MOC Public Affairs – an Operational Center of Gravity at NAVCENT

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The 5th Fleet / U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) operates in arguably the most strategically significant region on the planet. In the NAVCENT MOC there is a unique, energized buzz – a constant sense of proximity to the impending. Everyone knows that at any moment, our daily operations here can have immediate and lasting strategic effect in the region and beyond.

Setting the operational conditions for success in the information environment is the job of NAVCENT public affairs. Sound public affairs counsel and action must be available to the fleet commander and his staff 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. At NAVCENT, public affairs personnel fulfill this demand as integral members of the MOC team.

The NAVCENT Public Affairs Officer (PAO) serves as a special assistant to the NAVCENT commander, advising him, the MOC staff and the Commander Task Force (CTF) leadership on all public affairs matters. Several of the functions of public affairs at NAVCENT are similar to other MOCs: direct support for the commander’s engagements, photo and video services, internal and external media stories, planning execution, and embedding media, graphics services, community relations, and other functional public affairs requirements. However, beyond these typical functional requirements, NAVCENT has made a dedicated effort to directly integrate public affairs into operations throughout the MOC.

NAVCENT public affairs has continuous representation on the MOC watch floor, and Crisis Action Teams (CAT) when stood up. Public affairs watchstanders range from E5 to O3, all TS/SCI clearance holders. These watchstanders serve as the MOC Director’s PA counsel, support media queries, and most recently, serve as subject matter experts and facilitators to fleet fulfillment of the CENTCOM’s Visual Information (VI) reporting requirements, a growing demand across the region.

Perhaps the most influential role of the NAVCENT Public Affairs Officer is as the lead for the Communication Integration Working Group (CIWG), a fusion point for communication and engagement critical to the commander’s decision cycle in both Phase 0 as well as emergent crisis operations.

As the “master of the message,” the NAVCENT PAO is able to ensure that the entire staff and the CTFs are aligned with standing fleet communications guidance. The standing NAVCENT Deployer’s Public Affairs Guidance is the point of alignment for CTFs and other deployed units. The guidance is designed with an open architecture to allow for the inclusion of specific country or exercise guidance from the staff theater security cooperation (TSC) team. The standing guidance also incorporates more strategic public themes and messages from CENTCOM and public affairs direction from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Department of State.
The CIWG also synchronizes the commander’s Key Leader Engagements (KLE). NAVCENT’s regional and extra-regional partners highly value face to face, bi-lateral engagement. KLEs support CENTCOM’s Theater Strategic Objectives (TSO), and are a must for the commander when he considers access and interoperability constraints. Synchronizing who the commander will meet with what the commander will say in his office calls is extremely important. CENTCOM, regional embassies and U.S. national policy stakeholders all provide input to the commander’s engagement. The CIWG also has input to the engagement planning. The consolidated input is presented to the commander and his travel staff as part of the travel preparation, while the content and tenor of the engagements are crafted. The fact that the Policy Advisor (POLAD) are also on many of the engagements helps them aid the CIWG to best ensure that themes, messages and actions align with higher tier strategic objectives.

In a November 2012 memorandum, George E. Little, Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs noted; “It is the role of the information related community to ensure the leader’s intent is reflected in every staff product, and that various parts of a command are closely synchronized - there should be no difference between what the Public Affairs office is saying, the J5 is planning and the J3 is doing”.

The CIWG membership includes the PAO, the Political Advisor (POLAD), the Information Operations Officer, Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) Deputy, the Chief of Strategy and Policy, Intelligence (N2) representative, the Judge Advocate General (JAG), a Foreign Disclosure Officer (FDO) and various other subject matter experts from across the directorates and CTFs as required.

Engaged MOC leadership, coupled with a direct mandate from the commander to involve Public Affairs in every aspect of our operational planning, execution and assessment, has ensured that public affairs is not simply be a staff function focused on snapping photos of visiting dignitaries and promotion ceremonies and not an integral player in the war fight.

Rather, more than ever, people communicate vertically and horizontally and have access to more and better quality information than ever before. With today’s interconnected world of the Internet, traditional media, satellite television and the emergence of social media and citizen journalists, Public Affairs will continue to be at the operational center of gravity at NAVCENT.

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