



CBS News anchor Scott Pelley interviews then-Col. Patrick Frank, commander of the 3rd BCT, 10th Mountain Division in 2011 during a CBS Evening News segment on coalition progress in Afghanistan. During his interview, the commander was able to solidify the information fight through key themes and messages. (Photo Courtesy of Capt. Kevin Sandell)

By Captain Kevin Sandell

When U.S. Tomahawk cruise missiles were launched into Syria this past April, it was a Navy Mass Communications Specialist who captured the viral footage shown on national and international news networks. It was an Army Public Affairs officer who masterminded the community relations role of Operation Dragoon Ride in 2015 during Operation Atlantic Resolve. In 1999, the collective efforts of two combatant commands to ease Y2K hype resulted in a 50 percent decrease in public concern for the effects of Y2K on U.S. strategic

systems.

Public Affairs professionals play a crucial role in today's operational and information environment. Shaping operations through a Public Affairs lens can pay dividends for achieving strategic objectives, and should be considered equally among other planning factors. We as Public Affairs practitioners, earn our stripes when we fight for a seat—and prove ourselves—alongside our primary staff colleagues.

Having served as an U.S. Army Public Affairs officer for six years, I have worked alongside many expert communicators and skilled print and broadcast specialists. Beyond earning the MG Keith L. Ware Communication awards, these Public Affairs officers and NCOs truly understood their operating environment, and provided authoritative counsel to their commanders. They were skilled in communication planning, running PA estimates, and brought more to the fight than just taking “grip-n-grin” photos and posting them to Facebook. Successful public affairs teams are proficient tacticians or strategists who can easily synchronize with senior level staffs.

As a Public Affairs officer, I am passionate about our field and the impacts we have on public support and even in deterring adversaries. Having served as a Brigade Combat Team PAO, Public Affairs Detachment (PAD) commander and now a functional brigade PAO, I value the effects we accomplished for commanders both in garrison and in combat.

In the Summer of 2013, our detachment managed Fort Hood's Media Operations Center for the MAJ Hasan court-martial. Our detachment facilitated the Army's largest media event at the time, with over 100 news reporters from 60-plus media outlets at Fort Hood. In doing so, we ensured the news media was granted open access to covering the trial in a fair and just environment. Reporters frequently commended the detachment's Soldiers for enabling such dynamic and crucial coverage necessary under the First Amendment.

Two years prior, as a BCT PAO with the 10th Mountain Division, I saw firsthand the promising role of Public Affairs in the information fight. In October 2011, we hosted a national news network's evening news anchor and his team for a two-day broadcast from our Forward Operating Base in Afghanistan. Already six months into the brigade's deployment at that point, we had escorted nearly 30 reporters embedded with the brigade. By hosting the national news anchor and facilitating his coverage, the coalition's fight for the Zharay and Maywand Districts of Kandahar Province was now thrust into an international spotlight.

Telling the Army Story requires Public Affairs officers and NCOs to take a proactive and

inventive approach, while remaining relevant to the operational planning team. A Public Affairs officer is one of the Army's most unique job specialties, and we must always strive to be "starters" and not benchwarmers in the information fight. Our opportunities in the PA field are unlike any other the Army offers, and the information environment requires more from us than just being sidelined as the "Hooah" video producer. Public Affairs teams prove their mettle to commanders when they roll outside the wire and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with those on the front lines.

According to *Joint Publication 3-61* doctrine for Public Affairs, communicating with national and international audiences is in our national interest and puts "Joint operations in context, facilitates informed perceptions about military operations, undermines adversarial propaganda, and helps achieve national, strategic, and operational objectives."

The Department of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff rely on Public Affairs personnel to fulfill those responsibilities. The gravity of those responsibilities requires U.S. Army public affairs professionals to accurately and effectively tell the U.S. Army story.

We are entrusted with the weight of relaying quick and truthful information to national and international audiences. It is a charge we cannot take lightly.

We must be expert communicators and professionals of our craft. Everything we do, produce and release must be to contribute to the information fight—and the operational environment—for our Nation's interests. There's too much at stake not to.

Capt. Kevin Sandell is a Public Affairs Officer currently stationed at Fort Hood, Texas. He has served as a PAO since March 2011. He is an avid news junkie, and joined the Army to eventually become a Public Affairs officer. He is currently assigned to the 504th Military Intelligence Brigade. He has also served at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and Fort Drum, New York. He is married and is a father to four kids under the age of six.

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