



## The Armed Forces in Afghanistan and the Media

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**Upon leaving his position as communications advisor to the ECS, Rear-Admiral Christophe PRAZUCK took stock of the evolution and necessity of the communications function in operations, particularly in Afghanistan. This testimony shows how important it is to allow journalists to work within the constraints of operations.**

In 2009, 167 journalists were welcomed on the ground by the French military in Afghanistan, not counting the permanent correspondents (some ten in Kabul) and the media teams accompanying the political authorities in theatre.

The 167 journalists in Afghanistan represent nearly half of all the journalists who covered all the operations in which French soldiers are engaged - some 30 OPEX in all. 167 journalists in 2009 is 20% more than in 2008, twice as many as in 2007. That's more than 600 cumulative days of reporting, some of which were spread over more than 50 days. This is the equivalent of one journalist for every 20 French soldiers deployed in Afghanistan.

By way of comparison, that same year the British armed forces welcomed 240 journalists<sup>[1]</sup> from the 13,000 soldiers they were deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq. That's about one journalist for every 55 soldiers deployed.

This media interest in the Afghan theatre is the result of a situation where societal change, information technology and the media are at crossroads. This media interest in the Afghan theatre is the result of a combination of societal changes, changes in information technology and media, changes in the conditions of engagement in the Afghan theatre, which have become more stringent since 2008, and the adaptation of the armed forces to meet the demands of the media.

Since the Gulf War, Operation Restore Hope in Somalia and the Balkans, the media landscape has undergone a real technological and cultural change.

Today, no less than three French television channels broadcast news 24 hours a day; free daily newspapers have proliferated in major cities; specialised defence and military magazines are now competing with websites and blogs dedicated to defence issues.

The media has changed, the military has adapted. With the constant concern to explain the nature of their commitment to our fellow citizens, the armed forces have organised themselves to best meet the growing demand from an ever-increasing number of media, for a public that is ever more varied due to media specialisation.

### **The increasing harshness of operations**

In 2001, the media wanted to follow the rout of the Taliban and the hunt for Osama Bin Laden until the situation stabilized. Then the war in Iraq mobilized troops and international media on another front. Afghanistan was slowly becoming the "forgotten war" across the Atlantic.

But from 2006 onwards, the insurgency regained momentum. At the same time, ISAF[2] extended its area of responsibility to the whole country and units of the Afghan National Army deployed. ISAF deploys mentor teams, the OMLTs[3], who accompany them in all their missions from training to combat.

With them, the media are rediscovering the face of conventional French forces in combat. Several major media outlets have been following this commitment alongside the ANA[4] since 2007, which has since cost the lives of 9 French soldiers.

On 18 August 2008, 10 French soldiers fell in Uzbeen, a valley north-east of Kabul. The media resonate with the questions of French public opinion, which seems to be caught off guard by the violence of the military engagement in Afghanistan. Undeniably, there will be a before and after Uzbeen in the media coverage of French military operations.

In 2007, 78 journalists covered the French military action in Afghanistan; the following year there were almost twice as many. A dozen media outlets send permanent correspondents to Kabul.

For their part, the armed forces use their own communication media to inform ministry staff as well as the general public: more than 350 news briefs, 200 video reports and a web documentary have been posted on the Armed Forces Staff website since January 2007. Numerous dossiers and articles have been devoted to Afghanistan in *Armées d'aujourd'hui*, *Terre* information magazine and *Air actualités*. ECPAD's image teams, which produce reports within the deployed units, have shot some 250 hours of video footage since 2008, from which are extracted the reports that are put online on the Defence website and the tapes of elements made available to the media to supplement their own subjects. More than 6 hours of footage have thus been taken by the media over the last two years.

Explaining to the French people the meaning of their soldiers' commitment in Afghanistan, the meaning of their sacrifice when they fall in combat, and giving the media the opportunity to report on this commitment by being at the side of the soldiers deployed on operations are a well understood necessity, from headquarters to the units. It has led to a growing effort to meet the expectations of the media as best as possible, while trying to reconcile their activity with operational constraints.

## **A necessary balance between information and security**

Hosting the media in a theatre such as Afghanistan imposes constraints. Constraints for journalists, constraints for the units that open their doors to them.

How can the demands of the media be met without weighing on operational activities? While the media coverage of military action is a democratic imperative, preserving the operational capabilities of units remains a priority. Hosting one or more journalists generates logistical constraints. Is there a place in the VAB or in the helicopter to take them on operations? Is there a cot on the base to accommodate them? Combat rations to feed him?

So it's a question of planning the arrival of the media and spreading their arrival over time and over the different units and missions of the force to reduce their material and operational impact. This effort necessarily limits the reception of the media.

Moreover, if the safety of the journalist is not an objective of the mission, it is nonetheless a concern for the soldiers he accompanies. Will he be able to follow them on patrol for several hours in mountainous terrain at 45°C? Will he be able to position himself when the gunshots go off? That is why ISAF is issuing several recommendations to media teams regarding the physical condition required to follow the operations, the equipment and individual clothing of journalists (bullet-proof vests, helmets, discreetly coloured clothing, etc.). In France, journalists wishing to follow military personnel on operations are invited to attend a training course on risks in conflict zones at the CNEC [5] in the Pyrenees. More than 300 journalists have attended this course since its creation in 1993.

Finally, the last constraint on the media coverage of operations is the safety of operations and men. Showing the reality of commitments, the daily life of soldiers in the theatre, the assessment of threats and the preparation of operations, while preserving the confidentiality of information that guarantees the safety of soldiers, is a major challenge for the reception of journalists.

The response is based on a mutual commitment between armies and journalists. Free to testify and report on France's commitment in Afghanistan, journalists are asked in return to respect the confidentiality of certain information.

Firstly, they are asked not to reveal the death of a soldier before the families have been notified by the armed forces, a rule that is fully understood and respected by the media. Secondly, ISAF is asking all media coming to Afghanistan to pledge not to reveal information about certain force capabilities, intelligence activities, future operations, or even past operations. Second, ISAF is asking all media coming to Afghanistan to undertake not to reveal information about certain capabilities of the force, intelligence activities, future operations or even past operations that could have an impact on current and future operations, force protection measures, the identity of soldiers and of course Afghans, who could then become the target of insurgents who do not hesitate to execute those working alongside us.

The balance struck between opening up to the media and preserving operational effectiveness has made Afghanistan the theatre of operations most covered by the French media. Paradoxically, this does not make it the most publicized subject.

In 2009, defence issues were the ninth most publicized topic of the year, but Afghanistan accounted for only one-tenth of this theme. In fact, military operations, announcements of reinforcements, the strategic review by General McChrystal, commander of ISAF, and the

Afghan presidential elections in August 2009 were the most talked-about topics. In 2009, the media will have generated only one-seventh of the coverage in the French media devoted to influenza A, and three-quarters of the coverage devoted to the crash of flight AF 447.[6]

In the United States, with 5% of the media coverage, Afghanistan is the fourth most publicised subject, behind the economic crisis, health reform and the Obama presidency. Topics on Afghanistan increased fivefold in 2009.[7]

The explanation for this discrepancy between journalistic coverage and media coverage lies solely with the editorial offices, which choose the hierarchy of the information they present. This has not prevented the 420 journalists who have succeeded one another in the Afghan theatre since 2007 from reporting, informing, analysing or criticising France's military engagement in Afghanistan.

De l'enfer Afghan (France 24, November 2007) to Le 2ème REP pacifie la vallée de Tagab (Le Figaro, 25 April 2010) via Mourir au nom de la paix (Un œil pour la planète, France 2, February 2008), The battle of Tagab (France Inter, April 2008), A war in the name of peace (Special Envoy, France 2, March 2008), Papa part à la guerre (Zone Interdite, M6, May 2009), Afghanistan: la chevauchée des Tigres (Paris Match, 24 September 2009), "High Voltage, Alpine Hunters in Afghanistan" (book published by Gallimard, in October 2009), Afghanistan, night raid (Paris Match, November 2009), Au cœur de la Légion étrangère (Hors Série, France 3, April 2010), etc..., these reports, documentaries or books, noticed among others, some of which have been awarded prizes by information professionals, have enabled their audiences to better understand the meaning of France's military commitment and France's action in Afghanistan. Welcoming journalists into units is sometimes felt to be a burden; it is essential to report on what is being done far away from France and in its name, and to ensure that our fellow citizens remain close to the action of our armed forces.

[1] British Ministry of Defence, Annual report and accounts 2008-2009.

[2] International Security Assistance Force.

[3] Operational Liaison and Mentoring Team

[4] Afghan National Army

[5] National Commando Training Center

[6] Government Information Service (GIS) data.

[7] Data from the Pew Research Center's "Excellence in Journalism" journalism research and analysis project.

After serving in the Indian Ocean and then in the submarine forces between 1982 and 1989, Rear-Admiral Christophe Prazuck obtained a Ph.D. in physical oceanography in 1991 from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and applied his knowledge to the Navy's environmental cell in Toulouse, which he headed from 1991 to 1994. After graduating from the Collège Interarmées de Défense in 1997, he took command of the frigate Floréal based in La Réunion in 1999. In 2001, he took command of the SIRPA Marine and then, in 2004, he became head of the DCoD's Media Department. From September 2006, he is the communication advisor to the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces and spokesman for the EMA.

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