



The Real Meaning in Words and Deeds

Today I went to a funeral.

It made me think about communication – the discussion of ideas in such a way to increase understanding and knowledge – and war. The casket draped with the American flag in the front of the church in Colorado Springs, Colo., held the ashes of U.S. Army SGT Michael P. Scusa, 22, who was killed in Afghanistan. A chaplain prayed and read some scripture. An Army general officer made brief specific comments about the Soldier. A woman stood up and walked to the back of the sanctuary carrying a baby – I learned later he was Scusa's only child, Connor – so as not to disturb the proceedings. At the end of the service, Soldiers in the 4th Infantry Division honor guard carried the coffin out of the church.

This was all very much real. This service to honor a Soldier killed in war was not contrived or choreographed or managed to somehow control the effect of the information. Scusa was one of eight U.S. Soldiers from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division killed in a battle with the Taliban on Oct. 3. Accounts of the battle described it as among the fiercest in the eight years of war there. I sat in the back pew, separated from the gathering of friends, family and military leaders. A photographer from the local newspaper stood on the balcony above me – his photograph of the casket being carried away

ran above the fold on page one of the paper the next morning.

Like almost every American, I have no personal knowledge of what happened the day Scusa and his fellow Soldiers died. I didn't know him or them but, honestly, I wanted to know more a few hours later when the setting was more intimate at the Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver. Here on this day, Oct. 16, I could not hide in the back. I stood in the open doorway of the pavilion a few feet away from where the Soldier's young widow sat. Alyssa Scusa sat stoically and, when the gunshots of the Army salute honoring her husband rang out and taps played, her mother gently reached for her hand to comfort her. I could feel the finality of the moment. The general knelt down to give her the folded flag that had draped her husband's coffin along with the shell casings from the salute. I took a low resolution photograph of the scene with my Blackberry. Her son Connor eagerly wanted attention that she could not give.

An Oct. 5 Associated Press report by Todd Pitman provided a partial glimpse into what happened the day of the battle. Plans had been in place to close two remote U.S. positions – Combat Outposts Keating and Fritsche – near the Pakistan border as the U.S. military began turning to a population-centric strategy. A Taliban leader who had been in Pakistan crossed the border into Afghanistan four days earlier. Word spread the night before that an attack was imminent, causing many of the villagers to depart the area. The local police chief did not leave and he was executed on Oct. 2 when the terrorists arrived. In the early morning, approximately 300 Taliban and other insurgents attacked the two Army posts defended by three 4th Brigade platoons, along with Afghanistan Army counterparts. At the end of nearly six hours of fighting, U.S. helicopters came in to repel the enemy. In addition to the eight U.S. Soldiers, three Afghan soldiers were killed in the battle with 24 U.S. Soldiers and 10 Afghan soldiers wounded. Approximately 100 insurgents were killed.

Media reports immediately afterward connected the battle with GEN Stanley McChrystal's Aug 30 assessment of the strategic situation facing his security forces in Afghanistan. Along with laying out his case in the assessment for focusing actions more directly on ways to help the people of Afghanistan vice specifically targeting terrorists, McChrystal requested more troops to do the security mission. The classified assessment was subsequently leaked to the media and, prior to the Oct. 3 fight for the two outposts, the media reports on the unclassified content created a perception in some circles that McChrystal and other military leaders were conducting some sort of strategic communication campaign to influence the President's actions. Although this perception of the military's intentions ultimately seemed to change as President Obama considered his options in Afghanistan, it did seem to create a backdrop that shaped information about the 4ID fight in a way to bolster the argument for more troops.

The point of publishing McChrystal's assessment was to "inform the debate," according to investigative reporter Bob Woodward. Jaime McIntyre provided Woodward's account in his Line of Departure blog (lineofdeparture.com) in December. Woodward had been given the report under an embargo for a future book he planned to write. Once Woodward realized the information in the assessment contributed to the public discussion, he pushed the Pentagon for the eventual release of unclassified portions. The reporter contended that the intentions were "pure" on the part of those who initially gave him the report and that it was not a purposeful effort to influence the political process. What he – along with many journalists – may not have considered, however, was the entire impact of the assessment's release during war on the conduct of war.

And this becomes the problem of strategic communication: Information shapes information and it takes time for people to sort out what the information tells them. Whether or not what happened on that day at these outposts was evidence of the need for new direction in the war, the assessment formed a backdrop to at least the initial reports of what happened. Early media reports expressed frustration over any implied implications that the battle was an American loss. This frustration from U.S. Soldiers who had first-hand knowledge came over the initial media reports of the battle. Their point was clear: These outnumbered Soldiers fought heroically to defend and defeat an enemy attack coming from virtually all sides. It started with enemy rocket launchers from a village mosque and transitioned to a closer battle of handguns. There was the burned out shell of the outposts, but the remaining Soldiers in the three Army platoons that had fought all day still stood their posts during and after the several hours of sporadic gunfire that followed the close air support that kicked back the enemy.

With time, the epic picture turns clear. The Army general who spoke at the service and presented the flag – quoted men who were close to the battle. "All of you fought valiantly under heavy enemy fire – the Soldiers manned their positions with great courage," said CPT Stoney Portis, who spoke at the memorial service held Oct. 11 in Afghanistan. LTC Robert Brown had said, "These men faced their fears and fought for their brothers. In a desperate few hours they did their best and gave everything they had to save their comrades. ... (because of them) sitting among us are Soldiers who will once again see their families, love their children, and tell their grandchildren what it means to know a hero."

I thought about much of this as I watched the family and friends absorb the final moments in the ceremony at Logan.

BG Kurt S. Story presents the American flag to SGT Michael Scusa's wife, Alyssa during the interment ceremony at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colo.

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Today



Mike Howard wrote at 7:24 a.m.

I finally came up with the title to my editor's blog for the Army Space Journal. Orbit's Redline. I'll post my first one tonight in the Facebook notes.

Yesterday



Mike Howard wrote at 6:04 p.m.

Well, it's Friday and I hope to get our next edition of the Army Space Journal online today. This one has a few basics on Space in it plus a neat piece on our partnership school in Colorado Springs that is building cultural bridges with students in Afghanistan. I'll post the link this evening.

3 Days Ago



Mike Howard wrote 3 Days Ago

I've been reading some stuff on critical thinking and strategic communication. Wonder why nobody really connects the two concepts? I mean, to hear the brains talk about it one is intellectual and the other a tricky wink. Well, it's snowing outside.