

Running Head: COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Community Relations in a Combat Zone

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## Abstract

One of the best ways to promote positive public relations and encourage support for an extended deployment is to ensure the community, spouses and soldiers are given ample opportunities to remain involved. When all parties become personally connected and involved, the inevitable outcome is positivism, good will and increased Soldier's morale.

Charity events are a one of the most affective ways to accomplish this. These events are not only a means to and end, but dually serve as a great opportunity to promote involvement. It is relatively easy to encourage sponsorship from local businesses and spouses, as they are often already looking for opportunities, but are unaware of where their help is needed. When these events are successful, spouses and American citizens are left with a feeling of being an asset to the soldier and consequently feel more connected to the mission. Equally important the community's positive experiences benefit the soldier by ensuring they feel connected to the life they left behind. It is imperative for soldiers to know their community and spouses care enough to give; additionally, it gives the community and spouses a sense of worth when they are aware of tangible ways they are making a difference.

One of the difficulties our military faces as deployments continue to lengthen is the feeling of fading community support. Historically, political and social support for combat decreases as the length of the operation grows. This

eventually puts pressure on politicians and leaders to make decisions based on public opinion rather than tactical necessity. Political leaders often get involved with polls and determine their course of action based on perceived support of pressing issues. As members of the military, we have a responsibility to do as much as we can to extend the public support for our mission. This can often be achieved by these charity events. Most events should involve the civilian populace, local businesses, military spouses and the Soldiers. Again, combining these elements provides many benefits to all participating parties. During my recent deployment to Afghanistan, I was involved in one such event and learned, first hand, the impact an event such as this can have. The Base Command Sergeant Major (CSM Green) informed me that our Bagram Air Base was to execute a 4<sup>th</sup> of July Charity Fundraiser. It would be a 10K run around the perimeter of the dusty & rocky airfield. Hearing the outline of the plan, I volunteered our battalion to head the event. We discussed the event in length and CSM Green informed me the monies would be donated to the Fisher Houses at Bethesda and Walter Reed Hospitals. I knew the fantastic histories of these establishments and realized this would be a very worthwhile endeavor. I later met with my boss, Battalion Commander (LTC Smith), and told him what I had volunteered us for. We were both a little hesitant due to the scope of the project, but after talking it over, we quickly warmed up to the idea and started getting excited. We decided it would be called the “Freedom Isn’t Free” run.

The battalion staff was called together to begin brainstorming. We decided the way to raise money was to encourage a \$15.00 donation from the soldiers to participate. Each participant would receive a t-shirt commemorating the event. Later that week as I was telling my wife of the event, she reminded me that she had been receiving letters and e-mails from family members and friends asking what they could do to support the troops. She suggested the FRG contact members of the community, as well as their respective family members and friends to solicit additional

donations. Initially, this was not even considered. However, it turned out to be one of the greatest small scale public relations endeavors I've seen in my career. She and the spouses started a chain e-mail and snail mail letter detailing the event and its intended goal. The response was phenomenal. Not only did the community and family members of the soldiers respond financially (to the tune of \$10,000), but also with an outpouring of heartfelt letters which had a direct impact on the deployed soldier's morale. The letters were priceless. Businesses, family members and friends (the letter ended up being forwarded all over the United States) sent letters along with their very, very generous donations. These letters thanked the soldiers in the most amazing display of patriotism I have ever seen. They were read repeatedly again by the troops and hung in the battalion area of operation and served as a constant reminder of the love and support back home. My wife told me that she had also personally received countless letters and e-mails from those solicited thanking her for giving them the opportunity to be involved. Many expressed how desperately they had wanted to help, to make a real difference, but just didn't know how. At that time, you could no longer send "any soldier" care packages and there were also rumors floating that many of the packages sent were either not received or were being vandalized. They expressed in their letters that sending packages was great, but they wondered if they were getting there or if what they were sending was needed. . These fine citizens were grateful to us, beside themselves with gratitude for giving them the opportunity to be involved, additionally; the spouses who got involved left each meeting with a feeling of satisfaction, involvement and comfort. Most importantly, the solders at Walter Reed and at Bagram Air Base reaped the benefits by seeing that people back home truly cared.

We released a letter to the press and it was picked up by several news papers around the country (See encl 1, 1,000 troops to run n.d). We started receiving donations within a week of the

release of the article. I was able to get "Runners World" to donate 1000 race numbers to be issued to each runner. The FRG was able to get prizes donated from local businesses that allowed us to be able to award prizes for all age groups and female/ male 1<sup>st</sup> place through 3<sup>rd</sup> place. We also had about ten prizes that were awarded randomly. I started briefing the run at each weekly Base CSM's meeting and passing out sign up sheets.

The next task that we had to work on was preparing for the run. We set up a committee for the execution of the run that included the BN S-1, S-3 and S-4 NCOs. The S-1 was the public relations representative and was responsible for coordination of all press. The S-3 handled tasking and plans. The S-4 was required to gather all the supplies that we needed to execute the operation. The committee started gathering supplies, sending out taskings for support and collection of money and signup sheets. We did a risk assessment and decided on controls that needed to be in place to reduce the risk of injury. We picked possible traffic control points, water stations, and first aid points. We selected a location for the PA system that was large enough for everyone to gather for announcements before and after the run. The VFW agreed to sponsor the event and provide a banner for the start/ finish line. The base Morale Recreation and Welfare (MWR) provided the t-shirts out of MWR funds. One of the Soldiers in our battalion created the design for the t-shirt.

The "Freedom Isn't Free" committee continued to meet weekly to update me on any issues and to let me know how the donations were coming. It was now time for my scheduled mid tour leave and I was a little apprehensive about leaving a week prior to execution. The S-4 requisitioned water and Gatorade from the Class I section for the run as well as ice to cool the beverages. We signed for the large digital clock from Base Operations to have at the finish line as the official time clock. All requirements for the run were either requested and had a scheduled pick up date or we had the items on hand. The S-3 made all the arrangements for a detail to run

the operation, including medics and road guards and water stations. The S-1 was still receiving sign up sheets but at a much slower rate. The donations from home kept rolling in.

I departed for my leave and left the HQ 1SG in charge of the run. He was a very competent 1SG and a prior S-3, so I was not worried about mission success. I was very interested in how the project was coming while I was on leave so I made a few calls and everything seemed to be on track. After the run I called to see how it went and everyone was so excited about the success of the run. The Soldiers all enjoyed it and we more than doubled the turn out for any previous run, with over 1000 participants. Soldiers came to run the race from several forward operating bases in Afghanistan. We rose a little over \$26,000 which I thought was a huge success. The S-1 turned the money over to finance to have it converted into a money order so it could be sent to the recipients. When I returned from leave the run was the talk of the base and it seemed that it was well worth the energy we put into it. The S-1 told me that the funds were disbursed to the Two Fisher Houses by money order. I was later contacted by CSM Green and he wanted to know where the funds were. I told him that they were sent to the Fisher Houses and he told me that the money was supposed to go to the Fisher Houses through the VFW. I went to finance and confirmed the purchase of the money order and the transfer of funds. As an after action review comment I have only one. When you have a sponsor, make sure that you know their exact expectations in exchange for their donations. In this case the part we missed was allowing the VFW the opportunity to receive recognition for the event.

The event was successful in many ways and yes there were a few things that went wrong that could have been prevented. The best thing that came out of it was the way the local community got behind our event by giving countless donations. The FRG was very active and really played a large role in getting donations for the run. They solicited a large majority of the

items that were provided for the event. The most amazing thing to me was the wide spread donations that came from all over the country. We even received donations from Soldiers serving in Iraq.

I encourage all members of the armed forces to take steps to involve our loved ones and our communities in our fight against terrorism and extremism. This is a war that whether you agree with or not, is going to continue for a very long time. The support that we receive from the civilian populace back home can and will have a large impact on our ability to perform our mission. You see everyday in the news organizations trying to tie our hands in combat. We the military are the fight. It is hard to support us and turn your back on our efforts. The members of the military at the Bethesda and Walter Reed military hospitals, I am sure greatly appreciated the "Military taking care of military attitude". If you get an opportunity to do something like this I would definitely advise you to take full advantage of it. Try to get people from home involved, along with the civilian community. It may well mean the difference in the level of success we have in the international war on terror.

### **1,000 Troops to Run Charity 10K in Afghanistan**

*Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, June 29, 2004*--More than 1,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and multinational forces are expected to take off their helmets and voluntarily hit the rocky roads of Bagram Air Base airfield in Afghanistan for the very first "Freedom Isn't Free" charity 10k July 4 (TBD).

Each runner is donating \$15; all proceeds will be donated to the VFW to assist soldiers and families of those wounded or killed supporting Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"We plan for this to be one of the most motivational events to happen here this year," said 1SG Green, CSM for the sponsoring unit, Logistics Task Force (LTF) 725 MSB. "This all-volunteer event is a self-initiated effort conducted by the folks stationed here in Bagram who are looking for a way to help. Our soldiers never stop giving, and this is just another great example of that."

Over 1,000 runners from more than 50 units and 10 countries will be represented at the charity run. Military

members and civilians will walk, run or put on their rucksacks and march the route. The course features rocky roads and generally rugged terrain, but race sponsors still expect world-class finishing times.

The sponsor for this event is LTF 725th Main Support Battalion, 25th Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. The 725th provides tactical logistics for U.S. and coalition forces in the vicinity of Bahgram airfield in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. The support battalion provides tactical logistics for U.S. and coalition forces at Bahgram airfield and humanitarian assistance in the local community.

To learn more, or to donate monies or prizes to "Freedom Isn't Free" please log onto [www.deltadawgs.us](http://www.deltadawgs.us) where you can donate through a secure server or contact Schenley Green at 808/753-0656 or e-mail [Schenley1@hotmail.com](mailto:Schenley1@hotmail.com)

#### References

Lorna Green "The official site of The Veterans of Foreign Wars and the United States" 1000 troops run charity 10K in Afghanistan. Retrieved 3 Oct 06 <http://www.vfw.org/index.cfm?fa=news.newsDtl&did=1973>