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A COMMANDER'S PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLE

By

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While directed primarily to senior commanders stationed in the United States, this article includes many sound ideas applicable to the public relations problems of commanders and public information officers of all grades everywhere. Reprints are available on request to the Editor.—*Editor.*

REGARDLESS of his grade or prior official position, a newly appointed senior commander may soon discover that he occupies a changed position in the public eye. Whether he be in command of troops, a post, a school, a hospital, a depot, an ROTC unit, he finds himself newsworthy in the community where he is stationed. His name will appear in the local papers; he will be a sought-after speaker before local military and civilian groups; his pronouncements will be quoted—and often inaccurately. He will be the person by whom, in a large degree, the people of the community will judge the Army and the Armed Forces as a whole.

As a senior commander of any grade, your public relations responsibilities cannot be dismissed lightly. They are an integral and continuing part of your mission. You are a leading citizen of the community where you are assigned and the smaller the community, the more you stand out. You are the local agent of one of the world's biggest businesses.

Your Public Relations Staff

Broadly speaking, every member of your command from yourself down to the newest private and the lowest rated civilian employee is on your public relations staff. Lose no opportunity to impress upon each one that you consider good public relations a major obligation of all. The civilian em-

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ployees of your installation have a great influence on what the community thinks of its military neighbors. Show a personal concern for them. Make them feel that their interests are those of the organization for which they work. They can be your best or your worst public relations representatives.

More specifically, your PIO and his staff are your public relations personnel. Happy is the commander who finds at his new station a capable PIO who is widely and favorably known in the community. Regardless of his grade, lean heavily upon him for guidance and advice, at least until you have had time to make your own estimate of the situation. He can give you invaluable information on local people, organizations, activities, history, traditions and customs. He can open doors which you should enter. He can steer you away from pitfalls and blind alleys. He will have sources of information which you do not have. Even when you do have them it may not always be expedient to tap them yourself.

Your PIO is your staff expert on public relations just as your G3 is on training or your adjutant is on administration. His mission is to give you technical advice on public relations matters and to act for you within whatever limitations you prescribe. Make him a member of your personal as well as your official staff and insist that all elements of your command coordinate public relations matters through him. He should be included in all staff conferences in order to be informed about policies and operations and to advise on those which directly or indirectly involve the public. If you must select your own PIO give more consideration to his personality, natural ability and judgment than to his technical proficiency. Weakness in the latter can be overcome by experience and by having him take the Public Information course at the Armed Forces Information School.

Finally, forget that much overworked phrase "in addition to his other duties" and rarely permit it to be used in connection with your PIO. Do not detail him to additional duties which will interfere with his primary mission. His job knows no hours and if he is quick to recognize and capitalize upon opportunities, he will have little time for other assignments.

Individual Relations

Your public relations will fall into three general fields—with individuals, with the community and with the press and radio. Relations with individual citizens are the ones which, for the most part, you will have to handle yourself.

Your correspondence will probably be heavier than you have been accustomed to, particularly when your appointment is first announced. Old friends, casual acquaintances, complete strangers, worried parents, patriotic citizens, well meaning critics and sometimes just plain cranks—these and others will convey good wishes, offer or ask assistance or advice or information, extend invitations. Many letters will be addressed to you personally simply because the writer does not know the proper office to approach. These usually can be handled by a staff officer but the determining factor should be the importance of the writer. In local correspondence particularly, your PIO will know or can find out whether John Doe rates a personal reply from you or whether a letter signed by one of your staff officers, "General X has asked me to reply etc.," will make him just as happy. If in doubt, reply yourself.

Make it a cardinal rule of your office that every letter must receive an answer even if it is only a courteous acknowledgment signed by a staff officer. An unanswered letter rankles far more than one which gives a reply at variance with the one hoped for by the writer. If you ignore letters you are vulnerable on the grounds of discourtesy; a carefully worded response relieves you of that charge.

But there may be times when discretion is indicated. Yours will be a rare experience if you do not receive some letters or invitations designed to mislead or to put you or the Army, or both, on the spot. Requests for your opinion on a controversial subject, for use of your name to endorse a charitable cause, for your membership on a committee, for your inclusion in a photograph with some sponsoring group, should each be given the closest scrutiny not only as to the propriety of the request itself but even more as to the reputation of the person or organization making it. Too many people have found to their regret that hasty compliance with such proposals sometimes boomerangs with dismaying accuracy.

Autographs or photographs, in themselves, are harmless; when you give one or both (having satisfied yourself that it will not be used for commercial, political or some unworthy purpose) you have built good will. But be content simply to sign your name. The complimentary sentiments or the flowery encomium are the things which may embarrass you later.

Community Relations

Your relations with the people of the community where you are stationed are of prime importance and your first je

is to convince them that the Army is an agency of theirs of which they can be proud.

You and the members of your command, be it large or small, have an obligation to the community where you live and work. Study the community thoroughly; learn its history and traditions and customs; visit places of interest and as quickly as possible get acquainted with local affairs and local leaders.

Particularly in your first few weeks at a new station you may be asked to address various groups. Here again, be sure of just what you are getting into before you accept. Nationally known organizations such as the Community Chest, Red Cross, Boy Scouts and similar groups approved by higher headquarters offer no problem; neither do those organizations upon which your intelligence section frowns. But the in-between groups—local agencies sponsoring local projects, organizations whose purpose is not altogether clear, whose actual objectives may be less commendable than their ostensible aims—these are the ones to go slow on. Above all, watch out for “anti” groups—those which are antagonistic to other groups for political, racial, religious or similar prejudicial reasons. The business slogan “Before you invest, investigate” is sound advice. In your public relations, you are investing not only your own good name; you are investing also the good name of your command and of the United States Army. You cannot afford to speculate.

In your laudable desire to associate yourself with community activities, don't spread yourself too thin. Your job comes first—and people will be quick to criticize if they think you are spending too much time on non-military pursuits. Better to accept membership in or speak before a few organizations of recognized importance and widespread influence than to take on numerous commitments of lesser value. Sometimes you must refuse an invitation because you do not feel it justifies the time and effort involved. If you think an occasion merits Army representation and you cannot be present yourself, offer to designate a qualified member of your staff to attend in your place.

Whether you are an experienced and skilled speaker or just run-of-mill, give the most careful attention to every speech you make. Each must be thoroughly prepared and carefully delivered. A short presentation covering one or two well-thought-out ideas gives a far better impression than a longer rambling speech which gets nowhere. If you do not

have a flair for writing or if you are asked to speak on some technical subject, have your PIO or one of your staff officers prepare the speech for you. Then either rewrite the ideas in your own words or read and reread and rehearse the speech until it becomes *your* speech. When you deliver it, read it if you must, but read it as though you understood what you were saying and believed in it, not as though you were merely presenting some other person's words and ideas.

If you enjoy writing and speaking, prepare two or three speeches which have local flavor and which bear repeating—some lesser known phases of the history and background of the local community; present or past Army or Armed Forces activities in the general neighborhood; a biographical talk on some outstanding personage in earlier days of the locality. People are always interested in things close to their own homes and lives. If you, as an outsider, can tell them things they did not know before, it will redound to your credit and to that of the Armed Forces.

But your community relations responsibilities are not completely discharged when you go to the community. Seek out opportunities to bring the community to you; let people see how the Army really works, lives, eats and plays. A resourceful PIO can plan sightseeing tours of your installation which will interest visitors without disturbing busy offices, training groups or classified activities. Invite community organizations to hold an occasional meeting in an auditorium or, better yet, a mess hall where they can be served a typical Army meal. Arrange with the local recruiting station to bring groups of high school boys and girls to see your post and to get a first-hand impression of Army life.

Press and Radio Relations

Too much emphasis cannot be laid on your press and radio relations, not because they are more important than individual or community relations but because they are so far-reaching. A brief item having real news in it, favorable or unfavorable, going out over one of the news wire services or over the air may be picked up and repeated all over the world.

Press and radio representatives are interested in getting news—complete, accurate and honest facts. And they must have it promptly. News is one of the most short-lived commodities in the world; a deadline is inexorable and once it is missed it is usually gone forever. Newsmen much prefer to get their information from official and authentic sources. If

they cannot get it there, they will pick it up from whatever other sources they believe to be reliable and the resulting stories may cause you regrets, if not serious embarrassment.

As soon as you can reasonably do so, arrange to meet the press and radio representatives assigned to cover your installation. Probably most of their dealings will be with your PIO, but you should know them and they should know you and you should make every effort to start and to maintain your relations on a basis of mutual respect and friendliness.

You can establish good press relations easily by recognizing the right of the press and radio to have information about you, your command and the Army and by making it readily available to them. Invoke "security" as grounds for withholding information only when there is a valid military reason. Keep "off the record" remarks to a minimum but when necessary give newsmen the required background information so that they may interpret your news facts correctly. Admit errors, and when you are not sure of your facts say so. When you have a story to release, give it out impartially to all reporters who want it. But if a newsman comes to you with some story or lead which he has dug up himself, protect his exclusive rights to it and give him such information as you can.

The newspaper profession has a high code of ethics and its members will respect your confidence. But they will instantly recognize bluffing, evasion, half truths or attempts to slant the story and they will resent such tactics as insults to their intelligence. You must avoid these mistakes.

So called "bad" news stories are often the result of poor handling rather than of the facts themselves. Accidents, disasters, unpleasant events of one type or another are bound to happen and you cannot avoid them. But you can often forestall unfavorable repercussions by candid and honest release of information. Within the limitations of security, give news and radio representatives all of the facts available to you; permit them to take photographs; show them what steps you are taking to alleviate the damage particularly if life or private property is involved. The resulting stories in all probability will give you the best of a bad situation by playing up the remedial and preventive measures you are taking. But if you are uncooperative and arbitrary, if you refuse to give reporters the facts as far as you have them, if you deny them reasonable access to the scene, you are giving them

a separate story on your suppression of legitimate news in connection with the mishap. And it won't be good.

Publicity which increases the prestige of your command, of the Army and of the Armed Forces as a whole is one of the major objectives of your mission. Of necessity much of it will—and should—involve you personally. But don't lose your sense of proportion. Don't hesitate to give newsmen permission to quote you if what you have to say is important and quotable but don't use a quoted statement simply as a wedge to get your name in print. Permit the use of your photograph in the local press often enough to identify you in the public mind with local military activities but not so often that the suspicion arises that you are a publicity seeker. Have available a small supply of a good photograph of yourself in glossy finish for newspaper and magazine reproduction. If you are one of the principal guests at a public affair don't fade into the background when a photographer approaches. But if you are welcoming a distinguished visitor to your post or awarding a decoration to a soldier, *he* is the center of interest and you should content yourself with a secondary role.

In the business field, the top executives of a successful organization devote much time and thought and money to giving information about the conduct of the business and the merits of its products to the employees and the customers. As one of the top executives in the Armed Forces you are under the same obligation to those under your command and to the citizens of the United States. If you use the personnel and facilities and opportunities available to you, public relations will take a proper and effective place in the many responsibilities of your assignment.