

MIND TREE



Not everyone — or every outlet — covers the armed services regularly. But aspects of the military pop up in many regular coverage areas. How can a reporter not versed in military terms, bureaucracy and sources best get the info?

MILITARY

BY KAY NOLAN

When a standoff by armed activists at eastern Oregon's Malheur Wildlife Refuge made international headlines in January, an aspect of the story referenced the U.S. military.

Some occupiers wore military uniforms, and one prominent figure in the group — who told reporters he was a former Marine who'd served in Iraq and Afghanistan — spoke to the press using what sounded like military language.

The self-claimed military status of some of the activists was hardly the main point of the story, a drama that unfolded over 41 days as supporters of the Cliven Bundy family and their circle of anti-government activists clashed with local and federal law enforcement over ranchers' rights versus government land management.

But it became a big deal to military service members and veterans when it turned out the self-proclaimed war veteran was actually a tattoo artist who'd fabricated the whole military service line. An activist who wore a Marine combat uniform had never served, either.

Military service can add emotion and relevance to a story — heartwarming when a soldier returns

home to ecstatic family; relevant when veterans programs affect a community; eyebrow-raising when touted by a political candidate; cloying when used in court or by criminal suspects as a prop for sympathy; or as "proof" of weapons knowledge.

Relatively few news outlets today have the luxury of a full-time military reporter. Most have no need for one given their coverage priorities. But military components can overlap ordinary daily news coverage at anytime, anywhere — on the street, in the courtroom, at a political rally or at a crime scene.

And all journalists should want to get details right.

Their reputation and that of their outlet is at stake. Errors or lack of follow-through, even in a minor story, can hurt the ability to gain cooperation with military spokesmen when the next story happens.

"It doesn't look very good to make mistakes," said Jenn Rowell, military reporter at the Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune, which covers nearby Malmstrom Air Force Base. "The military knows, and they pick up pretty quickly on whether or not you have any idea what you're talking about. If you consistently make mistakes when you cover them, they won't deal with you if they don't have to."

Even a seasoned reporter like Rowell — who formerly worked in communications for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and as an editor at KMI Media Group, whose publications target military audiences — acknowledges the beat can be intimidating and unforgiving.

"I once messed up," Rowell said. "I confused 'drill sergeant' with 'drill instructor.' I got email for weeks about it. I did not enjoy getting yelled at by a bunch of Marines for weeks. One paper I worked at, I wrote a story about airmen, and the headline ended up saying soldiers. Those kinds of things can hurt credibility."

FAMILIARITY

Lack of familiarity with military terms and procedures, as well as a lack of ready sources, can drive many journalists, especially those on deadline, to skip verification or leave out military details.

For example, when a crash involving a semi-trailer and a military vehicle tied up freeway traffic for hours in southern Wisconsin, it was definitely local news. Soon, a dramatic photo of the massive green vehicle hanging cab-first over the smashed railing of a freeway overpass — requiring

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a harrowing rescue of its driver and passenger — "went viral" on the Internet, according to Gina Duwe, a former Janesville Gazette reporter who posted the story.

"People were curious about it," Duwe said. "If we could have had somebody right away to tell us who the (military) group was, where it was traveling to and from and what they were transporting, we would have reported it."

Police and fire department officials relayed that a male driver and female passenger had non-life-threatening injuries. Public works officials discussed the bridge damage. The vehicle was ultimately described as a "military wrecker." But audiences in Wisconsin, a state with limited military presence, never learned more.

After all, the press needed to move on. But how can the average journalist verify military information in short order?

Paul Rickert, director of public affairs for the Wisconsin National Guard, said it helps to know the specific military branch and unit in question. Rickert fields questions about the state's Army and Air National Guard and helps reporters connect with public affairs officers at individual units.

But if a reporter has questions involving the Army or Army Reserve, Rickert acknowledged he couldn't help much.

"I'd call Army Public Affairs," he advised.

That's where it can get confusing.

Google "Army public affairs," and a website comes up, but one that's not very helpful. Click on "contact information for media queries," and phone numbers come up for "Operations, Intelligence and Logistics," "Weapons, Environment and Technology" and "Personnel and Human Resources Team." It's unclear which number to call to confirm whether an individual is a soldier or veteran or to identify an Army truck tying up traffic.

A phone call for this story to the Department of Defense public affairs office, to ask for general guidelines and sources for journalists regarding the military, added to the confusion.

The public affairs officer asked that questions be submitted via email, which she promised to share with the public affairs team. When she called back, she was polite but sounded frustrated.

"You need to find information online," the PAO said. "It's incumbent upon the reporter. You're welcome to ask (questions), but it's not something we would teach them. Part of being a journalist is doing your homework."

"I'm in the Pentagon," she said, adding that the journalists who work on the

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TIPS FOR VERIFYING MILITARY INFORMATION IF IT'S NOT YOUR REGULAR BEAT

BY KAY NOLAN

- Contact public affairs officers at an individual's unit to verify his or her service record. If you don't know the unit, you can contact the main public affairs office for each military branch. PAOs have access to records for current service members, including reservists and National Guard members, as well as veterans who served within the past 10 to 20 years, depending on the branch.

- To verify service records dating from World War I to the 1990s or so, consult the National Archives and Records Administration office in St. Louis. Requests must be made in writing using Standard Form 180. Because the billions of records stored there are not computerized, a response normally takes two or three weeks. Members of the press and Congress, however, can file a more urgent request by sending the form via email to congressional.status@nara.gov or by fax to 314-801-0763. Key words to use are "time sensitive" and "expedited media request." For questions, a special phone number for media is 314-801-0816. Randi Dolphin, National Archives and Records Administration customer service representative, said that service records from the 1950s to 1970s typically are filed by "service number" instead of an individual's Social Security number. Also, she notes that the U.S. Air Force did not exist until 1949, although the Army had an Air Corps during World War II.

- Active-duty service members are required to carry an Armed Forces common access card, or CAC, photo ID. "They should not object if you ask to see it, as a quick way to verify that they are really in the military and to verify rank," says Joseph Coslett, public affairs officer at the Defense Information School. "There's an expiration date on there as well." Military retirees are also issued IDs. "If they say they're retired military, they'll have a retirement card," Coslett said.

- Army vehicles have a code stamped on the front and back bumper that identifies the unit to which it belongs, according to Capt. Eric Connor, deputy chief of media relations for U.S. Army Reserve Command at Fort Bragg, N.C. "If you see that, all you have to do is Google it," Connor said.

- To identify a Navy vessel or aircraft, you can call Navy public affairs and send a photo.

- Silver and Bronze Stars, Purple Hearts and other medals can be verified by contacting the branch or unit a recipient served in.

- The website cmohs.org lists all Medal of Honor recipients by state.

OTHER TIPS FOR COVERING MILITARY COMPONENTS IN A STORY

- Always verify a service member's rank. "We once took a reporter on an air refueling flight, and when we finally saw the story, she identified the pilot as a 'lieutenant sergeant.' That's not even a rank," said Nathan Wallin, an Air National Guard public affairs officer.

- Use AP style, not military style, for rank, advises Jenn Rowell, a longtime military reporter. "Don't just copy what the military sends us, which is all caps (e.g., SGT)."

- Avoid the common mistake of describing all former service members as retired. "The term 'retired' technically means the individual is getting a pension, either by having served 20 years or longer, or by being medically retired," said Drew Brooks, military editor at the Fayetteville Observer. "Few people actually retire from the military." For most others, you can say "veteran" or "served from X date to X date."

- It's OK to approach a service member for comment involving non-military or non-political topics; for example, a "person-on-the-street" interview about a snowstorm or back-to-school shopping. You don't have to run the quotes past a PAO. Be aware that members of special forces, such as Navy SEALs or Army Rangers, may decline even benign interviews or photos, since anonymity might be crucial to their safety and that of their families.

- Be aware that members of the military are not supposed to wear their uniforms at political rallies, protests or other non-military events. Veterans are not supposed to wear their uniforms, except for very few exceptions, such as funerals, weddings and ceremonies/parades on Veterans Day, Memorial Day or Fourth of July. Do not ask service members, reservists or veterans to dress in uniform for photo shoots or just for effect. "It's not a costume and shouldn't be treated as one," Brooks said.

- For journalists who expect to cover military issues often, Rowell recommends the book "Pen & Sword: A Journalist's Guide to Covering the Military" by Ed Offley (2001, Marion Street Press).

premises are knowledgeable in military matters.

Asked where journalists who don't cover the military can turn when they have questions, she suggested contacting the individual branches.

THE BRANCHES

Joseph Coslett, an instructor at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, Md., which offers formal training in public affairs for all branches of the Armed Forces, urges reporters to call the De-

partment of Defense press desk or central public affairs offices of any branch, usually starting with the human resources/personnel team.

other — literally, they're sitting in a huge area where they all see each other. Let them divert you to the right person."

Coslett, a retired Air Force major, said he knows the military has a lot of acronyms and jargon.

"Don't be afraid to ask the basics," he said. "We teach (PAOs) here to truly empower the journalist because they are doing the same mission we are trying to fight for, which is getting out the information timely and accurately. Journalists think we're a gated community, so we try

to break down those walls."

Calls to public affairs offices for the U.S. Navy, Air Force and Marines produced friendlier results. Like the Army, the Air Force and Marine Corps prefer that the press seek out PAOs at individual units first.

But those interviewed welcomed gen-

eral press inquiries. "If people don't know where to go, they look us up and give us a call and we're able to point them in the right direction," said Capt. Sarah Burns, Marines spokeswoman.

In the Navy, many media queries appear to start at the top level. "If we can't answer it here, we'll refer them to the right place; we're like the hub," said Navy spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Hawkins. "We have commands all around the world. You may get referred back to us if it's not the right place to handle that question."

Asked if a small-town journalist should feel intimidated to call Navy public affairs at the Pentagon, Hawkins said, "No. We get a lot of media inquiries, and they usually come here, from small-town newspapers to major outlets, all of it." Still, a call to Army Public Affairs Human Resources proved touch-and-go. Once again, the PAO who answered insisted questions be sent via email. She wrote back that a PAO named Wayne Hall would be in touch. She copied Hall but didn't provide his number.

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Three days passed with no response. When I emailed again, Hall finally called. At first, he said he hadn't seen the original email; then he admitted he'd seen it, but hesitated to respond out of concern that he was not "best-suited" to answer questions about helping news media.

After a few minutes, however, Hall warmed up and offered some guidelines.

"If you're talking issues of policy, say, changes in uniform regulations or say, the Army implementing a breastfeeding policy or extending maternity leave, at this level, this number, we talk to the media," Hall said. "If you're looking for the total number of soldiers who deserted during 2013, those are the things we answer."

Hall said his team has helped local media verify an individual's service record. Mostly, though, Hall recommended working through PAOs at individual Army units or bases.

In parts of the country with little military presence, however, those sources might be unfamiliar and hard to track down quickly.

In Elkhart, Ind., 60-year-old Norman Reynolds was arrested last fall for shooting at alleged shoplifters as they drove from a store parking lot. Reynolds

Mark Maley, editor of the Elkhart Truth — a daily with just six reporters to cover a city of 50,000 and the surrounding area — said the paper took the man at his word, even after readers questioned the man's story and photo.

"We elected not to pursue it," Maley said, noting that "even if the uniform had come from Goodwill," the military element wasn't essential to the news at hand in his view. "But had this been a veteran issue or a military issue, we would have pursued it regardless of staffing level."

Drew Brooks, military editor at the Fayetteville Observer in North Carolina — home to Fort Bragg, one of the largest Army installations in the world — said he finds most military PAOs quite helpful.

"I've been covering the military since 2011," said Brooks, who has embedded with troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait. "The attitude toward the press is varied among individuals, just as it is among civilians. Some (members of the military) don't look too kindly on the media, but I've found the same thing in fire departments or police stations or at political events."

Brooks urges journalists to speak up and ask questions. He said those who do improve accuracy and perform a public service.

"There's a pretty wide military/civilian divide; the days when most people had a family member who'd been drafted or served are long gone," Brooks said. "Most civilians don't know much about the military. By writing about it, you're helping to explain and help close that gap."

HALL OF SHAME

Journalists certainly don't want their stories to end up enshrined on a "stolen valor" or "hall of shame" website for failing to catch an imposter who falsely claims military honors.

Brooks said more and more groups seek to highlight such mistakes.

Even the military-savvy Fayetteville Observer got stung after it ran an Associated Press story about a businessman who insisted he'd been part of the Special Forces team portrayed in the movie

"Black Hawk Down."

"The claim was, 'I didn't get along with the producers, so they killed off my character,'" Brooks said. "That story ran in our paper unbeknownst to me. I came to work the next day and there's a deluge of emails and phone calls saying this guy's full of crap."

"Ask, ask, ask," Brooks advises. "Most mistakes I see could have been easily avoided." ❖

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NARRATIVE WRITING TOOLBOX

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

Broadway, right in front of the Pig 'N Pancake, a place known to all who come to the beach.

It was about 10 a.m.

That's when members of the Portland Police Highland Guard, a bagpipe unit, stood in the middle of an intersection on Broadway and began practicing the mournful dirge they would play in a few hours when they walked up the center aisle in the convention center after the audience of 1,600 settled into their seats.

BE ALERT

The story has to be about something, not just a countdown. Each section revealed something about the town, law enforcement and onlookers. Here's my final section, the one right before the ceremony itself. Look at how I come back to the theme and use writer's voice.

And what triggered that voice? Look at the section and put yourself there. What did I see? What allowed that writer's voice to emerge in a way that was real, true and powerful?

It was about 11 a.m.

That's when members of the Portland Police Bureau's Mounted Patrol Horse Patrol Unit took their positions, knowing the procession, made up of hundreds of police cars and fire trucks, had left from Camp Rilea, near Warrenton.

And then it was here. They were ready.

But then came an SUV carrying Goodding's wife and their children.

Those watching could see the widow openly crying, wiping her eyes as she sobbed.

Ready?

Never, not for this.

Men saluted. Women placed their hands over their hearts. Hats were removed. Tears flowed.

Now go find your story. ❖

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—DREW BROOKS, *military editor, Fayetteville Observer*

showed up for his court hearing and television interviews wearing a complete, albeit outdated, half-Army, half-Air Force uniform. He called himself a "24-year military veteran" and touted his weapons training and marksmanship.