



# SETTING THE STORY STRAIGHT

*Jeanne McKinney lifts the lid on Military Public Affairs and reveals how it has grown to become a critical force multiplier*

**W**hen you want to find out what is going on with our forces from peacetime to global crises and war, Military Public Affairs (PA) is a communications hub, driving information in multiple directions by the moment, hour and day. In this age of instant news via cellphones and social media, PA's role is critical to legitimise information. Its 24/7 gears crank out trust and reliability – shaping communications in the vast operational defence domain for the public to know and understand.

Getting the story right is a role Marine Corps Col David Lapan (Ret.) took seriously.

Lapan served for over 30 years, 20 of them in public affairs, fulfilling spokesperson and advisor roles. His assignments included working with several Defense Secretaries and serving under Gen. Martin Dempsey, the 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In addition to the Pentagon assignments, Lapan did tours of duty in Haiti 2004 (after the removal of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide), Iraq 2005-2006 (helping to establish a provisional government) and Afghanistan

**Lt.Col. David Lapan with ABC News reporter Martha Raddatz in Fallujah in 2005**

2014 (a senior advisor to Gen Joseph Dunford (Ret.) Commander, ISAF, and US Forces Afghanistan. Lapan served under three White House administrations – led by Clinton, Bush and Obama, with Democrat and Republican presidents.

From 2000 to 2003, there were egregious terrorist attacks on the United States, including the USS Cole bombing and 9/11. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also started. During that time, Lapan was serving in the Dept. of Defense, at the Pentagon Press Office. There was a lot of chaos; war was ramping up into full swing. A myriad of tasks fell into Lapan's lap to collect, collate and organise vital information and hold briefings for the press.

He covered US Central Command (CENTCOM) issues involving security and counter-terror operations in the Middle East, Central Asia and parts of South Asia. Lapan's work involved doing daily gaggles (on the record but off camera) and, briefings to the Pentagon Press Corps – a mix with the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs together, operational commanders, and senior officers from the Joint Staff. These Defense Dept. briefings added credibility and assurance to ongoing operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq, at a time of US recovery following 9/11 and President George W. Bush's subsequent launch of the war on terror.

As a military journalist, listening to military briefings and conducting interviews with commanders on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan was invaluable. I specifically remember this one... In a 2017 Dept. of Defense teleconference briefing from Kabul, Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and US Forces-Afghanistan, spoke about President Trump's South Asia Strategy in his first term. US forces had recently prosecuted strikes against the Taliban's economic engine in Helmand Province, an engine fuelled by narcotics. Nicholson goes on to describe the goals of the strategy and the: "three forms of pressure on the enemy." His words were confident that the strategy was working to deter and disable enemy plans. Ultimately, he says: "War is a contest of wills".

Earlier in 2010, the contest of those wills peaked at its highest level with President Obama's surge of 100,000 troops in-country fighting in some of the bloodiest conflicts in the war. In 2014, Obama ended the US combat role transitioning to a train and assist role to build up the Afghan Forces. USMC Gen James Mattis was the commander of CENTCOM from 2010-2013, known as a legend, 'A Marine's Marine'. In 2018 when Trump, during his first administration, showed interest in privatising the war with security contractors, Mattis, then serving as Secretary of Defense pushed back on the idea: "When Americans put their nation's credibility on the line, privatising it is probably not a wise idea," he told reporters during a rare appearance in the Pentagon Briefing Room. Mattis, instead, wanted to build on progress hard won over the years.

We heard from the experienced commanders firsthand. They had spent hard, difficult years focused on war fighting, not politics nearly 7,000 miles away. You knew they knew and had the leadership experience to prove it. Plans and goals, pressure campaigns, outcomes and, yes, casualties were provided. We did not have to guess.

Guessing, confusion, is the new norm during Trump's second administration, ie: strikes on small boats in the Caribbean and Pacific killing alleged drug traffickers. The only information offered is nondescript aerial strike photos blowing up boats and people with no evidence produced. No names of suspects. Ties to criminal activity drowned in the seas.

"These are military operations," reminds Lapan, "Operational commanders cannot talk about what their soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coastguardsmen and other guardians are doing. Now, it's all coming from political appointees".

Military Public Affairs was a different strategic asset back then, a force multiplier as an information arm for those who not only had to focus on the training and fighting, but also building relationships with key Allies and partners. It takes people in uniform with direct associations to their own operations and troops to deflect propaganda, counter misinformation and deter false interpretations.

**"WE FELT THAT IT WAS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO GET THE FACTS OUT THERE QUICKLY"**

On 25 December, 2025, we heard the news about kinetic strikes on Nigeria via Trump using his own social media, not an unbiased platform. "It is not yet clear the outcome of that strike or what the exact target was," reported ABC. Then on X, Pete Hegseth said: "there will be more to come". What is more? Trump says the missile strikes were about protecting Christians and Nigeria's Minister of Foreign Affairs Yusuf Tuggar is saying: "it is a regional conflict, not a Nigeria Christian-Muslim conflict".

As a result of removing the mics from operational commanders at the Pentagon – critical military information becomes subject to political bias and a lack of alignment in the messaging. Vague threats serve no one. The American people then started to get attitude from Sec. Hegseth, who pronounced: "we will tell you what you need to know and that is it. Trust us". Nine days later, we read on Trump's social media about an invasive fully loaded military strike operation to capture Venezuela's leader Nicolás Maduro and his wife, tapping out the lights to do it.

Locations of multiple strikes and related casualties were kept secret. Speculation arose about a mysterious weapon allegedly used on Venezuelan security forces. All that was offered were tart, self-justifying social media posts leading to confusion, speculation and insecurity for Venezuela. Alarm circled the globe. Details remained elusive and the story kept changing. This is way out of the lane of Pentagon PA protocol and the era of free press inside combat zones.

At the end of 2002 and into 2003, Lapan and others at the Pentagon were prepping for the likelihood of going into Iraq, not yet decided. He participated in creating the Media Embed Program with President Bush. Although then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld came under criticism for his leadership role during the War on Terror, Lapan credits him with understanding the value of reporters

on the battlefields to be able to tell the story of what was happening.

“We knew Saddam’s regime would use disinformation and propaganda and make all kinds of wild claims. The Secretary and others said the best way to manage that is having the free press, independent reporters. We embedded hundreds of reporters and journalists,” says Lapan.

## SPECULATION AROSE ABOUT A MYSTERIOUS WEAPON ALLEGEDLY USED ON VENEZUELAN FORCES

The value of the Embed program came during the March to Baghdad 2003, a watershed moment ending Saddam Hussein’s regime. Saddam’s information minister (nicknamed ‘Baghdad Bob’) held a briefing, claiming: “Baghdad is fully protected, the infidels (referring to US/Coalition forces) are nowhere near, and we are going to fight to protect our city. The Americans are losing.” Lapan explains a Fox News embed was with an armoured unit less than a mile from where that briefing took place in Baghdad, so they did a split screen of ‘Baghdad Bob’ essentially lying while showing a Fox News embed with a US armoured unit inside the city.

A reporter on the ground provides facts and context, says Lapan. Journalists, like Martha Raddatz, currently Chief Global Affairs Correspondent for ABC News, took on the inherent risks of being in conflict zones to get the truth out about the Iraq War.

Under Lapan’s information and communications watch: “we had a regular rhythm of press briefings”.

Lapan did hundreds of interviews and arranged interviews with senior policy officials. The Pentagon also hosted reporters from across the world that had interest in US military operations.

“It did not matter who was in the White House, the majority in Congress; we handled our duties and obligations the same way,” he explains. “That is not what is happening now. It has become politicised and partisan trying to control the flow of information, including dismantling of the Pentagon Press Corps because they wanted them to sign agreements that basically take away the profession of journalism and make them stenographers.

“We felt it was extremely important to get the facts out there quickly to be able to tell the American public through the press how their sons and daughters were being employed in combat zones across the world, and how their taxpayer dollars were being spent.”

Sometimes the truth is a: “black eye to the United States and the military,” says Lapan. In 2004, Abu Ghraib human rights violations in one of the world’s most notorious prisons put the CIA and US army in a bad light during the Iraq War. “We had to communicate about it, what we knew and what we could talk about.” There are times when information must be protected when an ongoing investigation is happening or it could cause harm. “When I conducted media relations training, for Marines, for leaders of various types, one thing I always told them was: ‘if we don’t tell our story, someone else will’”.

“Adversaries will always look for opportunities to exploit gaps,” he warns. The danger in what we see now is a lack of focus and alignment, giving our enemies the advantage. If we do not value what we have lost in Military Public Affairs, we may not recover from damage done ●

**Jeanne McKinney** is an award-winning military journalist, book author, and documentary filmmaker. She recently published the true historical account of *Triumph Over the Taliban: The Untold Story of US Marines’ Courageous Fight to Save Camp Bastion* (now on Amazon). McKinney also wrote, directed, and is currently producing a limited documentary series called *Ronin 3: The Battle for Sangin* – that follows 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines through a labyrinth of murder holes and IEDs in a heavily entrenched Taliban stronghold in 2010, on mission to restore security to the local Afghan people.

**Lt.Col. David Lapan with Gen James Mattis, Commander CENTCOM in Kabul, February 2013**



Picture credit: Col David Lapan (Ret.)