Letter to the Editor

From time to time, people in your command, including the commander, will want to lash out at the media when they feel they, or the command, have been slighted. You need to make sure everyone knows that only the public affairs shop handles these things and that you will help the boss decide when to engage and when to let the comments pass. Judicious decisions will help keep the peace between you and your community. But, when you find yourself facing a situation in which an official response to media coverage is warranted, one of the most effective means of addressing the issue is often a letter to the editor.

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Letter to the Editor

A letter to the editor can be written for any number of reasons. They generally respond to specific articles in a publication. Letters to the editor can be used to clarify a point or refute one. While the letter to the editor is certainly an effective tool, it should be used judiciously. Writing a letter to the editor has a tendency to prolong the news coverage by keeping an issue in the public eye, which is not always to your command’s tactical advantage. Also, your legitimate complaints will be ignored if you complain about every little mistake.

It’s best to use the letter to the editor to address only very serious issues that affect you, or the community.

Do not use them to publicly demand a correction or complain about bias. You’ll find that the most effective way to correct misreported facts is to contact the news agency directly, inform them of the factual errors, and ask for a correction, not to publicly demand one of them. And reporting the facts in a biased way is not the same as getting the facts wrong. You’ll find it quite difficult to get a news agency to correct or retract a factually true story just because you didn’t like the way the facts were characterized.

Most newspapers get many more letters than they can run, and space is an issue. Keep your letters short, one to four paragraphs, depending on the length of the letters the publication in question typically runs. Length will vary, so consult the publication for specific guidance, if necessary. Even short letters may be subject to some editing for space or content. They are more likely to be published verbatim, so write them carefully.

Never personally attack a reporter or editor. As the old adage goes, “never pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel and paper by the ton.” Stay professional in tone, and always remember that your words will reflect upon your command. Deal with facts, and facts alone. Correct them where necessary, share them where they can increase understanding and use them to support your position.

Letters to the editors must be signed to be considered for publication. Expect a call from the editor to verify the information. This is done as a standard business practice to prevent anonymous people from fraudulently using high-profile names to write letters to the editor. The editor will likely want to talk to the boss before publishing the letter, so let the boss know that.

Photo courtesy of rpseawright.files.wordpress.com
Reasons to Write

There are six reasons to write a letter to the editor.

**Correcting the record** - you, or the media, got a fact wrong (perhaps a name, statistic, date or unit designator). If this is the case, first make sure the issue warrants the lengthened media exposure a letter to the editor will often precipitate.

**Crying foul** - you feel the media outlet or some other entity has crossed the line, perhaps they used an inappropriate tone or violated decency.

**Apologizing** - your organization made a mistake, and you are owning up to it.

**Giving Assurance** - you are addressing or attempting to calm readers' fears over a policy or event that affects them.

**Obituaries** - to publicly recognize friends of the command such as former commanders, a military-friendly community leader, a distinguished local combat veteran, etc.

**Praising/acknowledging** - directing attention to a historic, new initiative. A letter thanking a community group for historic or new initiative. Their great support of your deployed forces may fall into this category as well.
Structure

The letters should be no more than four paragraphs.

In the first paragraph, identify the article, letter, speech, etc., that you are addressing and state the command’s position.

In the second and/or third paragraph, tell readers how you plan to solve the issue, or why a certain policy must be in place. You may need to simply explain a decision that caused some contention. Provide the background of what you’ve done in the situation, and never accuse or blame the other side.

One easy way to think about these three paragraphs is to think of them as, first, what happened, second, what’s happening, and third, what’s going to happen. The first graph is what happened. For example - A story in the (date) issue of (newspaper name) titled "(story headline)" stated (whatever prompted you to write). We here at (your command) feel/think/believe (command’s position).

The second and/or third paragraph is what’s happening. You might say what your command is currently doing to address the issue, what actions you’re taking to avoid it in the future, or you may use this paragraph to use current factual information to counter the factual errors in the story.

The final paragraph is what’s going to happen, a forward-looking paragraph that restates your command position and describes the resolution you envision as well as the steps you plan to take toward ensuring it.

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Conclusion

Your command should be comfortable writing letters to the editor when necessary, but you must give wise counsel to your commander about making the decision when to write them. You should also be the one writing them on behalf of your command or the commander. There are six situations in which a letter to the editor may be necessary, and it's up to you to determine whether one of those situations applies. If you determine it does, remember when writing to stay professional, factual and brief.
References and Additional Resources

DODI 5150.4 of 16 June 1997, DOD Newspapers, Magazines and Civilian Enterprise Publications