

Op. Granby 1990-91: Some observations on the role and importance of 'Force Information' in the Gulf War

By Lt Cdr Nigel Huxtable RN



'Force Information and Media Services in Operation Granby 1990-91' by SJ Anglim, published in the RUSI Journal in October 1995, told the story of The Sandy Times as the major element of Force Information, a new concept deployed in 1990. It emphasised the importance of establishing and maintaining good morale throughout the troops in theatre regardless of badge or service. This year it is 30 years since the coalition victory over Saddam Hussein's forces after the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait, and Kuwait's eventual liberation on 28 February 1991.

For those wishing to read more about this aspect of an often overlooked British involvement in a successful conflict, the author's first-hand experiences could be a useful introduction to understanding the benefits of bringing together novel approaches to the ever-present problems of maintaining high morale and countering misinformation in the ranks. The success of this particular approach to 'internal communications' in the form of Force Information worked largely due to the personalities of those involved and the small size of their team. The personal touch was read and appreciated by the audience and it is felt appropriate to include this first-hand account of their work.

As a Royal Navy Instructor officer with experience as a joint Service Mountain Expedition Leader, and running the Training Video Production facilities in Portsmouth at the Royal

Naval School of Engineering & Technology (RNSETT), the chance to merge the two roles with a dash of self-sufficiency do not come around too often.

But then after returning from Scotland in the New Year of 1990/91 I was asked if I would like to join Force Information (FINFO) in the Gulf. FINFO was a new concept created at the behest of General Peter de la Billiere to provide all British troops in theatre with updates on what was happening and entrusted to set up and provide force communications mediums. Radio was provided by British Forces Broadcasting Service (BFBS) / Services Sound & Vision Corporation (SSVC); Video was shot and edited in theatre by another Instructor officer, Lt Cdr Campbell Christie, and made good use of American 'combat camera' footage.

To keep the troops on the ground and aboard ship up to date, a newspaper was created Initially an A4 sized production, the Sandy Times eventually evolved as a news magazine printed in Riyadh and distributed to all service units, both in theatre and to their home areas. One Army and one RAF officer edited material from the British broadsheets and collated articles about who was doing what and roughly where. Its aim was to keep morale buoyant during the long months of preparation, training and international politicking with Iraq and the UN, whilst quashing rumours and answering letters from the servicemen and women in theatre. Something done without advice or interference from 'on high'. Lt Col Glyn Jones providing the hand on the tiller or 'top cover', as it was called by Squadron Leader Pat McKinley RAF, who provided the replies to the letters and edited inputs from the broadsheet news articles sent from the UK, as well as laying out each production for the printers in Riyadh.

Photographs were a rarity, so having brought an R5 Leica camera kit with me, I offered my support to the Sandy Times team (i.e. Sqn Ldr MacKinley). Thereafter I enjoyed the freedom not only to move about the deployed British Army and RAF bases and Naval ships alongside in the Gulf port of Al Jubail but also have my film processed in Riyadh. This allowed us to have up to the minute illustrated stories published weekly in support of morale amongst the various units as well as ensuring facts were available and rumours quashed. A series of centre-spreads reflecting the life and times of the ordinary serviceman in theatre as well as sharing material safe for sharing with families and non-deployed unity in the UK and Germany. Having built up a reputation with the troops for honesty and lack of obvious 'message' I was made very welcome wherever I pitched up.

Because of the editor's honest and sometimes pithy responses in answering reader's letters, questions were inevitably raised about the lack of oversight. That and the religious/political ramifications of getting it printed in Riyadh meant that questions were eventually raised in the House of Commons. Support received from MPs ensured the costs of this new approach to internal comms 'in theatre' were met and its benefits proven.

Invitations to visit the various units on the ground ensured a welcome wherever I as a photographer pitched up. Food, a place to sleep and transport whether helicopter or jeep and the daily transport planes to and from Riyadh ensured a wide coverage of the troops on the ground. Even accompanying them in the move West to the final assembly and attack positions (Ad Dibdibah Drive).



As the days passed the editor and I decided that when the coalition troops were to invade Iraq/Kuwait then it was only honest for us to be there to record the event as eye witnesses. This was agreed and arranged. Mostly due to the reputation of the Sandy Times as a trusted in theatre publication. Mid-February saw Sqn Ldr Pat McKinley embarked with Patrick Cordingley's 7 Brigade 'Desert Rats' and me with Major General Rupert Smith's 1Div HQ team. Having settled in to our new locations, been issued with our morphine ampoules and attended the briefings, international negotiations called a halt to the countdown.

Returning to Riyadh we remained on call to return to the front, but having been briefed we were unable to contribute anything new to the latest edition, or even share what we knew in HQ. Let alone the photographs of briefings being delivered to senior officer at the front. The film processing took place at a 'one hour lab' where film could be watched as it was processed and pictures printed with no chance of any getting 'lost' Standing watching everything being processed and printed was always a small period of calm amidst extremely busy times for the small Sandy Times team. Only after the war did I learn quite what had gone on in the background, security-wise, to allow me to do this.

Once the word came down that 'the clock was ticking again' we hastened back northwards. Luckily I had been able to talk my way to accompanying a Royal Signals team setting up 'ptarmigan' radio nodes in advance of the ground troops and so was in one of the first vehicles into Iraq at the head of the British army.

There then followed 100 hours of modern fluid tank warfare with access to the Headquarters in the field and even on to the front line itself. Typical of the support I received was to be told that there was an RN Sea King due in, as it dropped off anti-tank teams, and did I need a lift? So I left the forward POW collection team I was with at the time and ended up next day returning to the very front line in a Puma doing casevac work. The Navy pilot needed little persuasion to exceed his safe fly zone to go right forward to 7 Brigade HQ area to collect blue on blue casualties. Coalition forces had advanced so fast that safe fly zones were not keeping up with the front line. Foolhardy perhaps, but speed was of the essence in supporting the wounded.

Having eventually run out of film, I returned to Riyadh only to hear at the airport that a ceasefire had been called and to be asked if I was going to cover the ceasefire negotiations at Safwan. Sadly not, as I had all my film to see safely printed up as well as restock for whatever came next. Back in the office, Charlie Lowndes, the principal BFBS journalist, recorded my impressions of what I had witnessed. As the ceasefire came into effect at 0800, my words were being transmitted unchecked and uncensored by anyone other than our own FINFO team. A small price for him typing them up for sharing in the next Sandy Times alongside the experiences of Sqn Ldr McKinley.

Even more challenging was my getting all the images from the ground war processed and back in HQ before midday. Not everyone in Saudi was in favour of the coalition and my photographs would have provided perfect access to military intelligence material. Eventually Pat McKinley returned from Kuwait City, where he had ended up with the Desert Rats. Together we put together a Sandy Times edition and I had the privilege of flying copies of it back into Kuwait city only days after the fighting stopped. Only when I returned to Kuwait with UNIKOM did I fully see what had been done to the city and could watch and once again record the return of the desert battlefields to their previous state.

On my flight out to Riyadh in January 1991, I shared the flight with a retired editor of The Scotsman newspaper. He pointed out the unique position in which I had been placed and the importance of being a being a witness to events with no allegiance to the established Press corps or Military Public Information system. Images from this war were a highlight of this time both in the press and The Sandy Times. Forming the basis of several exhibitions both in the MOD, Kuwait, various museums as well as being used in the Central Office of Information's history of the war, 'The Shield and the Sabre'.



About the author

Lt Cdr Nigel Huxtable joined Dartmouth as part of IO 38. Passing out top instructor officer in December 1979. He served a MCC to 17 years and is currently working with the Royal Naval Association as Assistant General Secretary as well as for the Combined Cadet Force delivering their Leadership training courses – and still contributing his Expedition skills in the Scottish mountains.