Scribblings

Journal of the Pen & Sword Club

News, views, clues, and musings for defence communicators

August 2025 Editors: Mike Peters & Derek Plews

When pondering the ideal person to run government communications my first thought is not a former editor of The Sun…

BUT that's what we have as, at the same time as elevating the rank of the position, Prime Minister Keir Starmer appointed David Dinsmore as the Government's Director of Communications at Permanent Secretary level, writes Mark Laity, Club Vice President, and Executive Council member.

Mark adds: That said, we need to look beyond The Sun, as since 2015 he's been more of a media executive as Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President of News UK, part of Robert Murdoch's News Corp.

As such he's been running a sizeable media organisation which has to be across modern information technology and is focussed on understanding and delivering to audiences. So, that's a sort of tick and one I'm sure that loomed large in those who appointed him. And if you can look past any ambivalence about the nature of The Sun, Dinsmore is a media man to his fingertips.

But…It's more complicated than that isn't it? We have to consider what is the purpose of the Government Communication Service. What it isn't is a normal profit-orientated media operation. Sure, it's meant to be cost-effective, but in the end its bottom line still doesn't have a £ sign against it. Success isn't measured by likes or ticks or subscriptions.

Right: Mark Laity, currently Chief Executive at the StratCom Academy was the BBC's defence correspondent before joining NATO as media adviser to Lord George Robertson, the Secretary General. Mark served in Afghanistan, was awarded NATO's Meritorious Service Medal, and retired as Head of Strategic Communications at SHAPE.

It's also bigger than any current ruling party. So the GCS is, as with the rest of the civil service, intended to be impartial, riding the twin horses of party politics and enduring governance. In fact, a large proportion of GCS work is 'normal' rather than political governance.

Then there's coming from a totally commercial operation into government. Hard enough at any level, but Dinsmore has been brought in, in the words of the Government news release, 'to transform how the UK Government communicates with the public and reform the Government Communication Service's output across all departments and agencies.'

To do that in any coherent way Dinsmore needs to understand the nature and ethos of government as well as the existing system with all its faults and virtues. Given his background that's unlikely. The journalistic mindset is very different from the executive mindset at the best of times, and most journalist are rubbish managers.

Managing a government department is at another level again. Some hack it, some don't. I like to think I managed that transition (others may differ on this) but then I came from a fairly institutionalised body – the BBC – anyway! Given time maybe he can develop it, but I doubt he will be given that time and at 57 he's late to this particular game.

Certainly, if Government thinks what the GCS needs is to be more like News Corp then not only are they wrong, but they will fail. I know more than enough about the GCS to know it is far from perfect, sometimes frustratingly so, but also that a good proportion of those imperfections are imposed from a higher level, very often through micro-management at the political level.

Indeed in our area, there are already signs of the dead hand of political interference with some of the MoD's actions, such as the absurd restrictions placed on military speakers at conferences. No GCS reform can address the thinking and instincts that produce that kind of nonsense.

GCS has also produced some sector-leading work in handling communications process. Its OASIS (Objectives; Audience; Strategy; Implement; Score) campaign model has been widely copied by other nations, and also NATO, as has its PITCH model (Partners; Insight; Trusted Voices; Compelling Content; Honesty). GCS in my experience maybe flawed but it's not broken.

I also wonder about some of the language around the appointment and what it implies. The references to 'modern media environment' and 'media landscape' are I suspect a default term for engaging with the traditional media rather than managing a complex information environment. Referring to 'transforming the way we communicate with the public' is also right but should not be the whole story.

For, to me, the key role of the new Permanent Secretary is not a glorified press secretary but the Chief of Strategic Communications. The problem we have is not simply improving our public communication but resisting the information offensive of adversaries like Russia and China.

We are in an information war with them, and also under assault from a barrage of conspiracy theorists, all deploying a barrage of misinformation, disinformation, and disruptive narratives. The GCS will need to engage with cyber war, information and psychological operations, information environment assessment, and all the other paraphernalia of the new information environment.

I really doubt Dinsmore has a real inkling of the information war he's about to enter, or even if those who appointed him had this existential information challenge in mind.

And alongside that, is a Government that is afraid to let its military chiefs take questions at conferences ready to dive into the world of TikTok and YouTube influencers with its own credible messengers? That's not simply a GCS problem but a systemic challenge to both the civil service and the Labour leadership that is instinctively micromanaging.

This is not to take away giving the government credit for elevating the GCS post to PermSec, but just to question what they think it's intended to achieve. If, as the announcement said it's part of '…the government's commitment to deliver the Plan for Change' then I fear they are missing much of the point. The need is much greater than such a narrowly political aim.

We are in an era of global political warfare when there's a lot more at stake than getting the Daily Telegraph off your back or neutralising Nigel Farage.

I haven't so far mentioned an obvious elephant in the room – Alistair Campbell. It would be easy to compare Dinsmore, the man from 'The Sun' with Campbell, another tabloid guy, from 'The Daily Mirror,' but it would be a mistake.

Dinsmore is a journalist coming late in his career to government while Campbell was always an intensely political guy who started in journalism. For much of his time in government he was also Blair's very powerful and influential Press Secretary, rather than head of GCS. Like Campbell or not – and of course he's a very Marmite figure – Dinsmore is vanishingly unlikely to match that.

Which raises the issue as to just how influential Dinsmore can, will and should be. As communicators know successful communication is all about integrating narrative with strategy. I am of course assuming the current government actually has either, which is possibly a stretch.

Ideally the lead communicator will be a significant voice in those policy discussions – once again having to ride those two horses, as indeed do all senior civil servants who are both politically neutral but have to implement government policy. That difficult balancing act is the inevitable corollary of successful StratCom in supporting (as doctrine puts it) 'narrative-led execution.'

It all adds up to a formidable task. As a person who split a four decade career pretty much evenly between journalism and institutional communications I know the differences, and I think he's in for a big shock handling a very different kind of game at a critical time amidst an information revolution which is changing everything. I wish him all the best.

Why Dinsmore ? The Fundamental Question

AS somebody who spent 16 years in Whitehall, worked at 10 Downing Street and in two Government departments - one of them as Chief of Public Relations in the Defence Ministry- I can reinforce Mark Laity's points in a particular way, writes Hugh Colver, the Pen & Sword Club's President Emeritus.

In answer to the question 'Why Dinsmore?' I can only really answer this question with other questions.

On the face of it, hiring a former Sun Editor in a senior communications role would lead most folk to assume that the Prime Minister is looking for Sun-like efforts to make an impact with the media, get the Government's message across in a very aggressive manner and lead from the front. However, that does not appear to be why he has been hired.

Is he going to run day to day news management? The answer appears to be 'no.' Is the Prime Minister looking for another Alastair Campbell? Well no he's not.

Alastair, as Mark points out, was a political animal through and through, was close to Tony Blair and was in charge of the politics in many ways. David Dinsmore is not being asked to do that.

He is being hired as a Civil Servant to oversee Government communications. This is not a political appointment. Taxpayers' money cannot be spent on Party political advocacy so that must be very clear. However, it must be remembered that when a political party is elected to Government their policies become Government policy and presenting that to the public is important.

In order to take on that task the person engaged would need ideally to have long experience in Whitehall, they would need to understand the culture, they would need to know how policy is developed and how things work, how things get done, how crises are managed.

The individual would need relationships across departments or work to establish them based on knowledge of how the system and processes operate, they would need to understand the No 10 Cabinet Office relationship, they would need to understand politicians and Parliament and the politics of Whitehall/Westminster.

It is assumed from his current job that the new Permanent Secretary knows how to manage organisations and people but apart from that attribute it is hard not to find the fundamental question hanging in the air. Why Dinsmore?

Derek Joins the Scribblings Editorial Team

SCRIBBLINGS has made a major move forward with the appointment of Lieutenant Colonel Derek Plews VR as its Joint Editor. He takes up the post immediately working alongside Colonel Mike Peters, former National Chair of The Pen and the first Commanding Officer of both the TA Pool of Information Officers and the Media Operations Group (Volunteers).

Derek brings a depth of knowledge, not only in journalism, but of government service at high level. He was Press Secretary to Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott.

Derek's experience includes communications with all three UK Armed Forces and Government Departments. A former member of MOG (V) he began his working life in Northern Ireland as a journalist with the Londonderry Sentinel and later the Belfast Telegraph.

He entered the world of defence communications and public relations at Headquarters RAF Strike Command, High Wycombe and then in the MOD Press Office, where he worked on the Navy and Centre desks.

On promotion, he went to Scotland as the Clyde Naval Information Officer, advising the Faslane Naval Base Commander on all aspects of public and media engagement.

After three years, during which he deployed as media advisor to the Senior Naval Officer Middle East during the Gulf War, he returned to London as Chief Press Officer and later was Head of News at the former Department of Employment.

A further promotion took him to the Department of Transport as Deputy Head of Information, where he was closely involved in the communications aspects of railway privatisation. After the 1997 General Election he was appointed Press Secretary to the Deputy Prime Minister, the late John Prescott, a post he held until 2001 when he briefly moved into the private sector as Director of Communications with the Association of Train Operating Companies.

Following 9/11 he returned to the Civil Service as Director of News at the MOD and Press Secretary to Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, before being appointed as the Director of Communications at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Derek joined the Territorial Army as a private solder in 1985, serving with the 4th (Volunteer) Battalion, The Royal Irish Rangers, and continued to serve, on and off, for much of his civilian career. He was commissioned into the London Regiment in 1996 and joined the Media Operations Group the same year.

In 2006 he resigned from the Civil Service in order to undertake an operational tour in Afghanistan. He deployed to Iraq the following year as SO1 Media Operations, and, on return, assumed the leadership of the Joint Media Operations Teams at the Defence Media Operations Centre, initially at RAF Uxbridge and latterly at RAF Halton.

During his tenure in this role, he deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan and was seconded to the MOD to write the communications strategy for the draw-down of UK forces in Iraq.

Following a short break, during which he was the Director of Communications at Reading Borough Council, he returned to Full Time Reserve Service in 2014, assuming the position of SO1 Employer Engagement within the Directorate of Reserves and Cadets in the MOD.

After a military career, spanning 36 years, he retired from the Army in 2020 in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and now spends his time researching and writing books on military history, guiding battlefield tours, chairing the Bucks Military Museum Trust, and supporting the Buckinghamshire County Committee of the South East Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association.

Is the UK sleepwalking into war..?

By Derek Plews

IN 2014, historian Christopher Clark, wrote a book about the origins of the First World War, entitled "The Sleepwalkers". He explained how, a century earlier, a failure to understand the seriousness of the fighting in the Balkans had dragged Europe into catastrophe. The European establishment, he argued, had sleepwalked into war. Looking at recent polling, there is a danger that the UK could make the same terrible mistake, writes Scribblings Joint Editor, Derek Plews .

YouGov research into the likelihood of a major conflict in the next 20 years, shows that only 29% think war is "very likely" within that timeframe. This figure has changed little since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

In 2024, Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Patrick Sanders, warned about the increasing threat of conflict with Russia, and urged the nation to step up preparations for war. He was slapped down. Comments about "hypothetical scenarios" involving possible future wars were "not helpful," snarled a Downing Street spokesman.

Sir Patrick, pictured right, returned to the debate earlier this year. Retired and free from the shackles of high office, he was even more frank, declaring that there was a "realistic possibility" of war with Russia within five years and calling for faster rearmament.

But re-armament is not cheap. The government has committed to spending 3.5% of GDP on Defence by 2027- probably too slow and insufficient in the face of a realistic threat of war. As another former Chief of the General Staff, General Lord Dannatt, noted at the time, jam-tomorrow spending promises were like "saying to Adolf Hitler in 1938 please don't attack us until 1946 because we're not going to be ready."

Despite the general's warnings, another YouGov survey, released in June this year, shows that less than half of voters (49%) agree the Defence budget should be increased.

This is unsurprising. People's ideas about the Government's spending priorities will vary, depending on their personal circumstances, religious and cultural beliefs, and political outlooks. However, one of the most important factors is likely to be the public's appreciation of the threat.

During the Cold War, with Warsaw Pact forces poised on the Inner-German Border, and public information films telling us how to make fall-out shelters, the danger was obvious.

Less so today. We have become too comfortable with the post-Cold War norm - four decades in which there has been no obvious existential threat. Despite the brutal fighting taking place in Ukraine, the Russian Bear seems a long way off and less menacing than his Soviet counterpart.

Recent governments have been reluctant to talk up the dangers, wary of being accused of scaremongering or trying to shift attention away from other issues. However, the most powerful motive for silence has been to deliberately undermine the case for sustained, long-term investment in the armed forces in favour of short-term, more politically-attractive causes.

Highlighting the scale of the threat would have required governments to do something about it. Instead, they have chosen to stay quiet, continue taking the post-Cold War "peace dividend" and avoid turning ploughshares back into swords.

Departing from that stance, the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) and its close relative, the National Security Strategy (NSS), have done a reasonable job of spelling out the risks. The SDR described them as "more serious and less predictable than at any time since the Cold War." Russia's invasion of Ukraine "makes unequivocally clear its willingness to use force to achieve its goals and its intent to re-establish spheres of influence… and disrupt the international order…"

The NSS revealed that the UK was directly threatened by sub-threshold "grey zone" activities such assassinations, intimidation, espionage, sabotage, cyber-attacks, and various forms of democratic interference… Adversaries were laying the foundations for future conflict, positioning themselves to…cause major disruption to energy and supply chains… "Warfare between major powers… is a real possibility."

Following up on the SDR, the MOD mounted a mini-campaign to reinforce the messages contained in the document, trotting out the co-authors to brief various media outlets.

Foreign Affairs expert, Fiona Hill, pictured right, told the Guardian that the UK was in "pretty big trouble," caught between the rock of Vladimir Putin's Russia and the hard place of Donald Trump's increasingly unpredictable US. "Russia," she concluded, "is at war with us."

Lord George Robertson, former Defence Secretary and Secretary General of NATO, warned the House of Lords that the UK and its people were not safe

In an ominous post-script he added: "We don't have the ammunition, the training, the people, the spare parts, the logistics, and we don't have the medical capacity to deal with the mass casualties that we would face if we were involved in high-intensity warfare."

General Sir Richard Barrons told Sky News that Russia was an immediate and pressing threat to the UK and that we should "absolutely be prepared to exist in a world where things like precision missiles can reach the UK and do great harm." A Russian cruise missile was only 90 minutes away from the UK, he noted.

But none of this is likely to have moved the dial of public opinion very far. The SDR and NSS are not best-sellers and a key element for a successful communications campaign – constant and sustained repetition of the message – is AWOL.

The SDR recognised the emerging threats and set out a plan for meeting them. Forced to work within a strict financial envelope, however, this could only be achieved over a 10-year timescale. Going further and faster is possible, but only if more money can be found. We can afford to spend more on Defence, but only if society is prepared to accept tough choices.

Money is in short supply. Servicing the national debt costs more than the entire Defence budget. Competition between government departments has rarely been more fierce.

seems little chance, then, that the government will volunteer to channel more resources towards the armed forces – unless there is a big shift in public sentiment favouring such a move.

This could be achieved by a properly-resourced, sustained, cross-government, multi-channel influence campaign, aimed at explaining the threat, convincing people that it is real, and leading them to support greater Defence expenditure.

Regrettably, that is unlikely to happen. The Government, struggling to meet existing commitments, and with a tanking economy, will resist making the case for more Defence spending. It will be left to retired Generals, Admirals, Air Marshals, and individual politicians and commentators to try to sound the alarm and sway public views.

But without planning, coordination, and sustainment these efforts will likely fail to achieve the break-through in public consciousness necessary to influence thought and actions. The UK will continue to sleepwalk, unprepared, towards war.

Influence by Any Other Name: Have We Lost the Art of Media Operations

By Colonel Mike Peters, former commanding officer of The Media Operations Group (V) and UK Government Principal Information Officer, blue chip defence corporate communications specialist and award winning journalist.

In the modern battlespace, strategic communications is often described as the orchestra – an ensemble of disciplines that together project national intent and military credibility. But one instrument, once played with distinction by UK Armed Forces has all but fallen silent: professional media operations. Media ops is not simply a press-release factory or a crisis firefighting team; it is the disciplined, truth-driven interface between the armed forces and the public – both domestic and international.

In recent years, defence culture has too often subsumed media ops into broader influence operations, as though truth and perception management were interchangeable. They are not. Influence and psyops are targeted tools aimed at shaping adversary or specific audience behaviour, often in contested or covert settings.

Media operations, by contrast, operate in the open, on the record, and under scrutiny. Its audience is not just the military chain of command but taxpayers, voters, allies, and the global press – all of whom judge the credibility of Britain's forces by the clarity, honesty, and timeliness of their public communication.

In an age when hostile actors weaponise misinformation at speed, a well-trained, deployable media ops capability is not a luxury but a frontline asset. If strategic communications is to serve both the national interest and the democratic obligation to inform, the UK must reclaim the lost art of speaking plainly, quickly, and with authority.

WALK into any modern military headquarters and you're likely to see a bank of screens showing live sentiment tracking, 'reach' metrics, or data from the latest influence campaign. There will be earnest talk of "cognitive effects," "perception management," and "narrative shaping" by staff officers. This is the age of strategic influence, we're told. PsyOps is king. The information domain is the battlefield.

But as some of us look around—especially those who've briefed in warzones, walked beside reporters in body armour, or stood in front of cameras when the truth was hard—we see something else: a military communications doctrine that in many places has lost its balance.

The British Armed Forces, once admired for their professional and principled Media Operations capability, have allowed it to wither. In its place stands a shiny—but often shallow—architecture of influence.

We are mesmerised by PsyOps, Info Ops and Influence Ops, but seem to have misplaced the craft that speaks credibly to serious audiences at home and abroad. Worse, we risk losing the trust of the very people we're meant to serve.

This matters now more than ever—because the battlefield has changed, again! The era of "bush fire wars," counterinsurgency campaigns, and media-managed stabilisation operations is behind us. What looms ahead is cold, agile, long ranged, heavily armoured, and potentially nuclear. And existing in a media environment that is electronically instant.

Ukraine has forced the West to rediscover what a peer-on-peer war really looks like. Tanks, HIMARS, S-400s, and EW disruption are in fashion.

NATO is practising for high-intensity conflict, forward deployments, and dispersed mobilisation. The spectre of nuclear confrontation, long buried under layers of post-Cold War optimism, has crept back onto the PowerPoint slides.

In this environment, credibility matters more than cleverness. Messaging cannot be improvised. It must be clear, truthful, disciplined—and delivered by people who know what they're talking about. You cannot "influence" your way through a 155mm artillery barrage, nor meme your way past a nuclear threat. You must communicate—honestly, rapidly, and professionally.

And yet, the British military's ability to do that—to brief journalists, inform allies, and explain operations to its own public—has been quietly hollowed out.

Once, the British Armed Forces fielded deployable media teams who were respected, trained, and integrated. Public information was treated as a battlefield function. Not a civilian afterthought. Not a side line or Reservists. But a command responsibility and a Directorate of seniors with a place at the Ministry of Defence Sixth Floor tables.

Now, those same functions are scattered across various corners of the system—some within StratCom, others left to social media managers or contractors. Real, tactical-level media operators are rarely seen. Field commanders often lack trained media staff.

Fewer still know how to manage a hostile press briefing or build lasting relationships with credible defence journalists.

The result? A generation of officers who fear the press rather than understand it—and a press that is no longer equipped to understand the Armed Forces. Herein lies the deeper crisis. It's not just that Defence has sidelined Media Ops. The British media itself has been allowed—perhaps encouraged—to drift away from serious defence reporting.

Where once every major newspaper had a defence editor, many now rely on generalists who've grown up under the influence of media studies rather than military reporting. They are smart, fast, and often well-meaning—but some don't know a tank from an APC, an unmanned air vehicle from an air superiority interceptor. Some can't tell a Type 45 destroyer from a corvette, let alone understand the operational consequences of a fleet too small to sustain forward presence. And, unfortunately, don't really care or understand that it matters.

This is not a sneer at young journalists. It is a warning about the vacuum left by decades of editorial suppression. Defence has become "difficult," too complex, too jargon-heavy, too uncomfortable. The appetite for covering it seriously is disappearing—and the press officers trained to help explain it have not been replaced. When crisis hits, the void shows.

Meanwhile, the Defence Establishment has grown intoxicated by the language of "influence." Influence sounds modern. Influence sounds bloodless. It can be measured, branded, packaged into campaign boards. Influence is reassuring to politicians who don't want the public asking too many questions about force levels or readiness.

But influence is not an end in itself. It is only powerful when built upon a platform of trust and truth.

PsyOps has its place—against adversaries. Strategic Communications has the major role—aligning messages with intent. But Media Operations is the tool that speaks to allies, electorates, and Parliament, where reputations are made or broken, and consent is either earned or lost. And media ops must be truthful. You can't lie to the media - either mainstream or defence specialists - and expect them to back you when the missiles fly.

A Call to Re-balance

It is time for a reset. Media Operations should not be the ghost in the machine, nor the bolt-on afterthought to StratCom plans written in a consultant's idiom. It should be reinstated as a professional discipline, taught, respected, resourced—and led by those who understand both the press and the profession of arms.

This is not nostalgia. It is necessity. If the tanks are rolling again, if Russia and its proxies are probing our alliances, and if the shadow of nuclear threat has returned to the European theatre, then it is not the meme-makers and marketing managers who will win the information war.

It is those who can stand at the front, calmly explain what is happening, why it matters, and what must be done—without flinching and without spinning. We had those people once. We trained them. We valued them. Some of them wore body armour, carried press accreditation, and knew that getting the story out was part of the fight.

We need them again—before we learn the hard way what happens when no one is left to tell the truth.

Lynne O'Donnell – Frontline Witness to Afghanistan

Scribblings was prompted to look at a Substack entry about the media in Afghanistan by Club Member Lynne O'Donnell, right. We reproduce it below. Few journalists have carried the burden of telling Afghanistan's story with such persistence and clarity as Lynne, An Australian-born foreign correspondent, she cut her teeth with more than a decade in China before moving to the warzones of Iraq and Afghanistan. She went on to serve as Kabul bureau chief for both AFP and the Associated Press, shaping the way the world understood the conflict and its human cost.

Award-winning and widely read, Lynne has written with rare depth on the struggles of Afghan women, earning the Amnesty International Human Rights Press Award in 2010. Her book High Tea in Mosul remains a classic of wartime reportage, while her more recent columns for Foreign Policy dissect the politics and people behind the headlines.

Her determination has not come without risk. In 2022, she was detained by the Taliban in Kabul and forced to sign false "apologies" for her reporting – a stark reminder of the dangers faced by those who refuse to abandon truth. Yet she continues to write and broadcast with courage, combining frontline experience with academic insight from her studies in War Studies at King's College London.

A journalist at The Kabul Times in Afghanistan in 2023. The Taliban's information ministry runs the decades-old newspaper, one of about 15 major news outlets that have become tightly aligned with the group's radical Islamist ideology. (Photo: AP/Rodrigo Abd)

How the Taliban's propaganda empire consumed Afghan media

By Waliullah Rahmani on August 13, 2025. Waliullah Rahmani is an Asia researcher at CPJ. From 2016 to the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021, he was founder and director of Khabarnama Media, one of the first digital media organizations in Afghanistan.

New York, August 13, 2025—In four years, the Taliban have annihilated Afghanistan's independent media sector and supplanted it with their own propaganda empire and sophisticated digital bots that flood social media with pro-Taliban content.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) interviewed 10 Afghan journalists, inside and outside the country, who said that independent media, which used to reach millions of people, have largely been banned, suspended, or shuttered while key outlets have been taken over by the Taliban. None would publish their names, citing fear of reprisals.

The Taliban now run about 15 major television and radio stations, newspapers, and digital platforms, including on YouTube, X, and Telegram — tightly aligned with their radical Islamist ideology.

"The ruling authority enforces a monolithic media policy, rejecting any news, narrative, or voice that deviates from what they deem the truth. Even personal opinions expressed on platforms like Facebook are treated as propaganda and punished accordingly," Ahmad Quraishi, director of the exiled Afghanistan Journalists Center, told CPJ.

Exiled journalists offer one of the last remaining sources of independent information broadcast into Afghanistan. But even they face safety concerns and hardships, as well as job losses and potential forced return due to the U.S. funding cuts to the Congress-funded Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) outlets.

Turning fearful journalists into spies

In September 2020, a year before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, a radio presenter reads the news during a broadcast at the Merman radio station in Kandahar. Women journalists have been largely sidelined by the Taliban.

As Afghanistan marks the fourth anniversary of the Taliban's August 15, 2021, takeover, most journalists who spoke with CPJ said they were fearful, and either jobless or heavily censored. Several described the relentless surveillance, control, and intimidation as living under a "media police state."

"Taliban intelligence agents have launched a policing system where every journalist is expected to spy on others," a media executive who led a TV station in eastern Afghanistan told CPJ. "They demand complete personal information on all staff: names, fathers' names, addresses, phone numbers, emails, WhatsApp numbers … We must report everything."

Intelligence agents monitor and detain reporters over their social media content, while the morality police arrest those who violate their stringent interpretation of Sharia law, which includes a ban on music, soap operas, and programs co-hosted by male and female presenters.

Two media owners from northern and eastern Afghanistan told CPJ that they had been subjected to invasive revenue audits and administrative delays because they were perceived as insufficiently compliant.

"Taliban agents reach out to journalists privately, pressuring them to spy on their colleagues or push specific narratives," one of the owners said. "If someone refuses, they call the media manager and demand the journalist be fired. We comply, or we face licensing issues from the Ministry of Information and Culture or financial penalties from the Ministry of Finance."

In May, a spokesperson for the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice said it had held over 1,000 meetings with the media over the last year to "coordinate in promoting Islamic Sharia values" — a term understood locally to mean morality police enforcement meetings.

Two female journalists from western Afghanistan said they were each summoned over 10 times in the past two years. "Once they interrogated me for three hours in the office of the Directorate of Virtue and Vice, asking why I worked instead of staying home," one woman told CPJ, referring to the ministry's provincial office.

"They said that if I were found working with exiled media, it would be wajib al-qatl [permissible to kill me].

One official said, 'We forgive you this time, you thank God for this. But under Sharia, we could bring any calamity upon you.' Another time, they said they could detain me for a week just to extract a confession, and no one would even know."

Inside the Taliban's media empire

The Taliban flag flutters over a provincial branch building of National Radio Television of Takhar (RTA) in Taloqan, in northeastern Takhar province in 2024. (Photo: AFP)

Three active, independent Kabul-based journalists explained the Taliban's new media landscape to CPJ: At its heart is Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), which broadcasts in the country's two official languages: Pashto — preferred by the Taliban — and Dari — a Persian dialect and Afghanistan's most widely spoken language. RTA also has English and Arabic sites. The Taliban rebranded the radio division as the "Voice of Sharia Radio."

With over 500 staff nationwide and a budget of about 600 million Afghanis (US$8.8 million), RTA reports often promote Taliban achievements, such as supporting refugees and diplomacy.

Bakhtar News Agency, founded in 1939, employs around 60 staff in Kabul and four reporters in each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Run by the information ministry, it is the Taliban's official news source and publishes in eight languages, including Mandarin and Turkish.

The information ministry also runs several daily newspapers, including Dari-language Anis, Pashto-language Hewad, and English-language The Kabul Times in print and online. These newspapers were founded several decades ago.

The three journalists said security agencies operate three radio stations:

Hurriyat Radio has a website, YouTube channel, and local radio stations that are expanding across the provinces, broadcasting in multiple languages, with 26 Kabul staff plus provincial correspondents.Reporting focuses on regional rivalries and Taliban military successes, particularly against the Afghan-based Islamic State-Khorasan, which continues to kill civilians and Taliban leaders.

Hurriyat Radio was launched in 2022 by the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) — the Taliban's notorious intelligence agency behind a series of media crackdowns — and is managed by the agency's directorate of media and publications.

Radio Omid, started in 2023 by the defense ministry, employs 45 staff in Kabul and provincial reporters, and reports on the ministry's achievements. The radio station is managed by the office of spokesperson of the defense ministry. Radio Police, relaunched in 2021 by the interior ministry, broadcasts news about police activities across key provinces like Kabul and southern Kandahar.

The Taliban has four news sites, at least three of which are run by the intelligence agency: The flagship project is the multi-lingual Al Mirsad news site, launched in 2023 to challenge IS-K narratives. It downplays the group's presence in Afghanistan while reporting Taliban successes, using multiple social media channels, including YouTube. It is funded and operated by the GDI's directorate of media and publications and its senior managers are linked to the interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani.

YouTube-based Maihan discredits the Taliban's opponents, with 12 staff, led by Jawad Sargar, former deputy director of the GDI's directorate of media and publication.

When contacted via messaging app, Sargar asked CPJ to stop contacting him, adding, "These matters are not related to you."

YouTube-based Yad, chronicles Taliban history and criticizes its rivals. It is also GDI funded, run, and operated. The multi-lingual Alemarah news site, active before 2021, is the Taliban's official outlet, run by Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid.

Disinformation campaign

Intelligence officials have four offices from which they direct disinformation campaigns. Dozens of creators are paid 6,000 to 10,000 Afghanis (US$88 to 146) a month to run fake social media accounts that troll critics, smear activists, and simulate grassroots support, two Afghan journalists told CPJ.

The project is led by senior GDI figures like deputy director of media and publication, Jabir Nomani, former GDI spokespeople Jawad Amin and Sargar – who runs Maihan – and Kabul-based political analyst Fazlur Rahman Orya, the journalists said.

Orya, who is also director of the Sahar Discourse Center, which advises the Taliban on policy, denied that he was involved in disinformation, telling CPJ via messaging app, "You make a big mistake about me." Nomani did not respond to CPJ's requests for comment via messaging app.

Qais Alamdar, exiled founder of the open source investigative platform Intel Focus, has documented the activities of these bots, which often post near-identical tweets within minutes of each other to bolster the government's legitimacy or prevent internet users finding other news, such as an attack on the Taliban.

"Only someone with consistent access to electricity, internet, and time could maintain that kind of operation in Afghanistan," he told CPJ.

Traffic accidents are only news allowed

As a result of these repressive measures, many media outlets have shut down or have been banned entirely. In the northeastern Panjshir Valley, once the heart of resistance to the Taliban, no media outlets remain active, Ahmad Hanayesh, who used to own two radio stations in the province, told CPJ from exile.

Four journalists from Herat, Nangarhar, Faryab, and Bamiyan told CPJ that aside from education and health stories, the only serious news they were permitted to cover was traffic accidents. Even crime reporting was banned.

GDI's media and publications director Khalil Hamraz and Taliban spokesperson Mujahid did not respond to CPJ's requests for comment via messaging app.

Who Do You Believe — When Truth Drowns in the Flood?

In the fog of war, truth was always elusive. Today, it is almost unknowable.

WE live in a world saturated with information — and riddled with manipulation. The explosion of influence operations, both state-sanctioned and freelance, has reached such a pitch that even experienced professional communicators can no longer confidently say what is fact and what is fabrication, writes Editor Mike Peters.

The current war in Gaza is a case in point. It has become not just a kinetic conflict but the world's most visible battlefield of narratives — and counter-narratives. And if the world's media cannot agree on what is real, how can public opinion, policymakers, or even military commanders navigate with any clarity?

The Israeli Defence Force has been widely criticised for limiting access to Gaza for international journalists. The argument is simple: sunlight is the best disinfectant. Let the press in, let them witness events first-hand, and let them report freely. But there's a paradox at the heart of this ideal.

Even when journalists do report what they see, the information environment is so polluted that their findings are instantly challenged, reframed, misquoted, or drowned in a sea of contradictory claims.

Both sides in the conflict know this, of course. The information domain is a critical front. Hamas uses emotionally charged imagery and unverifiable casualty figures to sway international sympathy. The Israeli government counters with forensic rebuttals and carefully managed data — but also, at times, with heavy-handed restrictions and blanket denials.

So who do you believe?

It's not a question asked lightly. Even those with deep professional experience in war reporting and defence communications are now frequently at sea. The velocity of content, the sheer volume of assertion and counter-assertion, is overwhelming.

Some independent analysts — former officers, defence academics and humanitarian specialists — have questioned prevailing narratives around the extent of suffering in Gaza, especially claims of widespread famine. Their argument is not that conditions are tolerable, but that certain terms are being applied without meeting the rigorous criteria set by international standards. This line of thinking is met with predictable outrage — but it illustrates something deeper: the near-impossibility of establishing accepted facts in a climate this charged.

Their stance is not intended to deny suffering. It is, rather, a call to examine evidence carefully — and to resist emotional shortcuts or ideological preloading. That, in today's environment, is almost revolutionary.

Yet such voices, however calm and informed, are nearly inaudible in today's din. The world isn't just witnessing an information war — it is *living* inside one. Every social media platform is a battlespace. Every smartphone is a weapon of perception. Every claim is weaponised before it can be verified. Every photograph is suspect unless proven otherwise — and sometimes even then.

This saturation has had a profound effect. It breeds confusion, cynicism, even apathy. Some believe everything they see. Others believe nothing. For military commanders, this fog can be fatal — influencing public support, diplomatic pressure, and battlefield constraints. For civilians, it becomes impossible to separate humanitarian concern from political positioning.

And for professional communicators, those trained to interpret, explain, and project clarity, it can feel like drowning.

The Pen & Sword Club was founded to uphold standards of integrity and professional judgment in the communications sphere. But what does integrity look like in a world where every truth is instantly contested, and every lie given oxygen? What happens when even trusted institutions — the BBC, Reuters, the UN — are dragged into the information war and accused, sometimes fairly, sometimes not, of partiality?

What the Influence Operators Would Say…

No article like this escapes counterattack. And the psy-ops and influence operators — those who live and breathe narrative dominance — have a ready playbook for pieces like this one. They would begin by saying: "All narratives are constructed — including yours."You choose your sources, your framing, your tone. That *is* influence. Objectivity is a ghost.

They would argue: "By framing confusion, you serve the enemy " If people lose trust in all information, they become paralysed. That is victory — not for truth, but for those who benefit from chaos. They might sneer: "Neutrality is a luxury for the privileged." They'd say: pick a side. Choose justice. Choose resistance. Don't hide behind 'balance' when bombs are falling.

And the most chilling view of all?" Confusion is our greatest weapon." As one fictional psy-ops officer might put it: *"If they no longer know what to believe, we control what they feel."* This is not paranoia. It is doctrine.

The Collapse of Trust

Perhaps now we can begin to understand why the British public has increasingly turned away from legacy broadcasters like the BBC and Sky News. Accused of bias by all sides — often simultaneously — traditional media are no longer seen as authoritative but compromised. Their very professionalism, once a guarantee of balance, is now interpreted as concealment.

And where has the public turned instead? To social media — where the volume is louder, the claims more visceral, and the curation non-existent. Here, the citizen journalist reigns. But too often, that citizen is not trained, not impartial, and not even remotely interested in the truth. They are activists with cameras — pushing political, sectarian, or ideological lines, sometimes from their bedrooms, sometimes from the frontlines.

This is the ecosystem in which extremists have surged into public consciousness — not necessarily because their cause is just or unjust, but because they *own* the visual narrative. They mobilise rapidly, create spectacle, and dominate the frame. It is not about facts. It is about attention.

And attention, today, is everything. So yes — the world may not be going mad. But it is entering a phase where perception, outrage, and digital noise have replaced dialogue, reason, and verification.

And in the battle between truth and lies, it is not enough to be right — you must be *heard*.

103 Years
Military Review
The Professional Journal of the U.S. Army
1922-2025

Winning the War of Words – Lessons from Ukraine's Information Offensive: By Major Joseph D Levin, US Army

This feature draws on "Lessons on Public-Facing Information Operations in Current Conflicts," published in the March–April 2025 edition of Military Review, the U.S. Army's professional journal. Written by serving and retired officers with operational experience in strategic communications and media operations, the original paper was peer-reviewed and is widely regarded as one of the clearest analyses of Ukraine's information campaign against Russia. It is reproduced here in adapted form with full credit to the authors and to Military Review..

The following story takes the essence of the Military Review research and blends it with our own understanding of the conflict, the communications battlefield, and its lessons for professional defence communicators. It charts how Ukraine has fought — and in many respects, won — the battle for perception in its war with Russia, and it warns that Western militaries risk repeating Russia's mistakes if they do not treat public-facing information operations as a decisive element of modern warfare.

Ukraine's Strategic Narrative – Discipline in the Midst of Chaos

FROM the very first hours of the Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukraine's understood the value of controlling the narrative. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, with his background in performance and media, stepped into the role of wartime communicator with remarkable confidence. His nightly addresses, filmed from the heart of Kyiv under threat of bombardment, became an international fixture.

The image was deliberate — olive-drab T-shirt, unshaven face, simple surroundings — the visual vocabulary of authenticity and defiance.

This was no ad-hoc effort. As the Military Review paper makes clear, it was a disciplined communications strategy. Themes were clear and consistent: resilience, justice, urgency.

, embassies, and military spokespeople echoed them in unison. Messaging went out in Ukrainian, English, Russian, and other key languages to ensure reach well beyond immediate allies.

Openness was part of the plan. Journalists were granted close access to frontline troops and bomb-damaged cities. Raw footage of drone strikes on Russian armour, civilians confronting occupying soldiers, and the grim aftermath of missile attacks travelled the world in hours.

The effect was two-fold: strengthening the resolve of Ukrainians and keeping their cause in the headlines abroad.

Russia's Rigid Messaging – Control without Credibility

Russia, in contrast, came into the war with a long-standing propaganda machine — but one geared towards domestic control rather than competing in an open information space. At home, state media painted the war as a "special military operation" to "denazify" Ukraine, a noble mission to protect Russian speakers. Abroad, it sought to exploit political divisions, question NATO's motives, and erode sympathy for Kyiv.

In occupied areas, Russia blended localised propaganda with tight restrictions. Telegram channels pumped out messages mixing civic announcements with Moscow-approved narratives, while photographing or filming military activity was criminalised. The intent was to control what residents saw and heard — and what the outside world could learn.

Yet the Kremlin's approach struggled in the age of open-source intelligence. Civilian-captured videos, satellite imagery, and intercepted communications contradicted official claims within hours.

Denials of attacks on civilian areas collapsed under the weight of verified visual evidence, amplified by Ukraine's allies and global media. The Military Review paper is blunt: Russia's over-centralised, slow-moving narrative apparatus was ill-suited to an environment where every smartphone owner could be a reporter.

Agility Versus Repetition

One of the most telling contrasts the paper draws is between Ukraine's narrative agility and Russia's narrative rigidity. Ukraine adjusted its messaging to match battlefield realities — celebrating victories with compelling human stories, framing setbacks as part of a larger struggle, and constantly refreshing the emotional case for international support.

Russia, by contrast, stuck to the same script regardless of events. Over-centralisation meant that updates were slow and sometimes out of step with what people could already see for themselves. Repetition without adaptation quickly dulled the impact of its messaging.

The result was predictable: Ukraine's story felt alive, grounded, and credible; Russia's sounded stale, defensive, and increasingly implausible.

Five Lessons for the West

The Military Review authors do not treat Ukraine's success as a one-off, nor as something only small nations can achieve. They frame it as a set of transferable lessons — if Western militaries are willing to act on them.

First, information operations must be integrated into planning from the outset. Waiting until after the shooting starts is too late.

Second, commanders and staff officers at every level need to be trained in media engagement, not just those in public affairs roles. A single ill-judged comment can have strategic consequences.

Third, rapid-response content teams are essential. Credible footage and imagery from the front must be captured, processed, and released in hours, not days.

Fourth, fact-checking capabilities must be ready to counter hostile narratives before they harden into accepted "truths."

Fifth, military and civilian agencies need to speak with one voice — synchronised, consistent, and credible.

Underlying all of these is a cultural shift: treating the information space as a primary operational domain, not a sideshow.

The Wider Information Battlespace

Beyond Ukraine and Russia, the conflict has exposed broader trends in modern information warfare. The rise of citizen broadcasters — ordinary people with smartphones — has transformed the scale and speed of narrative creation. A single TikTok clip can cascade across platforms, be picked up by traditional media, and reach millions before official spokespeople even open their mouths.

Artificial intelligence is becoming part of the arsenal — both as a tool for monitoring and amplifying content, and as a means of creating it through deepfakes and synthetic imagery. This opens opportunities but also risks, particularly if poorly executed content undermines the credibility of the source.

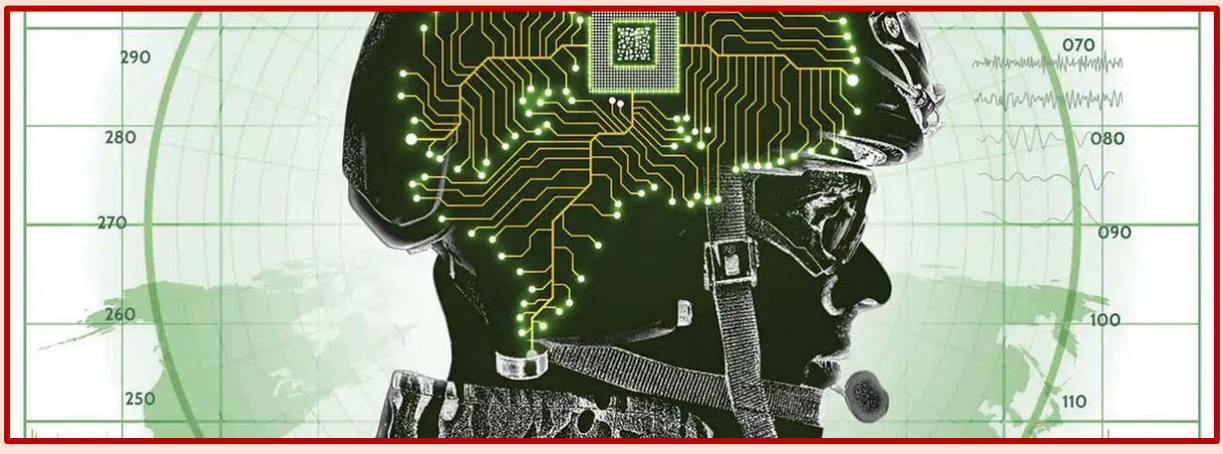
Attempts to restrict hostile state media, such as blocking RT and Sputnik in parts of Europe, have had mixed success. Audiences often migrate to alternative platforms, while disinformation continues to circulate in closed networks.

Ukraine's Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security stands out in this environment. It coordinates messaging across government, monitors hostile narratives, and works with civil society to improve media literacy. It is, in effect, a fusion of official strategic communications and grassroots activism — agile, responsive, and adaptable.

Why This Matters to Us

For readers of Scribblings, much of this will feel like vindication of principles we've long argued for: the need for trained, deployable media operations teams; the importance of narrative planning alongside military planning; the value of building credibility before crisis strikes.

It also challenges us to think hard about our own readiness. Could Britain, or NATO as a whole, match Ukraine's narrative agility in the opening days of a major conflict? Do we have the mechanisms in place to push out credible, compelling content at the speed of social media? And do our senior commanders — across all three services — see information operations as a decisive combat function rather than a public relations bolt-on?



Graphic courtesy of the NATO Innovation Hub)

To achieve success in the future security environment, the Joint Force must shift how it thinks about information from an afterthought and the sole purview of information professionals to a foundational consideration for all military activities. The Joint Force must design all activities and operations from the outset to account for the use and impact of information on relevant actors.—Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment

The Final Word

The Military Review paper closes with a reminder that is worth repeating here: the information domain is a battlespace in its own right. Fail to secure it, and you may lose the war before you've even had the decisive battle.

Ukraine's example is not about perfection — its communications campaign has had its missteps and controversies. But it has demonstrated, day after day, that a clear story, told well and told often, can be a weapon as potent as any in the armoury.

As one Ukrainian officer put it to a visiting NATO delegation early in the war: "We fight with artillery, with tanks, with missiles — but first we fight with truth." That is a line any professional communicator should remember the next time they are told the battle for perception is someone else's job.

What is the future of wartime transparency

The IDF, media freedom in Gaza, and the war for trust: "The first casualty when war comes is truth." – US Senator Hiram Johnson, 1917 But today, truth is not so much slain as redacted, repackaged, and live-streamed. And in Gaza, where the fighting is fierce and the stories contested, who gets to tell the tale remains a matter of strategy, safety—and survival.

By Mike Peters

THE Society of Editors has added its voice to a growing international chorus urging the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to grant journalists freedom of movement inside Gaza. The case made is a familiar one: in war, the public deserves independent, verifiable reporting. No democracy, it is said, should control the narrative through one lens alone.

But while journalists press for access, others point out that the IDF doesn't just fight with tanks and drones. It fights with cameras, captions, and social media feeds - often more effectively than any Western military. And in the realm of strategic communications, Israel's Spokesperson's Unit is not just good. It is world-class.

The IDF Spokesperson's Unit is widely acknowledged as a global leader in military media operations. Structured as a professional, integrated command with direct access to operational planning, it routinely delivers multi-language briefings, rapid battlefield imagery, live social media updates, and counter-narratives within minutes of events breaking.

In recent campaigns, the Unit has deployed drone footage, on-screen graphics, video statements, and even psychological messaging—targeted not just at enemy fighters but at international audiences. The result is a real-time stream of sharply edited, mission-aligned content that shapes the public narrative before most Western forces have cleared their press releases through legal.

Many observers within NATO StratCom circles privately note that Israel's doctrine has become a benchmark for cognitive warfare—fast, agile, and unrelenting in the digital space. Several

allied defence communicators have admitted that while they might not match its political assertiveness, they study the IDF's model as a tactical and procedural reference point.

Among experienced war correspondents too, there is admiration for the sophistication of Israel's output—but also concern about the vacuum left by the absence of independent verification. One veteran reporter described Gaza as "the most controlled battlespace in modern journalism," where "you either see what you're shown, or you go in blind."

These concerns are not new. Since at least the 2009 Gaza campaign, international media organisations have questioned whether a military monopoly on imagery and access undermines public trust - even if the content shared is factually correct. The line between information dominance and information management, they argue, becomes dangerously thin.

If Israel is so confident in its story, why not let independent journalists see it with their own eyes? That question lies at the heart of this controversy.

Israeli authorities say the current war against Hamas in Gaza involves a dense, urban environment where civilians, militants, and infrastructure are intertwined; an enemy known for media manipulation, including staging scenes or pressuring civilians to give false accounts; and a battlefield where journalists could unwittingly reveal troop positions, or worse, be taken hostage.

It's not an implausible case. Western military officers who have operated in Gaza describe it as a nightmare battlespace. But the result is that almost all frontline images reaching global audiences are filtered through the IDF's own lens or sourced from outlets operating inside Gaza with limited mobility, often under the influence of Hamas.

As international media commentators point out, in Gaza, "you get what one side wants you to see - or you find yourself in a war zone with no protection."

This leads to a critical but underexplored question: Are restrictions on media access a military judgment—or a political one? The IDF is a disciplined, modern force with a robust internal legal advisory system. But the visibility of war, especially in Gaza, is as much a political matter as a tactical one

Images of civilian casualties, destroyed neighbourhoods, or military misfires have global consequences. The decision to limit movement may therefore lie not in the war room, but in the Cabinet Office.

Some Israeli officials argue that international trust in their version of events has eroded, even when evidence is strong. Allowing unescorted access, they fear, would open the door to misinterpretation, misrepresentation, or diplomatic backlash.

But therein lies the tension: Can strategic communications succeed without transparency? And can any democratic force expect trust when independent witnesses are held back?

Some suggest the answer lies not in full media freedom or total control—but in a professional middle ground. This might include establishing licensed, rotating embeds with international media - briefed, protected, but not censored; creating joint press pools, coordinated with UN or Red Cross observers, to visit selected sites; and engaging neutral observers, such as the ICRC, to verify claims in real-time.

Precedents exist. British and US forces ran successful embedded programmes in Iraq and Afghanistan. NATO's StratCom COEs have examined such models. The key is mutual trust - between the military, the press, and the public.

Israel's Spokesperson's Unit has rewritten the playbook on how modern militaries communicate. It has taught the world how to fight in the information space. But if it wishes to remain a trusted source of truth - not just a source of narrative - it must consider what transparency looks like in 2025.

Because in an age of deepfakes, propaganda, and polarisation, truth is not a given. It must be witnessed. And for that, the world still needs independent journalists - not to shape the story, but to confirm it.

As wars grow more hybrid and perception becomes as vital as firepower, the IDF's media doctrine may soon be studied not just in defence colleges - but in journalism schools, political science seminars, and the backrooms of every government that fears the weight of public opinion. What they do next in Gaza may not only shape the conflict, but also the future of wartime transparency itself.

Logo: Courtesy of the BBC

Wars end, but the lessons remain unfinished

THREE anniversaries converge this year to remind us that while the battles may be over, the work of learning from them is not, says Editor Mike Peters. It is 50 years since the Vietnam War ended, 70 since the armistice stilled the guns in Korea, and 80 since VJ Day marked the final victory of the Second World War. These milestones are a chance to honour those who fought — British, Commonwealth, and American alike — and to confront the great unfinished lessons of how wars are reported and understood, not least in an age when the shadow of nuclear weapons still hangs over every conflict.

In the Pacific theatre of the Second World War, the U.S. bore the in the island-hopping advance on Japan, but Britain and the Commonwealth fought a vast and parallel war. The Indian Army — the largest volunteer force in history — battled from the Arakan to Mandalay, and beyond into liberated Malaya.

The legendary Chindits, operating deep behind Japanese lines under Orde Wingate, became one of the most compelling stories of the Burma campaign. Their long-range penetration operations were reported in Britain with a mixture of awe and relief, as proof that the enemy could be taken on in his own territory. Correspondents like Frank Owen captured not only their feats but also the price paid in exhaustion, disease, and loss.

Australia and New Zealand's forces fought in New Guinea and the Solomons alongside their American allies, while Commonwealth aircrews operated across the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. At sea, the British Pacific Fleet, a powerful but often overlooked force of carriers, battleships, and cruisers, joined the U.S. Navy in the final assaults on the Japanese home islands.

Operating thousands of miles from home bases, the Fleet's crews endured kamikaze attacks and logistical strain, earning the admiration of Admiral Nimitz and his senior commanders.

Reporting on these campaigns was shaped by distance, censorship, and the limits of wartime communications. The public saw iconic images — the raising of the flag on Mount Suribachi, the surrender aboard USS *Missouri*, the Union Flag once more flying in Hong Kong — but less of the daily misery of jungle fighting or the immense logistical achievement of keeping fleets and armies supplied in hostile waters.

Britain's press inevitably concentrated on Europe until Germany's defeat, while America's reported the Pacific more heavily but still within the frame set by military censors. The public learned that the war had been won; fewer understood the full price of victory, or the strategic calculations behind it.

Korea brought Britain, the Commonwealth, and the U.S. together again in a hot war fought under the UN flag. British troops stood with American and South Korean allies in some of the most desperate fighting of the war — the Gloucestershire Regiment's stand at Imjin, the Canadians at Kapyong, the New Zealand gunners, the Australians' infantry actions. American forces bore the brunt of the vast conflict, from the Pusan Perimeter to the Chosin Reservoir.

Their professionalism was matched by the respect they gave their allies. The Royal Navy's carriers flew sorties alongside U.S. Task Forces. Yet at home, Korea never gripped public attention in the way the Second World War had; it was too far away, too soon after victory, and too quickly dubbed "the forgotten war." The lesson — that a democracy's consent to war depends on the public's understanding of it — was not truly absorbed.

In Vietnam, Britain was not a combatant, but Commonwealth journalists were among those shaping the war's narrative. The U.S. military fought with immense firepower and determination yet struggled to match battlefield success with a coherent political message. The "credibility gap" between official statements and what reporters saw on the ground became a corrosive force at home. American correspondents like Peter Arnett, British reporters like James Fenton and John Pilger, and Australian cameramen such as Neil Davis exposed the war's complexity and contradictions.

Tet Offensive in 1968, declared a defeat for the enemy by commanders, appeared to television viewers as a dramatic and costly shock. The media had more freedom of movement than in any previous war, but this also meant that when official claims proved false, the damage to trust was swift and lasting.

From Vietnam, both sides took away different lessons. Some in the U.S. military resolved never again to let the media roam so freely in a war zone. The press, for its part, saw the value of independence — but sometimes forgot that lesson when access was offered in exchange for constraints. In the Gulf War, pool reporting and tight control kept the story within military bounds.

In Iraq, embedding gave reporters intimacy with units but narrowed their view; in Afghanistan, the war faded from the headlines until its chaotic end. Britain experienced the same tensions, from the Falklands to Helmand: balancing operational security with the need for honest, timely reporting.

The unfinished business is twofold. First, governments and militaries must be reminded — again and again — that war must be reported fully, and not just in their own voice.

Without public understanding of why a war is fought, how it is conducted, and what it costs, democratic consent becomes hollow, and the risk of strategic misjudgement rises. In the nuclear age, this is not simply a matter of domestic politics.

The stakes are global. Miscalculation in a conventional war can be deadly; miscalculation in a nuclear confrontation could be fatal to nations. The Pacific War ended with the use of atomic weapons; since then, every major conflict has carried, somewhere in the background, the question of whether escalation might go further than anyone intended. In such an environment, accurate, credible reporting is not a luxury — it is a safeguard.

The second unfinished task is to have the right people to do that reporting and facilitation well. In the military, that means trained, experienced media operations teams — uniformed specialists who understand both the needs of the press and the demands of the battlefield. In the press, it means maintaining defence correspondents who know the services, understand strategy, and can challenge an official line with authority. Both have become rare.

Too often we improvise with undertrained officers when a crisis hits; newsrooms, hollowed out by cuts, lean on generalists who lack the contacts and context to dig deeper than the daily briefing.

The correspondents of the Pacific War — American, British, and Commonwealth — followed the fighting from the jungles of Burma to the beaches of Iwo Jima and the decks of the British Pacific Fleet.

They brought home accounts that honoured the courage of soldiers, sailors, and airmen, and helped the public understand, however imperfectly, the cost of the victory being claimed in their name. That blend of proximity, skill, and purpose is what remains unfinished today.

As we mark VJ Day 80, we salute not only the fighting men and women of 1945 but those who told their story. We recognise the Allied partnership in the Pacific and in Korea, the sacrifices of American forces, the professionalism of British and Commonwealth troops, the daring of the Chindits, and the often-forgotten role of the British Pacific Fleet.

And we face the truth that until both the military and the media commit to keeping the trained professionals who can bridge the gap between the front line and the public, the lessons of war whether in the Pacific, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan will remain unfinished. In an age when nuclear weapons still lurk in the background of every major confrontation, that is a risk no democracy should take.

Scribblings expresses thanks to those who write for these pages and to those behind the scenes who also add to the continuing success of the Pen & Sword Club's journal.

Ideas, stories, and feature articles are welcomed from members. But please contact the Editors before writing. Opinions expressed in Scribblings are those of the named contributors.

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Scribblings is published on the Club website – www.penandswordclub.org where readers can also access back editions. The Networker which preceded this publication is also available to read. The final edition of The NetWorker is one of the most consulted. It marked the 30th anniversary of The Falklands War and outlined in detail the controversies and revealed the stories behind the reporting of the conflict.

The Club maintains a group page on the social media website, LinkedIn. This worldwide group is over 500 strong. The editors of Scribblings trawl LinkedIn for news of ,and about , members and for stories and facts that will interest defence communicators.

These are reposted to the Group to provide a daily interest. Applications to join the LinkedIn Group should be made to Mike Peters. michaelpcoms@btinternet.com