

Reporting from the front lines



PHOTO : COURTESY SCOTT TAYLOR, ESPRIT DE CORPS

Scott Taylor has reported independently from Afghanistan twice. He uses local fixers to arrange interviews and ensure his security.

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By Lyndsie Bourgon

Mitch Potter knows what not to write. In 2002, the *Toronto Star* journalist was ousted from his reporting position at Kandahar Airfield for publishing the number of guard towers that surround a nearby detainee centre: eight.

Potter's case is just one example of the military's control over reports that come out of Afghanistan. Due to military control, what isn't reported from Afghanistan is as important as what is.

Since Canada's deployment to Kandahar in 2006, 275 journalists have been embedded with Canadian forces. Embedded reporters eat, sleep, travel, and work amongst the troops. Most of the journalism we see from Afghanistan today comes from embedded journalists.

The military embedding program is controversial. Journalists need access to military

officials when and where news happens. But military control and base rules often limit the information that comes out of Afghanistan.

Jack Romanelli, who was editor-in-chief of the recently-defunct Halifax *Daily News* and former managing editor of *The Montreal Gazette*, worked with embedded journalists from the *Gazette* during his time there. He wouldn't send *Daily News* reporters to Afghanistan due to military control over content.

"If you're going to be controlled, what's the point?" says Romanelli.

But *Canadian Press* reporter and editor Murray Brewster says there is value in going. He has been embedded with troops twice.

"Being embedded doesn't mean you lobotomize yourself," he says. "It all depends on how you use it. If you just sit there and regurgitate what the army tells you, that's not good."

Playing by the rules

Before journalists head to Kandahar Airfield, otherwise known as KAF, they must sign the military's "Media Embed Program" agreement, which prohibits journalists from reporting on 20 kinds of information, including:

- Specific geographic locations of military units;
- Information on troop strength, equipment, or critical supplies; and
- Any information on friendly fire forces or procedures.

The list has grown over the years. Les Perreux, a *Canadian Press* reporter in Montreal who has been embedded three times since 2006 says, "It used to be that the only important rule was that we shouldn't publish information that would jeopardize the army on missions."

The restrictions now include a clause on "the rules of engagement"—which includes anything from who fired shots, to the number of grenades thrown during a battle.

When former University of King's College student Lt. Trevor Greene was attacked with an axe during an Afghan community meeting in March 2006, journalists initially reported the number of shots fired in retaliation.

Military public affairs officers felt this revealed to enemies how Canadian soldiers act under



pressure. The rules of engagement clause in the embed agreement was added soon after.

Perreux says that during the three months he spent in Afghanistan last year, “there were probably half a dozen instances where public affairs officers and I disagreed over what information should go into a story.” The axe attack on Lt. Greene was one of them.

In his March 5, 2006 article, Perreux detailed the axe used in the attack and the names of Canadian soldiers who killed the attacker. Instead of stating how many shots were fired, he wrote that the body was “riddled with bullets.”

One month later, *Globe and Mail* columnist Christie Blatchford was taken out of Forward Operating Base Robinson by helicopter after a suspected friendly fire killing.

“I guess they didn’t want journalists nosing around a very small base when investigative teams were coming in,” says Blatchford.

WTASF

What Those Acronyms Stand For

CEFCOM: Canadian Expeditionary Force Command

CBC: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

CP: Canadian Press newswire

DND: Department of National Defence

KAF: Kandahar Airfield, where Canada’s Afghan mission has been based since 2006

MEP: Media Embedding Program, the agreement reporters sign before becoming embedded

PAO: Public Affairs Officers, military officials who deal with the media

Romanelli thinks the dispatches Blatchford filed from KAF are indicative of why embedding doesn’t work.

“To me this is not the Christie Blatchford I’m used to reading at all. She’s a great court reporter and fantastic columnist, but then she goes to Afghanistan and she just writes these glowing reports on our men in uniform.”

But Blatchford says you can’t have it both ways. “You can’t criticize embedded reporting, and then not send over reporters unembedded.”

Under the embed agreement, journalists can’t stay at KAF for more than six weeks.

“The less time you spend there, the easier it is to get fooled,” says Scott Taylor. He has reported from Afghanistan twice unembedded, is editor of the military magazine *Esprit de Corps*, and is a frequent critic of the military.

“I’ve been told that the six week limit gives the journalist just enough exposure, and then they leave and don’t develop the need to go poking around for stories other than the superficial ones that are directed by public affairs officers,” says Dr. Bob Bergen, creator of the Canadian Military Journalism

course at the University of Calgary and Centre for Military and Strategic Studies. The course aims to train journalists to specialize in military operations.

“You’re under their control when you move with the



army,” says Perreux. “It’s like being in prison for six weeks. You are very limited in what you can do as a journalist.” He says that actually makes it hard to remain longer than six weeks.

But military control of information is nothing new.

Though Canada’s mission in Afghanistan brings the military’s first clear-cut embed program, journalists have traveled with the military to get stories for years.

During the Second World War, reporters went to the front lines with soldiers. Their material was censored by the military before being sent back to Canada. The military didn’t want spies in Canada reading about military strategies.

Today’s military is also concerned that if Taliban leaders are monitoring the media, they may be able to gauge the strengths, and weaknesses, of Canadian troops.

But the media are much more complex today.

“The medium is the message,” says political science professor and foreign affairs monitor Denis Stairs from Dalhousie University. “We have the Internet now...so the need to control the press has much less to do with politics and much more to do with ensuring that nothing is said that would give assistance to the enemy.”

Capt. Adam Thomson, a public affairs officer with the Department of National Defence, says the rules established for reporters on base “prevent information from being released that may endanger the operation.”

Bergen was a journalist in Calgary for 25 years and reported from Bosnia, Cyprus, and Yugoslavia. He wasn’t officially embedded but says, “I couldn’t have survived without the army then, the only difference is that I didn’t sign an agreement, and there were no restrictions on coverage other than common sense.”

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth

Embedded journalists have a responsibility to both soldiers and the public. But what information are we being denied at home in the name of troop security?

“Background,” answers Taylor. “Most Canadians don’t know the bigger picture, so it becomes simplistic support of the mission,” he says. “Embedded journalists by the score are always covering the same conferences and military commanders. There really is no interconnection with the local people.”



PHOTO : COURTESY SCOTT TAYLOR, ESPRIT DE CORPS

Journalist and former soldier Scott Taylor carried arms with him while reporting independently from Afghanistan. Journalists who are embedded cannot use or be in possession of weapons.

The six-week rule makes it hard to provide context to the situation in Afghanistan.

“In TV, everything is driven by the picture,” says the *CBC*'s Nahlah Ayed. “Context is maybe the first casualty in broadcast journalism, unfortunately.” Ayed was embedded in Afghanistan with *Canadian Press* in 2002, and has been embedded with *CBC* in Iraq.

Despite the drawbacks of putting journalists under the military's thumb, some of it is for their own safety.

The price of safety

Last February, the door of Graeme Smith's Kandahar City office was kicked down by masked gunmen who proceeded to search the place for what Smith believes to be himself—the foreigner hanging around the city.

The incident persuaded the *Globe and Mail* reporter that independent reporting isn't such a great idea.

Smith says being under the military thumb is not as big an issue as many think. “I hear a lot of criticisms of the embedded media program,” he says. “Frankly, it comes from people who have no idea what it's like to report news in Kandahar.”

Ayed also maintained a guesthouse in Kandahar while she was embedded in 2002.

“It was much safer for us than it is now,” she says. “It was expected that we would go in and do features, and we would go into town...That's much more difficult now.”

Chris Lambie of the Halifax *Chronicle Herald* was embedded in April 2007. He has no problem with limiting what he reports in order to accommodate safety precautions.

“For me it made good sense because I'd like to be alive, and I don't particularly want to get anyone killed,” says Lambie. “It's hard to find somebody to argue with that.”