different concerns in working with media pools in different scenarios. Those must be planned for and dealt with case by case. But even in Grenada, with only frantic last-minute planning to accommodate the media, accurate coverage resulted. Most significant, however, has been the deployment of national media pools on the eight occasions previously mentioned, allowing development, testing,

and refinement of procedures in supporting and controlling media pool coverage under a variety of circumstances with different types of forces.

We have now run the gamut—from a hasty, makeshift pool, organized to cover the latter part of the Grenada rescue operation; through training deployments and the activation of the DOD national media pool for the first transit of reflagged Kuwaiti tankers; to the first employment of the DOD media pool during hostile action by US forces, a thoroughly planned contingency that involved public affairs from the beginning as an integral part of the operation. Regional pool activities ceased in the Gulf in July of last year. In its place, a program of unilateral embarkations began to accommodate the many requests received from news organizations asking for the opportunity to send representatives to ships in the Persian Gulf. Of course, the Department of Defense and US Central Command retain the option of reactivating the pool, should that become necessary.

The military's planning, coordination, and execution of the media pool deployments to cover operations in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere have set the standard for future media pool operations. The evolution of pool deployments to cover both ground-based force deployments during training and contingency operations and sea-based deployments in the Persian Gulf involving all services has clearly addressed the Sidle Panel's statement of principle—"US news media [should] cover US military operations to the maximum degree possible consistent with mission security and the safety of US forces."⁵

The procedure is not perfect. We can always improve. Few military plans ever work exactly as they are designed to work. They inevitably require modifications based on changing circumstances and the needs of the participants, and constant review. That is happening now at all levels within the military. Every media pool deployment in the Persian Gulf—35 in all—provided some new perspective on military-media relations. But the proof is in the execution. It has worked for routine deployments and for hostilities experienced thus far. The media pool has come of age and military-media relations are as good as they have been since World War II. There is no reason why they can't get even better.

NOTES

1. For excellent background on military-media relations, particularly those during the Grenada operation, see Peter Braestrup, "Background Paper," in *Battle Lines: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Military and the Media* (New York: Priority Press, 1985), pp. 19-160.

2. Tim Ahern, "White Smoke in the Persian Gulf," *Washington Journalism Review*, 9 (October 1987), 18.

3. Mark Thompson, "With the Press Pool in the Persian Gulf," *Columbia Journalism Review* (November/December 1987), p. 46.

4. For an interesting perspective on the events surrounding 18 April 1988 by pool member Richard Pyle of the Associated Press, see his "Covering a Mini-War: Sometimes the Pool Works," *Washington Journalism Review*, 10 (July/August 1988), 14-17.

5. *Battle Lines*, p. 165.