

When the Air Force sent two B-2 Spirit bombers on a 37-hour mission from Missouri's Whiteman Air Force Base to the Korean Peninsula last March, anyone with access to Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube had a front-row seat for the impressive display of US airpower.

The sortie arrived in the middle of the United States-South Korea Foal Eagle training exercise—and just as North Korea was touting its own military might.

For their part, military officials have stressed that the unexpected B-2 flight was aimed at assuring allies and partners that the US military can respond rapidly anywhere around the world. But broadcasting the B-2's mission to both friends and foes was clearly a strategic goal of the long-duration bomber flight.

"They dropped ordnance in the Pilsung Range, had ... F-16s join up on them, and [did] a low approach at Osan

[Air Base]," recalled Gen. Herbert J. "Hawk" Carlisle, commander of Pacific Air Forces, during a Sept. 18 Air Force Association forum. "The low approach was on YouTube and on social media within an hour of the event. So we got exactly what we wanted."

From Air Force leadership to the Pentagon's then-Press Secretary George Little to US Pacific Command to the US Embassy in Seoul, mentions of the flight abounded on social media. Most official sources reminded their followers that the B-2 flight demonstrated the United States' commitment to defend South Korea and provide extended deterrence to allies.

Pictures of the stealth bombers, including one of a B-2 being refueled midflight, flooded Twitter feeds while people around the world tweeted and retweeted the B-2s' participation in the annual exercise.

Whiteman's own Facebook entry on the mission, featuring a picture of a

soaring B-2, quickly became one of the base's most popular posts, prompting 233 users to share the image. This in turn drew a legion of new followers to the base's page. On YouTube, a single air traffic control tower video of one of the B-2s flying with fighter escorts over Osan clocked more than 170,000 views. Media outlets in the United States and abroad picked up other footage from the mission, much of it now posted on YouTube.

The rapid and widespread dissemination of images from and information about the mission was not lost on Air Force officials who were eager to spread the word about USAF's ability to rapidly respond anywhere in the world.

The exercise included B-52 bomber sorties out of Guam and F-22 fighters and sent a "strong signal" to allies and North Korea alike about the reach of US airpower, Lt. Gen. James M. Kowalski, then commander of Air Force Global Strike Command, said at the Sept. 18

Stealth Bomber, Public Messages

By Megan Scully

A B-2 bomber mission to the Korean Peninsula was highlighted by USAF's burgeoning social media effort.

forum. “We do it regularly and we do it quite well,” said Kowalski, then serving as commander of Air Force Global Strike Command.

At Whiteman, Capt. John Severns, a spokesman for the 509th Bomb Wing, said the targeted audiences received the message of the flight. “It’s a very fraught part of the world right now, and we just wanted to reassure our allies and demonstrate capabilities,” Severns said. “Facebook was simply a part of that.”

A Strategic Approach

Leveraging social media to publicize military successes is not a new tactic for the Air Force or the other services. In fact, the first widespread efforts to use platforms like Facebook date back to 2007.

But the rapid and targeted succession of images and information dispersed over social media during and after the B-2 mission is indicative of an approach to social media—both within the Air Force

and across the military—that has become far more strategic and sophisticated in recent years.

“The Air Force tries to take a very holistic approach to media,” Severns said. “We recognize the face of media is changing. No longer is it enough to use press releases or base newspapers to reach out to people.”

For the Air Force, efforts to draw an audience on social media extend well beyond the service itself. Indeed, USAF believes most of its followers online are external to the service—families of airmen, retired personnel, hobbyists, enthusiasts, prospective recruits, and other interested members of the general public. The Air Force, in turn, now has a tremendously effective microphone to use for communicating information quickly and directly with this wide-ranging audience.

To date, the service has 464 registered Facebook accounts, 177 registered Twitter accounts, 103 registered YouTube

accounts, and 50 registered Flickr accounts. That doesn’t count thousands of unregistered personal accounts held by airmen, who are encouraged to use social media to tell the Air Force story.

“The main reason we use social media is to educate the public on what the Air Force does, what its missions are, and what the airmen do on a daily basis,” said Tanya Schusler, chief of social media at the Air Force Public Affairs Agency at JBSA-Lackland, Tex. The hope, she said, is to generate more support for the Air Force by better explaining what it does, in all its mission areas.

Schusler’s office manages USAF’s seven official social media sites, including newer platforms such as Vine and Instagram, as well as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and a blog. With the click of a button, the Air Force can communicate with more than one million people worldwide. The service’s official Facebook page has 1.3 million likes, and its Twitter feed



A B-2 Spirit takes off from Whiteman AFB, Mo. Publicly sending the B-2 to participate in joint training on the Korean Peninsula was a bold and clear message meant for both US allies and potential adversaries such as North Korea.

has nearly 200,000 followers. Other social media outlets have smaller—but growing—audiences. Those people, in turn, can communicate back directly with the Air Force, a conversation with an interested audience that would have been unfathomable just a decade ago.

At first, the Air Force posted to its various accounts whenever and however officials saw fit. But since Schusler took the job in April 2010, she said she has been working on making the service's approach to social media less ad hoc and far more strategic.

One of her first orders of business was to establish weekly metrics that she and her team could use to judge whether or not they were communicating the Air Force's message effectively. "If something doesn't work this one week, then we're not going to try it again next week," she said. Success isn't necessarily about the number of followers. Rather, higher engagement numbers—i.e., comments, retweets, and views on linked stories—mark a successful post.

Simply "liking" a message is not enough, by Schusler's engagement standards. She wants to ensure the communication is two-sided.

Schusler, whose team goes through all comments on the seven accounts USAF manages, said they "really want to connect with people and answer questions." Aside

AP photo by Shin Young-Heun



North Korean News Agency

from establishing metrics, Schusler began tracking messages to ensure they aligned with the Air Force's own priorities. Another goal, she said, was broadcasting senior leaders' messages.

The Air Force has, over the last several years, become more adept at understanding which content does better on certain platforms. Something that works on Twitter, for instance, may not play well on Facebook.

News stories, for instance, are typically posted on Twitter. Schusler aims to post between five and seven tweets a day. The Air Force, meanwhile, typically posts to the official Facebook page two to three times a day, but those posts usually have a direct engagement angle to them, such as a picture or a question for followers.

Above: A B-2 (r), accompanied by F-16s, flies near Osan AB, South Korea. Left: In an undated file photo, North Korea dictator Kim Jong Un and military leaders watch an air drill. Kim grew increasingly bellicose in early 2013. The US sought to remind North Korea of America's military reach and settled on sending the nuclear capable bombers.



Power Projection on the Korean Peninsula

The B-2 flight that became an Internet sensation was conceived in scenario drills between US Pacific Command and Washington, D.C., this past March, as a way to reassure America's East Asian allies and deter a young dictator.

Last spring, North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, began to escalate threats against South Korea and its US allies after conducting a third nuclear test in February and launching a rocket into orbit in December 2012.

By early March, US and Republic of Korea officials were increasingly concerned as Kim announced the unilateral abrogation of the 1953 armistice, and on March 26, North Korea announced its strategic rocket forces were prepared to strike US installations in South Korea, Hawaii, Guam, and the American mainland.

With the 2013 iteration of Exercise Foal Eagle underway, the US sought a way to arrest escalating tensions and demonstrate American reach and military power. Officials began to vet methods to demonstrate a nonconflict show of force—known in military circles as Phase Zero operations.

US Pacific Command “called all the components and said, let's come up with some response options, a variety of response options,” Pacific Air Forces Commander Gen. Herbert J. “Hawk” Carlisle told *Air Force Magazine*. Officials proposed various responses, running from single-service naval and air packages to joint efforts as part of US military maneuvers with ROK forces on the peninsula.

“We went from least overt, least demonstrative, to more demonstrative, and one of the ones we offered and talked about was the demonstration of the global power mission,” Carlisle said. Other forces were available for the task, such as F-22 Raptors flying from Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, and F-16s and other assets were already in South Korea, some participating in Exercise Foal Eagle.

Naval and air forces became the focus of the conversation between Washington, D.C., and PACOM headquarters, as time was an issue and new ground forces would not be in position quickly enough to send the proper power projection message.

“PACOM took options, racked and stacked, and went through the national command authorities,” said Carlisle, with the White House national security staff closely involved in the discussions. “We offered up options, and the one deemed most effective was to have the B-2 show up at Osan [Air Base, South Korea] and not have [the North Koreans] know until the F-16s showed up with them.”

The White House gave the order and on March 28, a pair of B-2s took off from Whiteman AFB, Mo., flying nonstop with aerial tanker support to South Korea.

After the flight, tensions and the North's rhetoric steadily cooled. PACAF officials said the demonstration reinforced the importance of bomber and combat aircraft rotations in theater. PACOM is seeking to expand theater security programs to rotate fighters and bombers in and out of various countries for training events.

The B-2 power projection demonstration effectively sent the message that the US stood with South Korea and had the means to defend it.

—Marc V. Schanz

Schusler links to Air Force blog posts on the Twitter feed, but does not on Facebook because the blog has not resonated with those followers in the same way. “We have to be very aware of what our audience needs,” Schusler said. She knows the audience so well she can now anticipate reactions, both positive and negative, to most posts. Other factors Schusler weighs are the timing of posts—a challenge with followers stretched across every time zone.

“The timing, the amount that we post, that's all strategic,” she stressed.

Across the Force

In addition to managing the Air Force's official pages, Schusler's team provides somewhat ad hoc policy and guidance to public affairs shops at Air Force bases. They monitor other Air Force sites daily, reviewing content and comments to determine what strategies and approaches work best.

If the bases have big news to share, they'll contact Schusler's office. She said she welcomes opportunities to talk to public affairs officials about using

social media and frequently monitors unofficial public affairs Facebook pages and will answer questions posted there.

But each Air Force installation is, essentially, on its own as it navigates social media and figures out how best to communicate with its audience.

Whiteman Air Force Base, for instance, prefers Facebook to Twitter, Severns said. The base now has more than 5,000 followers, many of those coming in the days after the B-2 flight over South Korea.

Other bases, such as Eglin AFB, Fla., Ellsworth AFB, S.D., and Barksdale AFB, La., are beginning to build a following on Twitter. Regardless of their approach, Schusler said installations are getting more creative and sophisticated in how they use social media.

If there is a downside, it may be that its use is so widespread that USAF loses control over the message when airmen post about the service to their personal accounts.

There is, in short, ample opportunity for misinformation to be shared. To combat the problem, the Air Force wrote its first social media handbook. It was first drafted to familiarize airmen with social media. But it has now evolved into tips for best practices—essentially a reference for airmen to appropriately tell their story and maintain professionalism without compromising mission security or breaking the law or Air Force policy.

After all, Schusler said, using social media personally and professionally are two very different things. Having a personal Facebook account does not necessarily make an airman an expert in communicating in a strategic manner on the platform.

The 2013 handbook, available online and now in its fourth edition, still has some basic information, such as how to use hashtags and details on common social media platforms. But it also contains a list of 16 tips, ranging from the obvious, such as not sharing classified information and avoiding offensive posting, to the less obvious, such as “stay in your lane.”

“Discussing issues related to your career field or personal experiences [is] acceptable and encouraged, but you shouldn’t discuss areas of expertise where you have no firsthand, direct experience or knowledge,” the handbook states.

It reiterates to airmen that they are representing the Air Force any time they are using social media and orders them not to use the service’s name to endorse or promote products, political positions, or religious ideologies.

In addition, the guidebook emphasizes the permanency and potential hazards of

USAF photo by SSgt. Nathan Allen



PACAF chief Gen. Hawk Carlisle briefs international representatives at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii. After the March 28, 2013, B-2 flight into South Korea, tensions eased and North Korea’s rhetoric cooled.

posting information online. “What you write may have serious consequences,” according to the handbook. “Once you post something on social media, you can’t ‘get it back.’ Even deleting the post doesn’t mean it’s truly gone. Ultimately, you bear sole responsibility for what you post.”

While the Air Force has evolved the handbook over the years, Schusler said the service nonetheless has to work harder to educate airmen on how to use social media safely. Currently, trainees get a briefing on social media during basic training, but there is no servicewide training afterward. One potential approach is computer-based training, but Schusler acknowledged developing this could take some time. The goal would ultimately be to encourage more airmen—not fewer—to use social media.

“We haven’t had many issues, but there’s so much potential for us to get the story out to more people if we could get airmen to be onboard with us,” she said. “Because the everyday things they do at work could help tell the Air Force story and they may or may not see that.”

Not a “Cure-All”

The Air Force has learned several social media lessons over the years, the

primary one being that it is not a complete communications solution for the force.

It’s easy to think posting on social media gets a desired message across. But Schusler stressed that social media requires far more deliberate activity—a fact that has taken some time for the Air Force to learn. It all comes back to considering the needs of the targeted audience, including the time zones they’re in.

“Social media is not a cure-all or a magic wand that can fix everything and get the message out and get you the results you want,” Schusler said. Rather, it is part of a greater, servicewide communications strategy. “It’s not going to solve everything for you,” Schusler said.

Not all information is appropriate for posting on a social media site, such as material intended for an internal audience. Or perhaps the information is something that should just be left on a website without advertising it across other platforms. In some cases, information may not necessarily need to be on the Internet at all. Even in an era where most people are online all day wherever they are, in-person communication is still often the best approach.

“How about just old-fashioned commander-to-airman face-to-face talk?” Schusler quipped. ■

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