



# Operation Atlantic Resolve

## A Case Study in Effective Communication Strategy

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When Lt. Gen. Donald Campbell, then commanding general of U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR), finished speaking at the Maritime Museum in Tallinn, Estonia on 22 April 2014, the reaction of those in attendance was one that neither he, nor anyone in the room, would likely forget.<sup>1</sup> The event, a charity dinner for the Carolin Illenzeer Foundation, brought together a mix of elites from Tallinn and the Estonian military

to support the children of those killed or seriously injured while in service of the Estonian Defense Forces.<sup>2</sup> Campbell's presence came at the request of Maj. Gen. Riho Terras, the Estonian Defense Forces commander, and the president of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, ahead of a deployment of U.S. paratroopers to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The operation was not yet announced publicly, so only a few in the room were privy to the ongoing



(Photo by Staff Sgt. Brett Miller, North Dakota National Guard)

A 173rd Airborne Brigade paratrooper (left) waits with a Canadian paratrooper to board a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter for a parachute jump exercise 22 June 2014 during Operation Atlantic Resolve at Adazi Training Area, Latvia.

work to implement the troop movement over the next 48 hours. Before Campbell got up to deliver his remarks, President Ilves pulled him aside and asked that he divulge to the audience the U.S. plans to send troops to Estonia.<sup>3</sup> As he addressed those in attendance, Campbell departed from his scripted remarks to confirm to the crowd that American forces were inbound to their country, to stay and train with their Estonian counterparts for an indefinite period. The audience expressed relief as they stood in applause of the general.<sup>4</sup> Some in the crowd openly wept.<sup>5</sup>

## Assessing the Information Environment

When Russian forces seized control of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine in late February, 2014, it was a reminder to the NATO nations on Russia's border of the benefits of the military alliance.<sup>6</sup> NATO responded in early March by exercising military options in the air and on the sea.<sup>7</sup> A U.S. deployment of F-16 fighter aircraft and Air Force personnel to Poland for training exercises,

stepped-up air policing over the Baltic states, and enhanced maneuvers and joint-exercise participation by a U.S. guided-missile destroyer in the Black Sea were the first pieces put into play on the Western side of the chessboard. For U.S. Air Force Gen. Phillip Breedlove, commander, U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and NATO's supreme allied commander, Europe, the first few moves were relatively simple.

"The tougher piece is, how do we do the assurance piece on the land?" Breedlove told the Associated Press in early April as he was developing his recommendation to employ ground forces in Eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> "Because these are measures which are more costly (and) if not done correctly, might appear provocative." The United States would have to proceed cautiously to shore up support for its NATO allies without escalating an exceedingly tense situation.

A few weeks later, roughly 600 U.S. paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, based in Italy, were en route to Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as part of what would later be dubbed

Operation Atlantic Resolve.<sup>9</sup> According to Breedlove, a company-sized contingent of airborne infantry in each of the four countries would hardly be an obstacle against the “force of about 40,000” Russian troops massed on the Ukraine border at the time.<sup>10</sup>

However, that was not the point. Ground forces deployed in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve to achieve a tactical objective and, perhaps more importantly, a communication objective. USAREUR’s coupling of the desired tactical and information end-states of the operation offers a model for applying communication strategy to future operations.

The presence of U.S. boots on the ground was the core tactical condition intended to signal U.S. commitment to NATO’s Article 5 obligations and of itself would have no trouble generating headlines.<sup>11</sup> Lacking proper context though, the move could have resulted in disaster if it was “erroneously perceived as a precursor to violence, a unilateral U.S. effort, or provocative to the Russians,” according to Col. Rumi Nielson-Green, the USAREUR public affairs officer at the time.<sup>12</sup> As the designated Army Service Component Command for Europe, it would be USAREUR’s responsibility to fulfill the troop deployment and Nielson-Green’s public affairs office charged with framing the activity in the appropriate

light. The success or failure of Operation Atlantic Resolve would hinge on aggressive, timely communication efforts. Specifically, this meant facilitating media coverage, ensuring transparency to the American public, and combating misinformation.

The emphasis on communication was clear at the highest level of both U.S. and partner governments. In announcing the deployment from the Pentagon briefing room, Department of Defense spokesman Rear Adm. John Kirby spoke not in terms of military maneuver, but of messaging. “I think the message is ... that the United States takes seriously our obligations under Article 5 of the NATO alliance,” Kirby assessed.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the news of the deployment broke deliberately ahead of the official announcement. Poland’s minister of defense, Tomasz Siemoniak, walked into the offices of the *Washington Post* and revealed part of the U.S. plan following a meeting at the Pentagon with U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel.<sup>14</sup>

## Formulating a Communication Strategy

USAREUR public affairs personnel noted the signals from leadership and planned accordingly. “Public affairs is decisive to this operation,” read the primary bullet point in the public affairs portion of

### 3. (U) EXECUTION.

#### (U) COMMANDERS INTENT

(1) (U) PURPOSE: TO ASSURE ALLIES OF U.S. COMMITMENT AND DEMONSTRATED RESOLVE TO SUPPORT THE BALTIC STATES AND POLAND.

#### (2) (U) KEY TASKS

(2A) (U) DEPLOY ONE (1) COMPANY EACH INTO POLAND AND THE BALTICS.

(2B) (U) ESTABLISH INITIAL COMMAND AND CONTROL NODE.

(2C) (U) CONDUCT PUBLIC AFFAIRS ACTIVITIES.

(2D) (U) INTEGRATE INTO THE EUCOM PERSISTENT PRESENCE PLAN IN BALTICS AND POLAND.

(3) (U) END STATE. U.S. DEMONSTRATES ITS AIRBORNE CAPABILITY AND RESOLVE TO DEFEND NATO ALLIES AND PARTNER NATIONS. THE U.S. IS PREPARED FOR FUTURE TRAINING, EXERCISES, AND OPERATIONS. KEY AUDIENCES ARE INFORMED OF U.S. COMMITMENT TO OUR ALLIES AND PARTNER NATIONS WITHOUT PROVOKING UNDESIRED RUSSIAN RESPONSE.

**Figure 1. USAREUR Atlantic Resolve Operation Order Commander’s Intent**



(Photo by Sgt. Daniel Cole, U.S. Army Europe PAO)

Soldiers with U.S. Army Europe's 173rd Airborne Brigade meet Latvian soldiers after a 24 April 2014 ceremony commemorating the start of new multinational exercises. A company-sized contingent of paratroopers deployed to Latvia in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve. The multinational training fulfills the USAREUR strategic objective of preserving and enhancing NATO interoperability and demonstrates U.S. commitment to its NATO allies.

the staff estimate briefed to Lt. Gen. Campbell in the initial planning stages, according to Lt. Col. Craig Childs.<sup>15</sup> Childs, a member of Nielson-Green's staff and a primary contributor to the estimate, recalled, "At first I don't think the staff agreed with the notion that public affairs activities belonged in the commander's intent paragraph" of the operation order. Campbell was on board with the concept, though.

"One of the most important things we did was acknowledge early on that there was going to be a heavy public affairs component to it, and get the capabilities we needed on the ground in the Baltics and Poland," said Campbell of his guidance to the staff in the planning stages.<sup>16</sup> The operation order would have to make clear that tactical and communication objectives would go hand-in-hand, ensuring the actions and words of the operation were in synch.

Just a few years ago, this would have been a novel concept. Dennis Murphy with the U.S. Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership

thought so when he advocated for a similar compulsory function to be added to the operational planning process. "Having a clearly stated information end state to accompany the traditional military end state," Murphy wrote in a 2009 article for *Parameters*, would compel commanders to consider their communication strategy in operations.<sup>17</sup> According to Joint Doctrine Note 2-13, Commander's Communication Synchronization, published in 2013, this is now a part of joint planning operations.<sup>18</sup> Yet no such planning mechanism exists in Army doctrine.

As Nielson-Green wrote in a 2011 article for *Military Review* though, a doctrinal change would only work as a "starting point."<sup>19</sup> Effective communication strategy means that leaders "weigh the effects of their actions against effects on the population or adversary perception and train their troops to think likewise," the 14-year Army public affairs veteran asserted in her analysis. Five years

after Murphy's article, Operation Atlantic Resolve offered Nielson-Green a chance to showcase her vision for effective communication strategy as the head of USAREUR public affairs. More broadly, it was an opportunity to demonstrate that the principle of pairing military and information end-states in operational planning could work in practice.

As shown in figure 1, when the USAREUR order was published on April 18, the end state of the commander's intent paragraph included the phrase, "key audiences are informed of U.S. commitment to our allies."<sup>20</sup> One of the four key tasks listed to reach that end state was "conduct public affairs activities."<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, the USAREUR command and staff mobilized around maximizing media coverage and enabling public affairs operations to get the message out.

## Implementing a Communication Plan of Action

Within 48 hours of the order being issued, USAREUR deployed a team of public affairs personnel to Poland before the arrival of the first deploying U.S. forces. The team of six from USAREUR would augment the three public affairs personnel of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. Sgt. Maj. Carmen Daugherty, the senior enlisted public affairs soldier for the European Theater at the time, led the USAREUR team.

"We left out on Easter Sunday, packed into a rental car and drove about 1,000 kilometers to Drawsko Pomorskie Training Area in Poland.

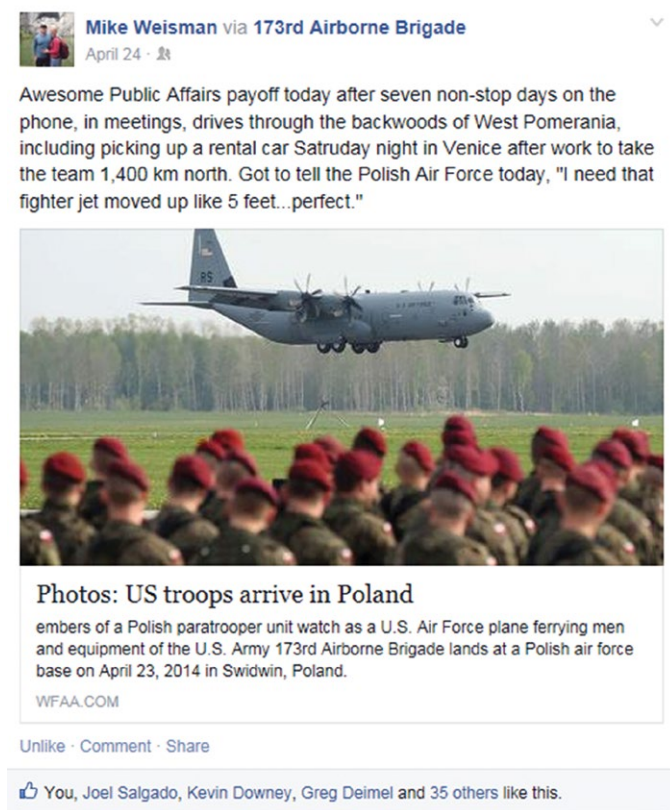
When we got there to meet up with the 173rd team, we had less than 72 hours until our paratroopers walked off the plane onto Polish soil," Daugherty recalled.<sup>22</sup> The team would need every

minute in between to coordinate with host nation defense officials, U.S. embassy country teams, and international media; facilitate coverage of the impending disembarkation events; arrange senior leader engagements with the media; and ensure timely release of official imagery that would assure the American public of the transparency of Defense Department activities. Moreover, due to the emphasis on public affairs activities in the operation order, the public affairs teams, forward-deployed and at the main command post in Wiesbaden,

Germany, helped shape the execution of the plan on the ground.

"Originally, the plan was for our guys to jump in at night. We had to go back to them and tell them, "That's not going to work. Media can't cover something they can't see," according to Maj. Mike Weisman, public affairs officer for the 173rd Airborne Brigade.<sup>23</sup> The plan changed from night airborne jumps to daytime aircraft landings and ceremonies, to create conditions that would maximize opportunities for the media to get imagery that reinforced the message: U.S. and host-nation forces standing shoulder to shoulder.

When the plan called for four simultaneous arrival ceremonies in four different countries, to mark the U.S. paratroopers' arrival in Poland,



**Figure 2. Social Media Post from Operation Atlantic Resolve**

Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, the public affairs team again raised concerns. “We wanted to maximize the exposure of the events in the news cycle. One big splash would be forgotten a couple days later,” said Childs of the decision to stagger the ceremonies. In addition, events in four separate countries posed unique challenges for coordination and would have left the forward USAREUR and 173rd public affairs teams overextended. The plan was thus changed to have four ceremonies over the course of five days. The forward public affairs team split up into teams to ensure proper coverage and coordination of the ceremonies, with each team handling responsibilities in two countries.

As shown in figure 2, Weisman’s Facebook update following the first ceremony in Poland offered another glimpse as to how influential public affairs guidance was on the final outcome of the operation. “Got to tell the Polish Air Force today, ‘I need that fighter jet moved up like 5 feet...perfect,’” read Weisman’s Facebook status just after midnight on 24 April.<sup>24</sup>

## Evaluating Effectiveness of Communication Efforts

Consequently, when the 173rd’s Company C, 1st Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, streamed out of two C-130 Hercules aircraft at Swidwin Air Base in Poland, the cameras were waiting. Photographers with Polish national daily publications and regional television outlets jockeyed for the best shots with international wire photographers such as Agence France Press, Getty Images, and Reuters, recalled Weisman. “All the Polish television outlets broadcast the event live and CNN picked up the Reuters live-video feed,” added Weisman, allowing the images to reach the U.S. and host-nation audiences in real time.<sup>25</sup>

The public affairs teams’ efforts to ensure imagery and information were quickly available to tell the story accurately were right on the mark, according to Sean Gallup, chief photographer of Germany News for Getty Images.<sup>26</sup> Gallup, whose photos were some of the first publicly available from the ceremony in Poland, later shared his perspective of the U.S.-Poland military event. “I would say the visual impression the event created was that the U.S. had sent a serious military unit but was not pursuing a confrontation,” Gallup wrote in an email.

What Gallup and the rest of the media saw was exactly the message that the Department of Defense, U.S. EUCOM, USAREUR, and the 173rd intended to convey at the outset of the mission. As days of furious planning culminated in paratrooper arrival ceremonies over the last week of April, the images and personal impressions the public affairs operators had visualized became reality on newspaper pages and TV screens worldwide. The story and accompanying imagery made the front pages of *The Wall Street Journal*, *International New York Times*, and *USA Today* weekend edition.<sup>27</sup> An initial report to higher headquarters from Nielson-Green read, “[Ministry of Defense] and Embassy media experts assess that the coverage is positive and message of assurance and U.S. commitment are well received by public.”

Jurga Zelvariene, a media affairs representative with the U.S. Embassy in Vilnius, provided the most vivid illustration of public attitude in her translation of a few powerful lines from a column in one of Lithuania’s largest daily publications, *Lietuvos rytas*. “About the arrival of the U.S. troops,” Zelvariene translated, “we celebrate one small victory today. The trample of American boots on Lithuanian ground is the most beautiful music, as is the rumble of NATO fighter jets flying over Vilnius. This is how our freedom sounds.”<sup>28</sup>

The results were clear: U.S. Army Europe and its public affairs practitioners had met the goal to ensure “key publics are informed of U.S. commitment to our allies,” as established in the operation order. Bruce Anderson, a civilian member of the USAREUR public affairs staff, compiled the media analysis of the operation.

Anderson noted that reporting early on focused almost exclusively on the theme of assurance, and later included more use of the words “deter” and “reassure.” Some of the coverage characterized U.S. action as “escalatory” or “provocative to Moscow,” Anderson noted in his findings, but “these were mostly drowned out by the dominant narrative of support for the U.S.’ move.”<sup>29</sup>

Campbell’s reception at the charity dinner in Tallinn illustrated that the mere arrival of U.S. forces was enough to assure a room full of Estonian spectators of U.S. commitment to allied nations. Moreover, the arrival of military forces, according to Campbell, promoted a similar sentiment among the nations’ militaries. “Having been on the ground, it is reassuring,”

said Campbell, “even at the numbers that we are.” The general could not visit every venue in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, though, nor could a company of airborne infantry, but media reports could. To achieve the desired sentiment on a national level in four countries, it was incumbent upon USAREUR’s public affairs personnel to work with their host nation counterparts and U.S. State Department country teams to deliver the message to stake-holding populations through the national and international media.

## Institutionalizing Lessons for the Future

USAREUR’s achievement of both tactical and communication end-states offers lessons for implementing communication strategy in future operations. Nielson-Green, in evaluating the work of her team, pointed to a few key conditions that set the stage for that success:

- ◆ Being part of the staff estimate: In spite of dissent from some in the staff, identifying the decisive nature of public affairs activities, and alerting the commander to that fact, laid the foundation for mission accomplishment.

- ◆ Thorough planning: Meticulous planning by the main command post public affairs team allowed the forward-deployed team to execute without hesitation. This included early and regular engagement with U.S. Embassy and U.S. EUCOM personnel to ensure interagency accord and sharing of information and resources.

- ◆ Public affairs should be no different than any other operational capability that the commander has: The integration of public affairs with the staff allowed for last-minute planning adjustments that avoided costly mistakes.

- ◆ A seat at the table: It is critical that public affairs leaders demonstrate they can be trusted to accomplish the mission. They, and their people, must train and practice their craft so that when the unexpected happens, they are trusted members of the team.

- ◆ Mission Command: Trust your noncommissioned officers and civilian public affairs experts. The plan could not have been implemented without allowing members of the team to take initiative and think independently. Waiting on decisions or explicit guidance from leadership would have cost time when every hour was valuable.

Today, Operation Atlantic Resolve continues. The 173rd Airborne Brigade paratroopers have rotated home, replaced by regionally aligned forces from the U.S. who continue to serve and train in the same capacity as their predecessors. Accordingly, communication efforts continue to play an ongoing and vital role as American soldiers train with their host-nation counterparts, the U.S. continues to reinforce the NATO alliance through reassurance efforts, and transparency of U.S. government activities abroad is still owed to the American public.

On 3 September 2014, President Barack Obama stood just five kilometers from the place where Campbell delivered the welcome news to Estonia that American forces would stand by their side. The president addressed U.S. and Estonian soldiers gathered in an aircraft hangar at Tallinn Airport with the prime minister of Estonia, Taavi Rõivas.

“You’re sending a powerful message that NATO, including the United States, will defend Estonia, will defend Latvia, will defend Lithuania, will defend all of our NATO allies,” Obama told the paratroopers.<sup>30</sup>

The commander-in-chief’s visit and remarks highlighted the central role of the troops, and the message communicated by their presence, in fulfilling one of the nation’s strategic priorities.

The delivery of that message is owed in no small part to the initial and ongoing communication efforts of the Ministries of Defense and U.S. Embassy personnel in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, U.S. EUCOM, and USAREUR public affairs. ■

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## Notes

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