

Scribblings

Journal of The Pen & Sword Club

*Views, news, and musings for the military and defence
communications community*

June / July 2025

Editor: Mike Peters

Credible Communication is not a luxury!

LORD Robertson of Port Ellen, the former UK Defence Secretary, past NATO Secretary General, and one of the architects of the recent UK Strategic Defence Review, set a clear challenge when he told the participants in the Pen & Sword Club's 2025 symposium that in an age of persistent conflict and disinformation, credible communication is not a luxury, but a core element of national strategy. Making the key note speech as the President of Club Lord Robertson set the tone for a day studying strategic military communications.

Attendance included representatives from all three branches of the UK Armed Forces, alongside senior communicators from across government, international partners, the media, and industry. The speaker line-up featured some of the UK's most respected voices in defence communications, some of whom argued that while the UK once led the field, it now risks falling behind.

A recurring theme throughout the day was that Britain's past successes stand in contrast to more recent struggles. The Falklands War, while a military victory, exposed severe shortcomings in media handling. And in Afghanistan, as several speakers acknowledged, the UK and its allies too often lost the narrative, ceding ground to insurgent propaganda and failing to maintain public understanding at home.

One of the most impactful contributions came from Jay Janzen, Director of Strategic Communications at SHAPE, who emphasised the critical concept of cognitive advantage—the ability to shape perceptions and decision-making faster and more effectively than adversaries. His theme: If we don't invest seriously in cognitive capabilities, we will keep winning tactical engagements while losing strategic influence.

Panellists featured a presence from Ukraine, whose defence communicator offered raw, powerful insights into the information war being fought in parallel with the kinetic one. The message was stark: information is not a supporting function — it is a line of operation in its own right.

The Pen & Sword Club, which draws from the international defence communications community, continues to build momentum around its core mission: to champion principled, professional defence communications in an age of complexity. Its growing membership reflects a shared belief that the pen—and indeed the microphone and lens—must remain in trusted hands.

“This Club stands for something more than networking,” said Colonel Mike Peters, one of the original founding members “It’s about professional pride, sharpening doctrine, and preparing the current and next generation of defence communicators for the fight they’re already in.”

Unprepared and under attack, says Club President

THE Pen & Sword Symposium proved to be a timely and lively event on June 18 as a full house discussed ‘The Role of Strategic Communications in today’s Security Environment., says Mark

Laity, Club Executive Council member, former BBC defence Correspondent and Head of Strategic Communications at SHAPE.



The event was sold out with 70 attendees from the Pen & Sword Club and associated bodies, creating an engaged and expert audience of defence communicators. It was held under Chatham House Rules, helping create a very lively and forthright atmosphere.

The keynote speaker, the club’s president, Lord Robertson of Port

Ellen, opened proceedings with a blunt and sobering assessment of the current defence environment, and speaking with the authority of the man who led the government’s Strategic Defence Review.

The former NATO Secretary General and UK Defence Secretary said Britain is ‘unprepared’ for current challenges and right now ‘we are under attack.’ Part of the problem, he said, is that while we have recognised the problem we are ‘still moving at a peacetime pace,’ and at all levels our forces had been ‘hollowed out.’

Ukraine had demonstrated the risk was not theoretical, and also the need for a mindset change in how we thought, equipped, and organised, and that while Britain formally recognised ‘NATO First,’ in reality we did not practise it. While our adversaries were not practising business as usual we were still bogged down in layers of bureaucracy and out of date cultures that needed confronting. He concluded the SDR pointed the way ahead but now needed aggressive implementation.

Lord Robertson's emphasis on the new security environment was well illustrated by the first panel on 'The Challenges of Disinformation and Artificial Intelligence.' Moderated by Colonel Lorna Ward, the panel was made up of Henry Collis, Director of Centre for Information Resilience, Uliana Lutchnyn from the Ukrainian firm, Mantis Analytics, and Squadron Leader James Langan.

Among the themes they focused on was the speed of AI flooding the zone with information, often misleading or false, making responding ever more challenging. One speaker highlighted that it was a mistake to overfocus on the sheer fidelity of deep fakes but more their speed and whether they resonated, reinforcing existing views.

Another looked at how AI could be used to assess and identify disinformation as part of countering it, but also to support our own narratives. The need to seek the initiative and promote our own narrative rather than being on the back foot was highlighted.

This naturally led into our second panel, on Narrative Wars. It was moderated by Squadron Leader James Langan, with former British Ambassador to Kabul, Sir Laurie Bristow, pictured right, Mark Laity of the StratCom Academy and Ed Bond of IN2.



The weakness of the international community's narrative in Afghanistan and elsewhere was seen as one of the key reasons for our failure in Afghanistan. In agreeing with this another panellist highlighted that NATO's new doctrines emphasised 'narrative-led execution' as the core means for executing all operations.

It was argued that despite this being agreed by all nations it was yet to be taken on board by Britain, and our ability to win narrative wars was compromised by continuing failures in resourcing, training, and organisation. Some examples were given where narratives were developed to make a positive change in operations.

Before lunch, the audience had a chance to listen and engage with a senior communication official from the MoD, who also stayed for further discussion during the networking lunch.

After lunch Mark Laity, a former SHAPE senior communicator himself, moderated the panel on NATO Strategic Communications. The strong NATO line-up was led by Jay Janzen, SHAPE's Chief J10 (StratCom) who presented via video, Captain (N) Giovanni Galoforo, the StratCom adviser to the Chairman of Military Committee, and Wing Commander Peter Clarke of the StratCom Academy.

The major changes that have taken place in NATO over the last decade were highlighted. Not only has doctrine and policy put StratCom at a prominent place within operations and strategy but there has been a growing acceptance of its value as a capability. It is now having a greater role in exercises and real world planning and has made real progress. That said, the symposium was told NATO still faced some old problems on training and resourcing and getting enough subject matter experts. This remained a constraint on it being as effective as it could be in deterrence and operating in the hybrid environment.

The day's final panel moderated by Colonel Rosie Stone had as panellists two military officers holding operational-level positions. They highlighted how at their level they were doing their best to take on board the NATO doctrines as approved by the UK, effectively creating the new J10 StratCom function. However, they also noted that at the higher levels this model had not yet been fully appreciated. They also echoed Lord Robertson's opening remarks about a peacetime mindset, with a lot of bureaucracy and little empowerment or mission command.

The day ended with a final open session, with some of the day's panellists taking part in a lively engagement with an audience that also had plenty of informed commentary and expert questions of their own. A few had had to leave to get their trains, but most stayed right to the end, demonstrating how engaging the day had been.

One of the things that made it possible was the role of sponsors whose support made it possible to keep the event affordable. Our thanks therefore go to Global Protect Security, IN2, Lockheed Martin and the StratCom Academy



The Baking Powder, Not the Icing: Rebalancing Information Operations

IN THE CULINARY world, icing may dazzle the eye, but it's the humble baking powder that makes the cake rise. So too in warfare: the spectacle of firepower and manoeuvre might captivate public attention, but without the leavening agent of coherent, credible information operations—including a robust media operations core—the whole enterprise risks falling flat, writes Scribblings Editor and

former Colonel Media Ops, Mike Peters.

The analogy was one that stood out for me at the Pen & Sword Club's symposium. The line is believed to be credited to an Australian war correspondent in Afghanistan and was more than apt. From the steppes of Ukraine to the deserts of the Middle East, it has become clear that success is measured not just in ground taken or enemies defeated, but in narratives won.

Yet despite all the doctrinal nods to “information advantage” and “cognitive effects,” many in the UK's military still treat information operations as an afterthought—added late, briefed lightly, and staffed thinly.

The Pen & Sword Club has always maintained that media and information operations are not a luxury topping to be applied after the planners have finished their main course. They are the very agent that makes a strategy rise to its full potential. From embedding journalists with forward units, to synchronising messaging with strategic intent, and from empowering spokespersons in theatre to integrating civilian communicators with military planners, our contributors argue form strategic communications to be structurally and culturally core to operational planning.

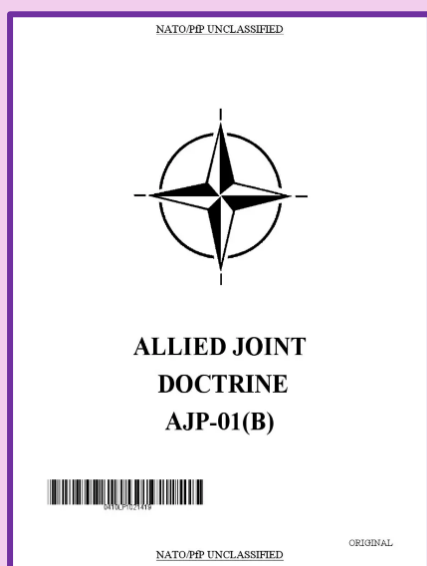
NATO's AJP-10 doctrine and its emphasis on strategic communications as a military discipline, are not merely a civilian adjunct. Our club members often examine cases where poorly integrated media operations led to narrative collapse or international misunderstanding.

[And we aim to shine a light on best practices—past and present—where the timely deployment of media teams helped shape battlefield perceptions and bolster legitimacy.](#)

It has often been said – with exasperation – that “If you arrive in a theatre of war without your communications team ready, trained, and trusted, you're already losing in the domain where the public will first judge your conduct.”

So let us retire the cake metaphors. But if we must bake, let's remember without baking powder, it doesn't matter how fancy the icing looks—the cake won't rise.

Media Operations has been marginalised



THIS issue of *Scribblings* argues that media operations, nested within the broader framework of information operations and strategic communications, must be structurally embedded in military planning from day one. It is a doctrine-backed, battlefield-tested truth—too often forgotten at precisely the moment when it matters most.

NATO's Allied Joint Publication AJP-10 (Strategic Communications) lays out the necessity for information to be treated as a capability in its own right. It states: "Strategic communication is an integral part of military operations and must be synchronised with operational planning at all levels." (AJP-10 Edition A Version 1, 2023)

Similarly, UK Defence Doctrine (JDP 0-01, 6th Ed., 2022) makes clear: "Information is a domain of operations. As such, communication is no longer a supporting act—it is central to planning and execution."

Yet in many operations, media operations are marginalised—lacking staff, resourcing, and authority. An internal review of British communications during Operation Shader (against ISIS) noted delays in deploying communications teams and insufficient equipment to engage with international media. [Source: House of Commons Defence Committee Oral Evidence, 2018]

The clearest modern example of integrated information warfare comes from Ukraine. Since 2022, Kyiv has synchronised battlefield messaging with presidential communication, digital diplomacy, and direct engagement with international media.

In March 2022, Ukrainian Deputy Defence Minister Hanna Maliar noted: "We do not just fight with weapons. We fight on every information front... Journalists are part of our resistance." [Source: Ukrinform, March 2022]

Ukraine's rapid media access, use of embedded reporters, and digital counter-disinformation strategies have allowed it to shape global narratives more effectively than a far larger adversary.

By contrast, Russia's top-down, centrally controlled media approach, combined with a failure to empower frontline communicators, has undermined both external credibility and internal morale. [Source: RAND Corporation, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model", 2016; updated 2023]

The British Experience: From BAOR to Present

THE British Army's Media Operations Group (Volunteers) disbanded a decade ago once provided deployable, trained media officers who had both military and professional media experience. Many believe this capability was never adequately replaced.

A 2021 report by RUSI ("Military Strategic Communications: Lessons for the British Armed Forces") argued: "The UK's inability to field a deployable, joint-service media team at readiness has left it lagging behind allies."

The Army Reserve has since struggled to retain specialist communicators. Senior officers have sometimes viewed media operations as politically risky, rather than mission critical.

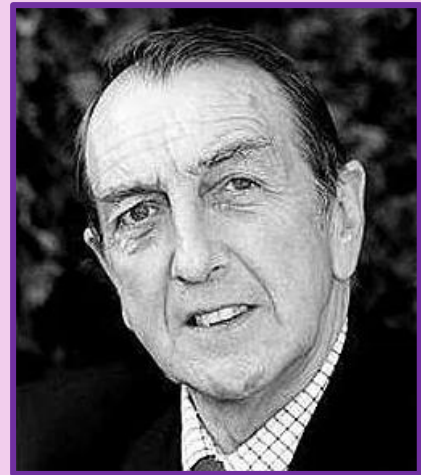
As Alan Protheroe, the former BBC Assistant Director General of News, Defence Correspondent and MoD adviser, once said: "The military still doesn't fully grasp that when a war starts, every camera, every microphone, and every smartphone becomes a weapon system—or a shield." [Pen & Sword Club oral archive, 2006]

Alan Protheroe, right, who led and founded The Territorial Army Pool of Information Officers consistently argued that truthful, timely, and authoritative communication was not a luxury of democracy in wartime—it was a strategic necessity.

In a 1985 Chatham House lecture, he said: “If information is power, then misinformation is weakness. In war, where uncertainty reigns, the side that can speak truthfully and consistently holds a deeper advantage—at home, among allies, and in the eyes of the enemy.”

He strongly supported the BBC's commitment to impartial war reporting during the Falklands conflict. He later used that experience to help shape MoD policy, arguing that: “If the British military wants the public's trust in a war, they must first trust the public with the truth.”

— Protheroe, interview with British Forces Broadcasting Service, 1991



Alan Protheroe championed the idea of a professional, trained cadre of uniformed media officers, able to operate on the ground and bridge the gap between journalists and commanders. It was with this in mind the Pen & Sword Club changed direction some 15 years ago and set out to provide a chamber where all sides of the defence communications community could meet and discuss.

In a private address to the Royal College of Defence Studies (1997), he warned: “You cannot invent a media plan once the shooting starts. And no plan survives contact with the first camera crew unless it's been rehearsed.” He also cautioned against treating media operations as politically expendable: “A tank without fuel is useless. A commander without a story is dangerous.”

In one of his last major interviews, given to the Imperial War Museum Oral History Project in 2005 (Ref: IWM 10340/Protheroe), he spoke candidly about the erosion of trust between the military and the media: “There was a time when the MoD could ring up the BBC and say, ‘This is sensitive, hold off for 24 hours,’ and we'd trust them. That trust was built on mutual respect. I fear that's been replaced by spin doctors and suspicion.”

He concluded: “In a 21st-century conflict, if your story isn't told by you, it'll be told by your enemy—or worse, by someone who doesn't care what's true.”

Lessons from the war between Israel and Iran

NFLUENCE is now a force multiplier, said Jay Janzen, Director of Strategic Communications at SHAPE in Brussels. Jay, pictured right, is a Pen & Sword member and managed Canadian Forces communications before he joined NATO. He was commenting on LinkedIn about a War on The Rocks article covering the recent Israel/Iran confrontations. He added: “Strategic communication, public diplomacy, and psychological operations achieved effects far beyond the battlefield. They neutralized panic at home, destabilized enemy cohesion, and helped shape global narratives.” As such, psychological operations and information dominance now sit alongside airpower and cyber warfare as core pillars of modern national defence.



“Don't downplay psychological operations. Psychological operations and strategic information management were key features of Israel's campaign. These tools were used not only to paralyze Iranian response networks but also to potentially influence decision-makers, shape public perception, and manage escalation on both domestic and international fronts.

“Psychological operations operated as a non-kinetic force multiplier, amplifying the strategic effects of kinetic strikes without expanding battlefield footprints. Future deterrence ought to be calibrated through visible military capability, political clarity, alliance cohesion, and control over the escalation ladder.



Extracts from Lessons Observed....

From the work of Bilal Y. Saab and Darren D. White, published by War on The Rocks, July 16, 2025. Saab is senior managing director of TRENDS US and a former senior advisor for security cooperation in the U.S. Department of Defense. White is a retired U.K. servicemember and a former military intelligence operator. Image: IDF Spokesperson's Unit via Wikimedia Commons



THE OUTBREAK of direct hostilities between Israel and Iran in June represents one of the most significant geopolitical escalations in the Middle East in recent history. What began as a calculated pre-emptive strike by the Israel Defense Forces against Iranian nuclear facilities, under the codename Operation Rising Lion, swiftly evolved into a multi-theatre war involving cyber, air, and naval engagements.

.....Iran retaliated through a mixture of ballistic missile and drone strikes, as well as cyber-attacks. It would have loved to utilise the firepower of its once robust network of armed non-state proxies in the region — Hizballah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian Territories, the Houthis in Yemen, and the militias in Iraq — but it couldn't because Israel had done a terrific job of massively degrading their military capabilities (at least Hizballah and Hamas). During the brief but intense Iranian-Israeli confrontation, those proxies remained largely silent either because they couldn't get into the fight in a meaningful way or because they were unwilling due to domestic political constraints.

While a fragile ceasefire was brokered after 12 days of combat, the nature of the conflict underscored the transformation of modern warfare — hybrid, decentralized, and fought across physical and digital domains.

.....The Israeli military's initial operation demonstrated unparalleled coordination of stealth aircraft, intelligence, cyber disruption, and psychological warfare. More than 200 sorties, involving F-35I Adir and F-15I Ra'am aircraft, struck over 100 targets across Iran, including nuclear sites at Natanz, Isfahan, and Fordow. These kinetic actions were preceded by months of intelligence-gathering, sabotage, and cyber intrusions executed by Mossad, the Israeli foreign intelligence agency, and Israel's Unit 8200.



Judging by the level of synchronization of cyber actions with kinetic campaigns, the Iranian-Israeli war is a reminder of how cyber warfare is now a core domain of military strategy, not merely a supplement. Both Iran and Israel experienced the limits

of cyber deterrence, particularly where private sector networks were inadequately protected.

Indeed, cyber operations played a pivotal role on both sides. Israel initiated the conflict with a cyber barrage that disabled Iranian radar systems, electronic warfare stations, and communications. Conversely, Iranian hackers targeted Israeli power grids, train networks, and digital infrastructure, with varying degrees of success.

Lessons for the Future

.....The June 2025 conflict between Israel and Iran yielded a range of critical doctrinal insights for modern military planning. It not only reaffirmed the continuing relevance of conventional capabilities but also underlined the importance of cyber integration, information dominance, strategic precision, and alliance cooperation in 21st-century conflict scenarios. From this conflict, we derive nine lessons.

..... *don't downplay psychological operations. Psychological operations and strategic information management were key features of Israel's campaign. These tools were used not only to paralyze Iranian response networks but also to potentially influence decision-makers, shape public perception, and manage escalation on both domestic and international fronts. In the early hours of Operation Rising Lion, Israeli operatives reportedly sent direct warnings to Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers moments before airstrikes. While designed to*



reduce collateral casualties, these calls also served a psychological purpose inducing fear, confusion, and mistrust within Iran's military command. By suggesting intimate knowledge of individual movements and locations, Israel sowed doubt in the security of Iran's internal communications and protection protocols. The psychological impact of Israeli precision strikes (particularly the assassination of high-ranking revolutionary guard officers) was felt beyond the military.

Civilian populations across Iran reportedly experienced waves of panic, fuelled by social media reports of air incursions, disrupted communications, and conflicting government statements. This internal disquiet, while not amounting to civil unrest, applied pressure on Tehran to consider de-escalation pathways. In effect, psychological operations operated as a non-kinetic force multiplier, amplifying the strategic effects of kinetic strikes without expanding battlefield footprints.

The Changing Character of Regional War

.....The 2025 conflict signalled a profound shift in the character and conduct of regional warfare. It reaffirmed the centrality of alliances, psychological operations, and precision targeting, while also highlighting the evolving role of strategic deterrence and information warfare in shaping outcomes.

The successful targeting of Iran's nuclear facilities — executed with surgical precision and coordinated through joint U.S.–Israeli intelligence — proved that well-executed, pre-emptive action can yield measurable delays in adversarial weapons development. These strikes were not only militarily effective but psychologically disorienting, undermining confidence within Iran's defence establishment and signalling Israel's reach, capability, and intent.

..... *Just as importantly, the campaign revealed that influence is now a force multiplier. Strategic communication, public diplomacy, and psychological operations achieved effects far beyond the battlefield. They neutralized panic at home, destabilized enemy cohesion, and helped shape global narratives. As such, psychological operations and information dominance now sit alongside airpower and cyber warfare as core pillars of modern national defence.*

.....The June 2025 conflict was not merely an episode in the Israeli-Iranian rivalry — it was a glimpse into the future of warfare. It showcased the fusion of conventional and unconventional tools, the necessity of operational resilience, and the unpredictability of asymmetric threats. It also raised enduring questions of how tactical victories can deliver strategic outcomes (which Israel has failed to do), and how nations can adapt to a battlefield that is no longer bound by geography or traditional rules of engagement.

As strategists and decision-makers assess the legacy of Operation Rising Lion and Operation Midnight Hammer, they should look beyond the metrics of destruction. The real measure of success lies in whether enduring security, stability, and deterrence have been achieved or whether this was merely the opening salvo in a new era of protracted, hybrid confrontation. The battlefield of tomorrow is not coming — it has already arrived. And only those nations that can operate across domains, at pace, and with strategic discipline will endure.

Scribblings Says...

EVERY paragraph of the Strategic Defence Review reflects the need for communications expertise in Britain's defence forces. That was the gist of the answer Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, President, of the Pen & Sword Club gave at the 2025 London Symposium to a question which challenged why strategic communications and Information Operations did not feature openly in the current Strategic Defence Review. Lord 's Robertson's response was considered—and telling. It was not a deflection. It was a diagnosis.

Lord Robertson knows better than most how vital the information environment has become to national security. His answer acknowledged a deeper problem: not a lack of language in the SDR, but a cultural and institutional gap—particularly within both military structures and political leadership—when it comes to understanding, valuing, and integrating 21st-century strategic communications.

Information advantage, narrative contest, resilience, influence—these terms echo throughout the SDR. But they have not translated into coherent capability among those who initiated this examination of the country's defence resources.

For too long, the UK has treated communications as a supporting act to operations, rather than a warfighting discipline in its own right. As others build integrated influence capabilities—involving public affairs, PSYOPS, media ops, and open-source intelligence—Britain risks remaining adrift in legacy thinking.

General Sir Richard Barrons has repeatedly warned that without the ability to operate in the information domain; we may lose future conflicts before a shot is fired.

Air Marshal Sir Chris Nickols, pictured right, has spoken of strategic communications becoming a “buzzword” instead of a battlefield tool. And veterans of 77 Brigade and other influence units have expressed concern that the UK’s approach lacks both clarity and credibility.



Think tanks, academics, and Parliament have raised the alarm too.

- The Royal United Services Institute’s paper “A Signal Failure?” (2021) pointed to deep structural shortcomings in how the UK integrates information operations.
- Chatham House noted Britain’s failure to turn soft power into operational leverage.
- The House of Commons Defence Committee warned that “we are outmatched in the information environment by adversaries who weaponise media, narrative, and disinformation.”

The Centre for Strategic Communication at King’s College London has long urged the UK to move beyond ad hoc campaigns and embed communications expertise into operational planning

NATO has done just that—codifying strategic communications in AJP-10 and integrating it across command chains. Ukraine and Israel, too, show how modern warfare demands real-time narrative agility.

Lord Robertson’s comment should be read not as a defence of the SDR’s phrasing, but as a call to arms. He recognises—as many in this Club do—that the real problem lies in cultural resistance to recognising that narrative, perception, and influence are no longer the prelude to war; they are the war.

The Pen & Sword Club exists to champion the professional practice of defence communication. We must now go further: to advocate for structure, doctrine, and leadership in this space. Strategic communications must no longer be a rhetorical afterthought. It must be built into the order of battle.

Every paragraph of the SDR may nod to the importance of communications—but until we resource the capability, command the talent, and deploy it with intent, we will continue to lose ground in the arena that matters most: the minds of the public, our allies, and our adversaries.

Gagging the Ranks

Why the MoD’s Communications Crackdown Is Drawing Fire from Journalists

“FOR a Government that came in on a freedom of information ticket, it’s pretty shameful,” said Robert Fox, the veteran defence correspondent, speaking candidly about the Ministry of Defence’s latest clampdown on service personnel’s contact with the media.

Robert Fox, who reported alongside 2 PARA at the Battle of Goose Green during the Falklands War, is no stranger to the challenges of frontline reporting, and his words carry significant weight in defence circles.



The MoD's new policy bans all serving personnel—Regular and Reserve alike—from speaking to journalists, posting on social media, or participating in public events without explicit permission. The aim, official sources say, is to prevent unauthorised disclosures and protect operational security. Yet many critics see it as an overreach, more about controlling the narrative than safeguarding troops.

Roberts pointed critique was published in *Press Gazette* last month, where he described the policy as “bossy, bullying nonsense” that is unlikely to be enforceable. “People will find ways around it, because you will find people in the military who feel their position is not being explained properly, so they will talk, whatever the Government tries to do,” he warned.

Such a clampdown is at odds with the principles that underpinned Britain's historic openness in conflict reporting. Robert himself was a pioneering embedded journalist in 1982, filing reports from the front lines with the Paras at Goose Green—reports that helped the public grasp the realities of modern warfare. In contrast, today's blanket restrictions risk driving honest voices underground, where misinformation can thrive unchallenged.

The MoD insists that all media engagements are considered case-by-case, but the chilling effect on service members' willingness to communicate is already apparent. As Dominic Ponsford, Editor-in-Chief of *Press Gazette*, has noted, the policy seems designed more to protect government reputation than to shield the Armed Forces from real danger.

This perspective echoes that of General Lord Dannatt, one of *The Pen's* Vice Presidents who warned in *The Times* that the Armed Forces “have nothing to fear from openness. In fact, they suffer when they retreat from it.” The risk is not only moral but strategic. In an era when information is a battlefield, transparency is a critical asset. The UK's own StratCom doctrine, along with NATO's, emphasises credible, timely communication as key to operational success.

Yet, by suppressing the voices of its own personnel, the MoD risks ceding the narrative to others—those who may lack the military's best interests at heart. Robert Fox's sober assessment serves as a reminder that confidence in one's own story is vital. “You can't pretend modern war doesn't exist... and you can't fight it behind closed doors,” he said in a BBC interview reflecting on his Falklands experience.

It is tempting to view the MoD's move as a necessary security measure, but the cost may well be a loss of trust both within the ranks and among the public. Britain once set the standard in war reporting, balancing operational security with openness. That standard now needs to be defended, not abandoned.

I don't agree' says Derek

There are several sides to a story and Club member, Derek Plews, has a different view on the stay silent directive. A retired Reserve Army officer and author of A Brilliant Little Victory, the story of the 48th South Midland Division during the First World War, he was in a previous life a senior media and communications advisor in a number of Whitehall departments. He says: I hold some fairly trenchant views about politics, defence, and veterans' affairs, but I have no party affiliations

IN THIS era of non-stop social media output, it appears that good, old-fashioned active news management is alive and well, lurking in dark corners of Whitehall...and it is still capable of causing tension between the media and Government communicators.

National defence correspondents, pundits and political commentators have rushed to condemn Downing Street for apparently “gagging” senior military officers at the recent RUSI Land War Conference.



Sky TV's Security and Defence Editor, Deborah Haynes, took to X to complain that no journalist had been invited to ask a question after Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Roly Walker opened the event on 17 June, and that the following Q&A session was pointless because it was "off the record".



Larisa Brown, pictured left, of *The Times*, attacked what she described as "micro-management" of the armed forces by political staffers. The right-leaning *Guido Fawkes* website raged that "a major rift between the MoD and Downing Street has blown open today as defence figures are unable to go on record at a major RUSI conference."

According to the *Times*, the move came directly from Downing Street and was aimed at enforcing strict control over what the newspaper felt should have been "frank, professional dialogue between the military and the public".

Others claimed that the "gag order" included a ban on senior officers speaking on the record at any session where a government minister was present. Some journalists described this as "unprecedented" and "staggering". Was it, though?

First, the exercise of control over the public utterings of senior officers is not novel. Politicians of all shades have, from time to time, found it difficult to trust generals, (or their Naval and Air colleagues) to "say the right thing" in their media engagements – occasionally with some justification. High-ranking soldiers might be expert at disposing of the King's enemies, but not all of them have demonstrated the finely-tuned political acumen necessary to avoid opening their mouths and inserting their highly-polished size 10 boots therein.

In an effort to manage down or "mitigate" this risk, and also to ensure some coherence in terms of messaging, the Defence Corporate Communications branch is mandated to co-ordinate all external engagement. This long-standing process is set out in a DIN (Defence Instructions and Notices), last updated in February of this year, and snappily entitled "Contact with the media and communicating in public," which has this to say:

"The MOD undertakes to communicate with the public in a way that is clear and honest, enabling transparency and trust in the government's actions... The strategic benefits... must be balanced against any associated risks. To mitigate these risks, all contact with the media and communication in public relating to Defence or Government matters must be authorised in accordance with the rules and procedures set out in this DIN... Unauthorised contact with the media... could undermine the MOD's operational capability or endanger lives. Such actions may result in disciplinary or administrative measures being taken...

"Personnel of one star rank and above [Brigadier to full General and single-Service and civilian equivalents] must obtain approval from Directorate of Communications for all contact with the media and public communication relating to Defence or Government matters. "The DIN goes on to explain that requests for media or public engagement should be submitted at least 14 days in advance, with DDC reviewing submissions weekly.

It is clear, therefore, that the military are not free agents when it comes to public or media engagement and this is not new. So far, so reasonable...?

Second, the Government has a responsibility to keep the public informed about what it is doing on their behalf. But it also has a right to try to manage how and when that information is provided. Journalists are one of the conduits through which the public are informed, but they are no longer the sole purveyors of news: social media outlets offer ministers the ability to outflank the traditional media "filter," and they are more than happy to use them.

This means mainstream media folk are forced to work harder and dig deeper for their stories, and they are often unsatisfied with the bland fare served by Whitehall press offices. It could be argued, therefore, that the media criticism surrounding the Land Warfare Conference was entirely predictable... But that doesn't mean it was entirely justified.

Let us consider the backdrop against which the conference was taking place. The long-awaited Strategic Defence Review had been published just two weeks previously. There was growing concern about the rising tensions between Iran and Israel, following the publication of the IAEA's Iran Verification and Monitoring Report. A sensitive NATO summit was scheduled to take place in The Hague, just eight days later, at which the UK was expected to sign up to spending 5% of GDP on Defence. In short, this was a sensitive time, and all concerned needed to tread carefully.

Although the current Downing Street communications machine shows few signs of being particularly strategic, often allowing itself to be dragged down into the tactical weeds as it tries to defend a raft of policy mis-steps, it would be worrying if the MOD and No 10 had not consulted and reached an agreed approach on how best to manage the output from the RUSI conference.

They would (should?) have wanted to ensure that the carefully-crafted messaging around SDR was reinforced in the keynote speeches (which it was). They would also have wished to reduce the risk of journalists sniffing out any perceived differences between military and political speakers; to avoid being drawn into debates about SDR funding or the situation in the Middle-East, where the Starmer/Lammy “de-escalation” narrative was playing badly; and to try to ensure that no-one said anything that might cause blow-back at The Hague. At the same time, there was little to be gained from having military and political speakers competing with each other for attention in the same sessions.

This is the fork in the road where the Government's communication agenda and the media's thirst for news diverged.

Defence correspondents who attended the conference had written the SDR story and now wanted some fresh meat, something that moved the story on. But Downing Street and Defence would have wished to reiterate and reinforce the SDR messaging. They would also have wanted to avoid ministers and military leaders getting drawn into a debate about how the new capabilities and increased lethality would be paid for and delivered, against a backdrop of an ever-tightening fiscal climate and the fine print in the SDR document that suggested some of the proposed spending would only happen “when conditions allowed.”

Journalists are under constant pressure to produce news, not to re-hash or re-heat cold leftovers. Government communications practitioners know this. So, they can either choose to feed the beast, by handing them a worthy story, in the hope that the appetite will be sated, or they can pull up the drawbridge, cross their fingers, and hope for the best. The latter course of action was what they chose for the RUSI conference. As a result, when nothing new was forthcoming, the media pack turned on the news managers, blamed them for “gagging” the military and, hey-presto, they had a story.

But the media criticism doesn't really stand up. General Walker spoke “on the record” as he made the opening address. The speech is available to watch on RUSI's YouTube channel (<https://www.rusi.org/research-event-recordings/rusi-land-warfare-conference-2025-keynote-speeches>.) Defence Secretary, John Healy, spoke later, again “on the record.” It is true, however, that the Q&A sessions that followed both contributions, were “off the record” or unattributable.

But this was not part of some elaborate Downing Street plot. The RUSI Rule, which governs most of their conferences, and certainly high-profile events such as the Land Warfare Conference, states:

“All speeches and prepared remarks are ‘on the record’ and are attributable to the individual and the event organised by the Royal United Services Institute. All comments made in response to questions (i.e., the non-prepared remarks) are neither attributable to the individual, nor to the event. Those wishing to quote any remark that is un-attributable by these rules, should seek the permission of the speaker of those specific remarks.”

Tory shadow Defence Minister, Mark Francois, immediately tabled a Parliamentary Question to MOD PUS, Luke Pollard, demanding to know “for what reason his Department has advised senior military officers not to speak on the record at events where a Minister is present?”

Pollard batted that off by pointing out that the premise of the question was false. “This is not true,” he replied. “Recently, the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Roly Walker spoke on the record, and live on Sky Television, at the RUSI Land Warfare Conference on the same day as the Secretary of State for Defence.” It was a poorly-executed long hop and it got the response it deserved, swatted high into the stands for a six.

If Downing Street and Defence were not trying to manage the news agenda, they were not doing their jobs. The media don't have to like it, but news management or the coordination of the provision of public information, is an entirely legitimate and well-trodden path, irrespective of the hue of the political party in power.



The Soft Effects of Operation Spiderweb

WHEN Ukraine launched *Operation Spiderweb*, in mid-2025 its audacity captured headlines: deep-penetration drone swarms took out up to a third of Russia's strategic bomber fleet. But beyond the physical destruction lay a series of powerful soft effects that rippled through Russia, NATO capitals, and the broader information environment.

The strikes caused confusion on the ground. Russian airbases—once presumed untouchable—were found scrambling to respond, in some cases with guards reportedly resorting to throwing stones at incoming drones. The psychological blow was swift.

Russian defence bloggers likened the moment to a "Pearl Harbor" for the home front, triggering panic and speculation across social media and official channels alike.

Operation Spiderweb shattered assumptions about the sanctity of rear-area airbases. Ukrainian ingenuity—with low-cost drones targeting multi-billion-dollar bombers—sent a strategic message that no depth of territory guarantees safety.

In NATO and Pentagon circles, the operation became a warning shot: Western bases too could face similar asymmetric threats. Calls for hardened shelters, decoy systems, and upgraded counter-drone capabilities followed.

The operation added pressure on Russia's internal political structures. Reports of intelligence failures and delayed responses sparked speculation about purges and internal scapegoating. Internationally, *Spiderweb* enhanced Ukraine's bargaining position—coming at a time when diplomatic efforts in Istanbul had stalled. The U.S., reportedly uninformed in advance, did not condemn the operation—perhaps a subtle signal of evolving support.

Spiderweb forced changes in Russian military posture. Bombers were reportedly dispersed to multiple locations, complicating sortie generation and reducing operational tempo. It also proved the disruptive power of cheap, autonomous platforms against traditional air power—prompting doctrinal reviews across global air forces.

In the war of perception, Ukraine scored a significant win. *Spiderweb* reframed Ukraine not as a beleaguered defender but as a technologically agile strategist. Russian attempts to obscure the scale of the damage struggled against satellite imagery and open-source analysis, undermining Kremlin credibility.

In Summary: Operation Spiderweb demonstrates that soft effects—confusion, reputational damage, narrative control, and diplomatic leverage—can amplify the impact of a well-timed kinetic strike. In the evolving battlespace, media and perception are as critical as missiles and drones.

Penny Mordaunt becomes Dame in King's Birthday Honours



Source, Getty Images: Penny Mordaunt was tasked with carrying a ceremonial sword during the King's coronation

FORMER Conservative cabinet minister and Pen & Sword Vice President Penny Mordaunt has become a Dame in the King's Birthday Honours.

Penny who represented Portsmouth North between 2010 and 2024, said it was "lovely to be appreciated in this way".

Penny's profile was boosted by her sword-carrying role as Lord President of the Council during the 2023 coronation ceremony - the first time the duty had been carried out by a woman. She also served as Defence Secretary and Leader of the House of Commons'

Jay Singh-Sohal receives OBE

CLUB member and former member of Media Operations Group (V), Jay Singh-Sohal has received an OBE in the 2025 King's Birthday Honours list for his work honouring Sikhs serving in the First World War



Jay is chair of the World War One (WW1) Sikh Memorial Fund and fought to get the UK's first memorial to Sikhs who served during the World Wars.

Captain Jagjeet (Jay) Singh-Sohal to give him his full title - has led Sikh commemoration events for more than a decade. He founded the WW1 Sikh Memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in 2015, to 'ensure that the bravery and sacrifice of Sikh soldiers was remembered at that place of national significance'.

It was the first of its kind. The Sikh soldiers were one per cent of the Indian population during World War One but made up 20 per cent of the Indian Army under the British and were represented in a third of the regiments.

Jay was born and raised in Handsworth and now lives in Sutton Coldfield. He served in Media Operations Group (Volunteers)

Chris gets a Mention

A ROYAL Air Force Media Operations Officer was recognised in the King's Birthday Honours list in June. Flight Lieutenant Martin Wade, a reservist with No 614 (County of Glamorgan) Squadron in Wales received a Deputy Chief of the Air Staff Commendation for the key role he played in the centenary of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force in 2024.

Martin pictured during an exchange visit with the United States Force

During that year, his book - the first on the history of his squadron 'On Dragons' Wings' was published. He coordinated his initiative with civic leaders to plant a memorial tree at Wales' National War Memorial and fulfilled an ambition to paint a Vampire aircraft in Squadron colours, displayed at the South Wales Aviation Museum. He also managed the No 614 Squadron Association standard laying-up ceremony at the parish church where the first Squadron member killed on active duty in 1940 is buried.



His final achievement in the centenary year was an exhibition showcasing No 614 Squadron since it was formed in 1937 at the Welsh Parliament (Senedd).

A journalist for over 25-years, Wade latterly specialised in digital media across a group of regional newspapers, often writing military-themed historical features. He now works as a Press Officer for the Welsh Government.

New Role for Rob

CLUB member Rob Philipson Stow has accepted the role of Ambassador for the charity, PTSD Resolution. Founded in 2009, PTSD Resolution provides vital mental health support to servicemen and women, veterans, reservists, and their family members who are struggling with the impact of their service in the UK armed forces.

This charity offers community-based treatment and support through a nationwide network of 200 therapists accredited by the Professional Standards Authority.

They work with individuals facing a range of challenges, including those who other services may not reach, such as those in prisons or those with substance misuse issues (provided they can engage in therapy).

Says Colonel Rob, who recently retired as Chief of Staff in the MoD Directorate of Communications. after a 35 year Army Career: “The impact of trauma can be devastating, leading to flashbacks, nightmares, anger, depression, and tragically, issues like addiction, job loss, family breakdown, and even suicide. PTSD Resolution offers a lifeline, helping to resolve these mental health barriers and facilitate successful reintegration into civilian life.

“Their work complements other service charities, addressing a crucial need. I am deeply honoured to support PTSD Resolution in their mission to help those who have served our country and their families, and I look forward to raising awareness and supporting their crucial work.



The Merlin Paradox: When Defence Narratives Turn with the Wind

By Mike Peters, journalist and former defence communications leader at BAE Systems, Westland Helicopters and EH Industries

THERE is a certain déjà vu in watching the British Merlin helicopter now being lauded in upbeat *Forces News* features and hailed by commanders as indispensable to the UK’s maritime and battlefield capabilities. Some decades ago, the same aircraft was the target of withering scepticism—from media and even senior figures in uniform. It was described variously as a procurement indulgence, a Cold War relic, or simply “too heavy to hover.”

Yet, with 20 years of operational experience behind it, the Merlin has proven not only its worth but its necessity.



There’s nothing new in this arc. The British public, political class and mainstream media have a long tradition of deriding complex projects during their gestation—only to embrace them later with patriotic pride. The most celebrated example remains Concorde: a technological marvel once a target for cost-cutting civil servants and derisive headlines, before becoming a symbol of national prestige and engineering brilliance.

The Merlin’s journey followed a similar path, though with more noise and less glamour. Conceived as the EH101, a product of Anglo-Italian collaboration, it was intended to replace the Sea King with cutting-edge capability for anti-submarine warfare and medium lift. But there were too many Doubting Thomas characters about in those early days.

What happened was a predictable cycle: early criticism driven by political scrutiny, headline-unfriendly cost figures, and—crucially—rival commercial interests. Defence communicators found themselves defending a programme dogged not only by technical complexity but by a background hum of misinformation.

In some cases, that misinformation was not accidental: whispers of unreliability, inflated costs, or misunderstood capability often had commercial origins.

Competing platforms, rival contractors, and foreign suppliers had their own messages to seed—and knew how to seed them.

This is a reality many in government and med remain reluctant to acknowledge publicly. But those who have served in the information battlespace of defence procurement know it all too well: disinformation doesn't only come from adversaries—it can come from allies, partners, and competitors with something to sell or something to protect.

In such environments, military communicators must walk a narrow bridge. The imperative to stay above commercial disputes is strong—and right. But that does not mean ignoring them. An effective communications plan must account for the fact that negative coverage may not be entirely neutral. The ability to distinguish between credible critique and commercial gamesmanship is essential, particularly when the headlines have lasting procurement consequences.

What's too often missed in this process is the role of the defence specialist press—the few publications and correspondents who do track a platform's development from first metal cut to operational deployment. These journalists, many with engineering backgrounds or military credentials, can often see through the commercial fog. Their interest lies not in sensational headlines, but in system performance, fleet integration, and mission relevance.

Yet paradoxically, they are often ignored. Both the Ministry of Defence and major contractors have, at times, fixated on shaping the mainstream narrative—placing op-eds in national broadsheets, focusing on television slots or splashy social media content. Meanwhile, the specialist media is left unengaged, even when they are best placed to communicate the complexity and the context.



Had the MoD and industry drawn more systematically on this expertise during the Merlin's difficult early years, the programme's image might have followed a smoother trajectory. Instead of swinging from derision to celebration, the story might have matured in parallel with the aircraft itself.

In an era where complex multinational platforms are again under public scrutiny, the lessons of Merlin remain pressing. Defence communicators must prepare for a long campaign of narrative endurance. They must partner with the right voices, challenge selective criticism, and recognise when opposition has more to do with market share than mission fit.

Because in the end, credibility is cumulative. So is trust. And the public story of a platform like the Merli – messy, disputed, but ultimately vindicated – deserves to be told in full, not just in retrospect.



Unsung Heroes Behind the Lens: The RAF Film Production Unit's Pivotal Role in WW2

FOR SOME time Scribblings has been asking for stories about the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force contributions to winning the Second World War publicity battle. In

this issue club member, Nigel Smales (author of his father's story – *When You're Smiler* – a tale of the WW2 Army Film & Photographic Unit) has helped put together this tale and a contact two of the families of those who served in light blue.

As VJ Day approaches, it is fitting to remember courage behind the cameras. *The Pen & Sword Club* has already covered the work of the Army Film & Photographic Unit and highlighted the photos and film from the liberation of Belsen Concentration Camp. In this edition *Scribblings* looks at the RAF Film Production Unit. Later we hope to show some of the work of the Royal Navy's news teams through the war and the Battles of the Atlantic and the Arctic Convoys.

These men, and women, risked their lives to capture the truth of war, providing invaluable intelligence, propaganda material, and historical records that remain critical to understanding the air war. Their work laid the foundations for modern military media operations.

Formed in the early years of the war, the RAF FPU quickly evolved into a specialist unit tasked with documenting aerial combat, bombing raids, reconnaissance, and their aftermath. Michael Napier, in his seminal production, recalls:

"The RAF FPU was not merely a press outfit; it was an operational squadron entrusted with some of the most dangerous and sensitive tasks of the air war. Cameramen were trained to operate in extreme conditions, flying alongside bomber crews through flak, night fighters, and hostile skies. Their cameras were weapons of truth, capturing evidence vital for command decisions and public morale."

Cameramen trained in the use of advanced aerial cameras were embedded with bomber crews, capturing rare and invaluable footage under extreme conditions. Their work required equal measures of technical skill and courage, as they flew missions with little defence beyond their crews' guns.

One of the RAF FPU's most dramatic assignments was documenting the sinking of the German battleship *Tirpitz* during Operation Catechism on 12 November 1944. Ian Gardiner's *Eyes of the RAF: The RAF FPU* (2005) describes the remarkable modifications made to the aircraft assigned to this mission:

"For the final assault on the Tirpitz, the RAF allocated a specially adapted Lancaster bomber stripped of its usual armaments and equipped with a sophisticated array of cine and still cameras. The aim was to record the attack from multiple angles, both for intelligence analysis and for the propaganda value of such a stunning victory."

Flight Lieutenant John Loftus, the senior cameraman on board, later recalled the mission: "Flying alongside the Lancaster squadron, our task was to capture every moment of the attack. The tension was palpable, but we knew our footage would be invaluable. Seeing the *Tirpitz* engulfed in flames through the lens was a powerful moment — history unfolding before our eyes."

The footage served multiple purposes: operational analysis for commanders and powerful propaganda to boost Allied morale.



The sinking of the *Tirpitz* was a major strategic and symbolic victory, and the FPU's documentation ensured it was etched into public consciousness.

Although no formal combat news team accompanied the Dambuster (Operation Chastise), RAF FPU photographers documented the aftermath of the Möhne and Eder dam bombings. Paul Brickhill's classic *The Dam Busters* (1951) notes: *Similarly, the Mosquito force's precision strikes and reconnaissance missions were regularly filmed by the FPU despite the aircraft's limited space.*

The Pathfinder Force, responsible for marking targets ahead of the main bomber streams, also worked closely with the FPU. Chris Ward's *Pathfinders: The RAF's Elite Bomber Group* (2003) explains:

The bravery and dedication of the RAF FPU did not go unrecognised. While the unit operated somewhat in the shadows compared to frontline combat squadrons, individual members received numerous post-war awards acknowledging their crucial contributions. Several cameramen were Mentioned in Despatches for their courage and distinguished service under fire, a testament to the hazards they routinely faced while filming missions.

Notably, Flight Sergeant Douglas Anderson, one of the unit's most skilled cameramen, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM) for outstanding bravery on multiple dangerous sorties. His work capturing aerial combat under fire was widely praised.

Officers such as Flight Lieutenant John Loftus, who led critical photographic missions including the *Tirpitz* operation, received commendations and were awarded the Air Force Cross (AFC) for exemplary flying skill in hazardous conditions, even though they were not directly engaged in combat.

Legacy and Remembrance

The RAF Film Production Unit was more than just a documentary crew — it was a vital element of the Allied war effort. Their footage and photographs informed strategy, supported training, and sustained morale throughout the conflict, says *Pen & Sword Club* member Nigel Smales, who works closely with the Army Film and Photographic Unit Association. Nigel's father served in AFPU and went on to a post war career in TV.

At the request of Editor , Nigel has established links with the families of some those who served in the RAF photographic unit.

Mr. Richard Dunn told him: ***“ My uncle Flight Lieutenant Morris Jones began his RAF flying career as a Photo Reconnaissance pilot in unarmed PR Spitfires from RAF Benson 1942 -1943 with 542 sqn. After completing his operational tour he became the air test pilot for the Initial Installation and Preparation unit at RAF Benson which specialised all new photo reconnaissance aircraft in preparation for operational duties at home and abroad.***

“ Mosquito strike wing and Dallachy Beaufighter wing filming attacks on German surface vessels and U-boats in the North Sea and along the Norwegian coast in the RAFFPU Mosquito, DZ592.

“The RAF Film Production Unit favoured Mosquitoes because of their speed and low level capabilities. They were later specialised by having a window cut under the chin beneath the clear perspex nose dome for the cameraman to make 180° shots of the action both with a handheld and a fixed camera. DZ592’s navigator/ cameraman was Flying Officer Alan.J.Newell.

“Morris Jones and Alan Newell were both killed in April 19/45 when their RAF FPU Mosquito was caught by the full force from an exploding U-boat (U 804) as they made their third low level pass over it filming the attacking Banff strike wing.”

Mrs Janet Ives, daughter of Flight Sergeant Raymond Greenaway No. 1 FPU) writes, together with her journalist daughter Carole Vowden,:

“My Dad, or Dodo as he was affectionately known, was a very private man. His life during his time in service lay tucked up in an old metal trunk in his garage for decades and it wasn’t until after the passing of my mum that some of his wartime activities were revealed, and then only because of an investigative and persuasive granddaughter!

He was a very different young man to the husband, father, and grandfather he became; there is no doubt that his experiences during the war had a profound effect on the man he grew into, like many of his contemporaries.

“At the age of 19, he trained as a wireless operator in the Marine Craft Section of The Royal Air Force but having grown bored of ground duties he went to Whitehall in his best blues and interviewed to become a photographer. He once said: “My experience was limited to taking holiday snaps, but I said I had a box camera and that was it.’ Within days my Dad found himself at Pinewood Studios, where he spent three months learning skills as a cine-cameraman alongside Richard Attenborough. ‘Dickie was distinguished by his briefcase; we just had notebooks,’ Dodo recalled. ‘He would swan around, but he was one of us.’

“Dad’s training flights took him along the Thames to Windsor Castle, and he was taught how to use infrared film, a development that enabled photographs to be taken through cloud, as well as the latest hand-held cameras.

“Passes signed by General Eisenhower allowed him and three comrades to travel through Allied nations with no questions asked, to join bomber crews on daylight raids over Germany. Armed with both cameras and revolvers, they were based in a sabotaged electrical sub-station near an airfield in Osnabrück – their task, to film operations targeting areas of industrial significance, including Hamburg.



“The only way to get footage was for him to lie, belly-down, on the floor of a Mitchell bomber, remove the access trap and point his lens through a gaping hole – no harness, no safety belt; nothing but his Bell & Howell 35mm camera between him and the ground. “You could see the flak exploding below from the anti-aircraft guns as the Germans tried to shoot us down,” he recalled, but it’s the noise and vibration that seems to have stayed with him longer than the fear.

“I feel immensely proud and humble to think that my Dad, at such a young age, was so brave and expected no thanks for his actions. This feeling became even more poignant as he showed me the artefacts that he’d hidden away in the metal trunk. From the pass that had been signed by Eisenhower himself, to a pamphlet explaining what to do if you became a prisoner of war, each item told a little of my Dads’ story.

“His time as a photographer with the RAF gave Dad a lifetime interest in photography and to this day, I still have hundreds of photos and slides of his life to remember him by! It is thanks to my journalist daughter we have some writings and audio recordings of his wartime life.

Reel Film Stars: the RAF's Pinewood Studio

EVERY time a WW2 documentary featuring aircraft is screened on television, we are treated to frighteningly real and understandably shaky footage of tracers, bomb runs and dogfights. Spare a thought for the untrained cameramen who held nothing other than a 35mm camera for protection. The RAF hand-picked a number of men and women to form the ‘Film Production Unit’ based at Pinewood Studios. Like wartime correspondents in the modern age after him, Flying Officer Sidney Woodcock sacrificed his life for the screening of his Newsreels. The following extracts are taken from an original detailed letter written by the Air Ministry Director of Public Relations Air Commodore Willoughby de Broke to Sidney’s widow, Violet, explaining what contribution Sidney’s life at Pinewood Studios made to the Allied victory.

Right: Ronnie Pilgrim (1913-2003) was a stills photographer prior to the Second World War; during the war he served with the RAF's Film Production Unit at Pinewood Studios. He continued to work as a cinematographer and director after the war.



“No film record existed of the epic air battles of 1940, so The Ministry of Information requested that Newsreels and propaganda films be made. The Film Production Unit within the RAF was formed, comprising of 27 Officers and 30 other ranks. By the end of the war, the total compliment had risen to over 400, nearly half of whom were film technicians on the ground.

“Once the Unit was established, the first problem was to find men – and women – to fill the posts. It was an essential condition that the Unit be staffed entirely from serving RAF members. The second major problem was equipment. No industrial potential was to be wasted on making film gear, so cameras were obtained from the second-hand market. Pinewood Studios was FPU’s base and known as RAF ‘Iver Heath.’

“The Commanding Officer was Wing Commander D.N. Twist, the “father” of the Unit who remained at Pinewood until 1942. The studios were not taken away from the film industry, but at the time they were being used for food storage and had this continued, deterioration of their facilities would have been inevitable.

"The Unit was completely self-contained, so along with film technicians – Directors, Scenario Writers, Editors, Sound Recordists, Cameramen – came the service "bodies" – cooks, clerks, drivers, police and all the normal personnel that go to make up and RAF unit. From here, all RAF filming activity in the Middle East, North Africa, Italy, Western Europe, U.S.A., Canada, South East Asia, Greece, Jugoslavia, Malta and Gibraltar, was overseen.

"Cameramen themselves would regularly fly with bomber squadrons supporting land operations. In this way major events were filmed, from the great 'Desert Victory,' through the D-Day Landings, all the way to the fall of Rome and the liberation of Copenhagen.

"One of the first productions was a two-reeler centred on Balloon Command which was issued to the public under the title of *OPERATIONAL HEIGHT*. So much was subsequently filmed, a magazine called '*THE GEN*' was published to keep people abreast who were in the Service."

"Beyond the usual British Newsreels and Films digested by servicemen and the public, perhaps the most unusual use to which the Unit's productions were put, occurred in 1944 when a special request was received from the French for some RAF films to show in the department of Savoy. The Maquis were ringed by the German army which had to be circumvented by the RAF in order to deliver their films. They were then shown in cinemas after which collections were made for a Maquis hospital."

"The total footage supplied by the FPU Library amounted to 272,500 ft. of Mute and 65,700 ft. of Sound. The total footage unedited was a colossal 5,000,000 ft. – say 1000 miles. In the early days, all material was processed by Denham studios, then taken care of 'in-house' by the Pinewood laboratory."

"The operational unit was started in 1942 by Squadron Leader E.P. Moyna who was an RAF pilot who transferred to the unit, at first with little official encouragement within the force. A total of 57 cameramen flew on a total of 683 operational sorties, but the bulk of work was done by just 15 men.

"The Unit's cameramen shared fully in the risks experienced by their squadrons. Frequently, a camera aircraft had to incur additional hazards by making several runs over targets. Subsequently, nine members of the Unit was awarded the D.F.C. and three the Croix de Guerre, seven were taken prisoner and 14 members lost their lives."

"I feel you would like to keep this record of the achievements of the Unit in whose service your husband gave his life. I deeply regret that he did not live to realise fully the value of the contribution he made to the Allied victory."



A Life Less Ordinary - Reflections on a Century of Irish Military Independence

ON THIS SIDE of the Irish Sea, we are entering the final year of a decade- long series of national commemorations, covering the period from 1916-1926, starting and ending with the anniversaries of the 1916 Easter Rising. We commemorate our war dead. To our shame, it took a hundred years to acknowledge, and commemorate, the British soldiers who also fought and died on the streets of Dublin, that Easter Week in 1916, writes Club member Dorcha Lee.

This traumatic event, inspired W. B Yeats to write: "Now, and in time to be, wherever green is worn, All changed, changed utterly, a terrible beauty is born."

In Ireland, to be a hero, you had to be young, charismatic, and preferably dead. Living heroes are not really acknowledged in our culture. Veterans of the Irish War of Independence (1919/21) were issued with service medals and modest State pensions, but no valour medals. The War of Independence ended with the Truce on 11 July 1921 between Irish and British forces, the date which is now an Army holiday in perpetuity.

Dorcha Lee, right, is a retired Irish Army Colonel, defence analyst, peacekeeper, International election observer. Former NGO, EU monitor and UN Volunteer. Linguist, writer, and singer.



Within five years of the Rising, the British Army had left, and the Irish people saw green uniformed troops replace the familiar khaki uniforms, as each barracks and post was handed over to the new State.

The Civil War that followed was by far the most difficult period, so difficult in fact, that, until relatively recent times, it was not possible for schools to teach Irish History after 1921.

Civil Wars are the most terrible and the Irish Civil War was no exception. The savagery and brutality of the Civil War shocked the country into a silence that lasted until most of the participants had reached their eternal reward. There was no truth and reconciliation process, but the threat to the Irish Free State during the 1939/45 Emergency (aka WW2) did bring together both sides of the Civil War, militarily at least, but not politically.

For most of my forty two years in the Army, there was no PR Section. There was one Captain who served as Army Press Officer, assisted by a sergeant and occasionally a Corporal. The Department of Defence had a Departmental Press Officer, but to be honest, no one really knew who he was! The Press Officer did all media interviews. Senior Army officers, similar to their counterparts in the Red Army, were discouraged from appearing in print anywhere, unless it was for An Cosantóir, the Journal of the Defence Forces, where it would be rigorously vetted.

Back in the early fifties, the Chief of Staff of the day would give a long speech, on the occasion of the GHQ Officers' Mess Christmas Dinner. This was essentially a review of the year when he complimented his staff for their work and dedication. One year, the Army Press Officer was singled out for special mention. Due to his outstanding work the Defence Forces was, reportedly, apart from Army week, not even mentioned once in the national press throughout the year.

The classic image of a senior Irish Officer then, was an authoritarian figure in Service Dress Number 1, with high collar, Sam Brown Belt, sitting, holding a pen, behind a desk, his symbol of office, surrounded by sporting and shooting trophies. His UK counterpart, on the other hand, would be comfortably dressed in combats with his troops, photo'd in an open air environment.

Seeking personal publicity was a serious offence against Irish Military Law. In the fifties, my own father, then a Commandant (Major) in Western Command HQ, in the garrison town of Athlone, was very active in sporting circles and amateur drama. He was formally paraded by the Command OC, accused of seeking personal publicity and warned, that, if it continued, he would be charged and court-martialled.

He was the cofounder of Shannon Fencing Club, and chief organiser of a very successful four nation quadrangular fencing tournament, during which, unfortunately, his lapse of judgement was, apparently, to take a phone call from a well-known Radio Eireann sports journalist, Eamonn Andrews, later BBC TV Presenter of the This is your Life programme.

The one time my mother ever gave me military advice, was when I was commissioned. She said, as long as you are in the Army, have absolutely no contact of any kind with the media. By then, however, the winds of change were already blowing.

The jewel in the crown of the Irish Defence Forces was the national Showjumping Team which for many years was an all-Army team. It was very successful from the beginning and the showjumpers served as ambassadors for the lucrative horse industry. It generated huge publicity for the Free State and for the Army.

I have fond memories of my Uncle Sean, (Jack Stack) a leading Army showjumper. Family photos show him in the thirties, when the Team won in Berlin and Rome, receiving trophies from a smiling Hitler and a stone faced Mussolini!



When Irish troops first deployed on UN peace keeping duties to the Congo in 1960, they wore World War 1 period bulls wool uniforms and grey backed shirts. They were armed with bolt actioned Lee Enfield .303 rifles.

UN Service was the catalyst for change. But Irish society was also changing and the new urgency behind the momentum to properly fund the Defence Forces is long overdue.

Some 22 years ago, in my last couple of weeks of service, my boss, the Deputy Chief of Staff (Support) asked me to come with him to the PR Section. They had produced a TV clip to promote a new recruiting drive. It was excellent, exactly what would appeal to young recruits.

The campaign theme was *A life less ordinary*. Beamed into every household in the Republic, and NI, it projected the Army like it had never been seen before, glamorous, dynamic, most definitely a life less ordinary. In that instant, I was ready to retire. My time was over, and the Torch of Learning, symbol of the Irish Military College, had been proudly passed on to a new generation. Within a few months the successful recruiting theme was adopted by the Armed Forces of a neighbouring country.