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Before Walter Reed, there were Fort Stewart and Fort Knox and...
SHOWCASE | March 05, 2007

In 2003 and 2004, UPI uncovered and reported abusive treatment by the Army of sick and wounded soldiers in Georgia and Kentucky and highly questionable handling of a widow in Colorado whose Green Beret husband killed himself in front of her. Seeking comment from the Army at the time, a UPI reporter and editor got stiff-armed instead. In Congressional hearings in 2004, an assistant secretary of the Army promised to do “whatever it takes” to improve conditions. That, of course, was three years before the recent Washington Post stories on Walter Reed. The reporter, Mark Benjamin, left UPI and went to work for Salon, where he continued to report such stories long before the Post’s series. In the Summer 2004 issue of [Nieman Reports](#), the UPI editor, Dan Olmsted, described what UPI had found – and also the uncooperative, bitter response he and Benjamin got from the Army. Nieman Watchdog asked Olmsted to write an introduction to the 2004 piece, taking into account what has happened so recently. Here is that introduction, followed by his Nieman Reports essay.

By Dan Olmsted
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Re-reading my article below from almost three years ago brings the following thoughts:

- The idea that people in positions to do something about it were unaware of the bad quality of military healthcare looks preposterous.
- Mark Benjamin’s work at UPI starting in 2003, and his subsequent reporting on Walter Reed at [Salon.com](#), really nailed the scandal well before the Post stories. I believe [the Post’s Walter Reed articles](#) should acknowledge his Salon reporting in some way – it’s not good for journalism when hard work gets completely bigfooted by Big Media.
- The issues [Mark and I raised](#) about the anti-malaria drug Lariam and subsequent suicides (and even homicides) in the military were swept under the rug and should be reopened. Most of the media gave the military a complete pass, especially after a white-wash Army surgeon general’s report about the murder-suicides at Fort Bragg in 2002 among

- Special Forces soldiers just back from Afghanistan.
- Ditto with such mandatory medicines as the anthrax vaccine. The military's use of soldiers as a captive population for perhaps overzealous and unaccountable medical interventions is a big, and related, topic. In fact what got Mark into the whole issue was our belief that some of these medical problems were iatrogenic.
 - Big Media have got to get their nerve back in dealing with big government, big business and the military-medical-pharmaceutical complex. It's fine that everyone's concerned now about post-war medical care, but it's also safe. More journalists need to go against the grain when there is still time to prevent, rather than simply pile on, the next scandal. We were fortunate to have a great editor-in-chief, John O'Sullivan. When the military pushed back, and they did as you'll see below, his comment was, "Go get 'em, lads!" (He's British.)

Here is Olmsted's report from the Summer 2004 issue of Nieman Reports:

If war is hell, then the aftermath for too many of those who fought the war in Iraq is worthy of another biblical metaphor – Purgatory.

Last fall [2003], UPI's Mark Benjamin got a call from the husband of a soldier who had served in Iraq and was in "medical hold" at Fort Stewart, Georgia, suffering from a serious heart problem. Benjamin had been working on stories about a number of mysterious illnesses afflicting troops in Iraq and after they came home. This man said his wife's illness was bad, but the treatment and housing she and other soldiers were getting was truly deplorable – no running water, no air conditioning in the cement barracks, and filthy, buggy showers and toilets in an adjacent building to which some of the wounded had to limp on crutches. His wife waited six weeks for a doctor to see her about her heart condition.

With a go-ahead from UPI editors, Benjamin got on a plane, went on base, got the story, and got on the phone to talk about what he'd found with the Army. For three days, he sought comment, with no response. Not one of his calls was returned. His story ran on a Friday and began:

[Sick, wounded U.S. troops held in squalor](#)

FORT STEWART, Ga., Oct. 17 (UPI) -- Hundreds of sick and wounded U.S. soldiers including many who served in the Iraq war are languishing in hot cement barracks here while they wait -- sometimes for months -- to see doctors.

The National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers' living conditions are so substandard, and the medical care so poor, that many of them believe the Army

is trying push them out with reduced benefits for their ailments. One document shown to UPI states that no more doctor appointments are available from Oct. 14 through Nov. 11 – Veterans Day.... A half-dozen calls by UPI seeking comment from Fort Stewart public affairs officials and U.S. Forces Command in Atlanta were not returned.

By Monday morning, the Army was more than ready to respond:

“Fuck you!” were the first words from the Army spokesman Benjamin talked to, claiming Benjamin had called no one about the story. That outburst of candor was followed by an e-mail, copied to 21 other Pentagon public affairs officers.

“I don't believe you did try hard enough to get an Army response....As you can see by the volume of information I am sending you –We could have responded....Apparently you said your calls to Fort Stewart public affairs officials and U.S. Forces command in Atlanta were not returned. That's not what they said and I trust them more than I do you.”

A dense fog of facts, figures and acronyms followed – “The CSA has included the improvement of installations in the Army's top Focus Areas and priorities. Additionally, the FORSCOM Commander is aware ...”

Months later, in front of a congressional committee, the fog lifted and our reporting about the testimony follows:

[Army fixing medical failure exposed by UPI](#)

WASHINGTON, Jan. 21 (UPI) -- With the biggest troop rotation since World War II under way, Pentagon officials told a House panel Wednesday they would do whatever it takes to avoid the mistakes that last year left sick and injured troops at U.S. bases waiting weeks and months for doctors. Many had served in Iraq.

The solutions include moving ill soldiers from steamy cement barracks without running water into nearby hotels, adding more doctors and setting aside \$77 million to improve conditions.

"We recognize that last fall, we temporarily lost sight of the situation," Daniel Denning, an assistant secretary of the Army, told the House Total Force Subcommittee Wednesday.

Barriers to Military Reporting

That is the way it works when you cover the military, at least a part of the

military that the brass doesn't want to talk about. NBC News's Tom Brokaw might have the run of an aircraft carrier and it's easy for reporters to get interviews with grunts who tell how good morale is and how happy they are to be fighting thousands of miles from home. It gets different when a reporter tries to cover stories about soldiers who believe they are getting shafted – especially when they are.

After Benjamin's Fort Stewart story ran, UPI was tipped that similar conditions also existed at Fort Knox, Ky. He flew there, this time with a UPI photographer. Soldiers, again, invited him on base. At Ft. Knox, the Army had moved soldiers out of despicable living conditions – including a barracks that the roof fell in on a few weeks later – but the lack of medical care was just as acute. As our photographer, Michael Kleinfeld, tried to photograph gimpy soldiers standing in formation outside the medical hold barracks, he was detained and taken to the garrison commander's office. (They didn't try to confiscate his film, at least.) A mildly menacing, slightly comic scene ensued, with base officials telling Benjamin we could have our photographer back, but only if he returned to the base to pick him up. Sensing an ambush, he declined. Finally, the intervention of a Senate staffer who admires UPI's reporting worked to free Kleinfeld.

But that wasn't the end of it. The next morning, a top Army public affairs official called one of UPI's top executives to say that UPI had “been caught trespassing.” We would be issued a “ban and bar” letter prohibiting us from going on base unescorted, he was told.

Apparently, if Benjamin and Kleinfeld asked nicely, this person indicated that base officials “would still be willing to escort them to the things they want to see and speak to the people they want to interview.”

Nor was *that* the end of it. Shortly thereafter, that Army official's boss, Brigadier General Bob Gaylord, also called this UPI executive and, as it was delicately put to us, “expressed his concern.” A few weeks later, the claim of “trespassing” started to look a bit blustery. At Benjamin's insistence, a Pentagon official clarified the policy about reporters going on base. He e-mailed us to say that while Benjamin “did not identify himself as a journalist...since there is no posted policy directing that he do so, he met the requirements for entry.”

In March, Benjamin and I went to Fort Carson, Colo., to report a story about mental health problems among troops – including suicide – and the possible role an anti-malaria drug might be playing. We gamely called ahead and told them what our story was about, in detail; asked to meet with base officials; offered to take the public affairs officer out for coffee; and requested a tour of the base. They declined: “Dear Mr. Olmsted, I regret to inform you that we

can't honor your request to speak with anyone at Fort Carson ...”

They said we had to talk to an Army official at the Pentagon. That official referred us to a spokesman at FORSCOM in Atlanta. Here is what Benjamin wrote to FORSCOM: “If you can arrange any input for our story, please help. I'd be glad to discuss our findings so far with any Army officials at any time.” That official never responded to any of our written pleas.

Meanwhile, for four days we sat in Colorado calling and e-mailing four different spokespeople. No one would let us on base or answer our questions. They said we weren't banned – just that we couldn't come on base under any circumstances no matter how long we stuck around Colorado Springs.

The most Orwellian – or perhaps merely absurd – moment came when we tried one final time to get the military's attention on a shocking incident in which the controversial malaria drug, Lariam, was an issue. A Green Beret based at Fort Carson, Bill Howell, had come home from Iraq and, three weeks later, shot and killed himself in front of his wife, Laura. She was convinced the drug triggered what appeared to be the sudden onset of madness, and her evidence was compelling. A combat veteran with no history of mental problems or pattern of domestic abuse, he snapped on Sunday evening in March – first trying to shoot her in the face (“I want you to watch this,” he said) – then shooting himself.

Lariam is known to cause severe psychiatric problems in a number of people who take it; the question of whether it causes suicide remains officially open. Mark and I began investigating the drug more than two years ago, and we reported in May 2002 that mounting evidence suggests it has triggered suicides. Just a month after that, in June 2002, a string of domestic murder-suicides began at Fort Bragg, committed by soldiers back from Afghanistan who had taken the drug. After a perfunctory investigation, the military blamed marital problems and absolved Lariam – which, perhaps not incidentally, it invented. (The Army has also complained to our editors in writing about our continuing coverage of the Lariam issue, to similar avail.)

Now two years later, Laura Howell not only believed Lariam caused her husband's suicide, she believed the Army was planning to blame marital problems for her husband's violence and death, just as they had at Fort Bragg. No one at Fort Carson even bothered to talk with her while conducting an investigation of his suicide, she said. “Doesn't that just make your radar go ‘beep, beep, beep?’,” she asked in an interview.

Obviously accusing the Army of a cover-up in a death investigation is serious business, and we needed a response. We tried in this May 3rd e-mail to a Fort Carson public affairs officer:

“Greetings. I left you a voice message just now – we’re doing a story on Green Beret Bill Howell’s suicide. His wife says she has not been contacted by the Criminal Investigative Division at Fort Carson although she understands the report about his death is done or nearly done, and she suspects this is because the Army is intent on blaming his death on marital problems rather than probing deeper into possible causes. Please let me know by Tuesday afternoon if you have any comment. As always we are anxious to hear what the military has to say and to get any other information that will help make our reporting fair and accurate.”

At 6:25 p.m. on that Tuesday, we did indeed get a response. Here is it (and yes, it makes no sense.)

“Dear Mr. Olmsted,

“I found out that my reply to you was out-of-line in that I was not authorized to send you the information I relayed. My boss is in the process of telling the Army side of the story. My zeal in answering your inquiry got in the way of our media relations efforts. For the most part, the info I sent you is correct, but there are some inaccuracies I am told.”

But we had not gotten a “reply” – out-of-line or otherwise – and we had no idea what he was talking about. We pointed that out in a follow-up e-mail and asked for a response we could print. We never heard another word. A few days later, The (Colorado Springs) Gazette ran our story across the top of the front page with the headline, “Green Beret’s suicide not fully investigated, wife says.” I am sure some people felt we didn’t try hard enough to get comment from the Army.

If, in reading this, you leap to the conclusion that the Army employs aggressive tactics to prevent or discredit negative reporting – obfuscation, personal attacks or if necessary a retreat to the bunkers – you’re right. The Pentagon’s P.R. apparatus is also big and bullying and used to throwing its weight around. That’s why many reporters find military stories so hard to cover; some give up or settle for whatever the spokespeople hand out.

Benjamin hasn’t given up. In fact, he keeps doing stories that are pursued by few other reporters. Editor & Publisher recently called him “Iraq reporter of the year,” even though he has never been to Iraq, and he won the American Legion Fourth Estate Award for coverage of veterans’ issues. In overseeing his coverage, I’ve seen clues emerge about how best to get at these stories. A few follow:

- Start at the bottom. The best stories come from talking to soldiers, their families and friends, and health care workers outside the military’s

reach. Only go to the top brass when you have a specific question that they will either have to ignore, deny or respond to.

- Think of military brass as being on the same level as administrators at any other federal agency – as bureaucrats who happen to have stars on their shoulders.
- When confronted with overwhelming evidence of a serious problem, do not be deterred by obfuscation of the data. We've taken to calling the military's statistics operation the "Vege-matic" – a machine that can chop, slice and dice data until there is no discernable pattern. For instance, the military isn't counting suicides that occurred after troops returned as part of the toll of Operation Iraqi Freedom – even if they were helicoptered off the battlefield in a full-blown psychosis and hanged themselves at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.
- A related point: If you can't figure out the answer, and the military won't tell you, report what the answer is *not*. For example, it can be hard to determine the total number of casualties in Operation Iraqi Freedom. But, for certain, it is more than the dead and wounded – it is also the (thousands of) injured and ill. How do we know? Because that's how the Army itself defines casualties.
- From the UPI 1929 stylebook: "The coolest man on the hottest story makes the fastest time." Don't get drawn into hostile conversations or escalating e-mail exchanges. Focus on the story and don't nurse grudges.
- Remember what George W. Bush said during the campaign: "I trust people. I don't trust the federal government." And as John Ashcroft said, "Information is democracy's best friend." Hold him to it.
- Put it in writing. Leave a paper trail of e-mailed correspondence stating exactly what kind of story you are working on, why you need the military's help, what your deadline is – and how hard you are working to get it right.

And offer to meet with officials anytime, anywhere, to get their part of the story. Just be prepared to wait until hell freezes over.



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Protect and Defend

Posted by R C - Ra Conteur

03/05/2007, 07:46 PM

Excellent article Mr. Olmsted. It takes just this kind of reporting to begin to understand the level of denial employed by bureaucracies faced with criticism. The first reaction it seems is to deny or duck any responsibility. Then to deny any access to the further coverage of a story.

The purpose of the First Amendment is to guarantee that the workings of government, paid for by the people, in service of the people, intended for the people, are available for scrutiny. It is the first item in the Amendments to the Constitution which government employees swear to defend.

What issues such as Benjamin raises do is help chip away at the idea that government agencies, institutions and departments are fiefdoms of power substantively unaffected by the tenets of the Constitution. They are not. They are paid for by the citizens, their work is in service of the citizens and their property and materials belong to the citizens of the United States. It takes an extremely vigilant press to keep reinforcing these facts. And when the walls of obfuscation go up, so must the headlines challenging those walls. Courageous reporting gentlemen.

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