

Is A Picture Worth A Thousand Lives?

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ON CYBER PATROL



Is a picture worth a thousand lives – or even one? Pictures and videos of military equipment, facilities, operations and especially battle scenes are potential training manuals for hostile forces. When inappropriate graphics are posted to the Internet in a blog, a newsgroup or any other forum it opens the door for disaster.

When sent in a non-secure email, even seemingly innocent pictures put lives at risk by exposing our camp layouts, security features and other intelligence that can help them in planning tactical operations. Intelligence sweeps after operations have shown that the enemy has copies of pictures and videos taken by soldiers themselves. Without even attaching a title or a description, these graphics made available by U.S. troops significantly increase the chance that the information they contain will result in casualties.

Pictures of combat zones and military installations are all over the Internet. They are available on many websites in many countries. They appear in e-mails. They dominate some blogs. While this kind of content is to be expected from the propaganda machine of our enemies, the amount that comes from our own troops is a real cause for concern. Every picture gives the opposition another set of clues to improve their IED construction and placement, ambush positioning and timing, and other tactical plans. Every video increases the chance that the enemy will find a vulnerability in the next patrol or convoy. We have our own experts that learn a great deal from similar materials released or captured from the enemy. We know that the insurgents, terrorists and the Taliban have the same kind of photo experts with similar capabilities.

To many soldiers this is obvious. To some it seems like paranoia. Unfortunately it is neither. With current technology the amount of time from still or video digital camera to the Internet for the world to see is minutes. A picture of a convoy leaving in the morning and posted to a personal blog could result in a successful attack just hours later.

People have many reasons for posting pictures and videos. This could range from “this is kewl – “check out this explosion” to “the real story needs to be told.” Whatever the reason, it is not worth the lives and safety of our comrades in arms.

A soldier taking video and photos is to be expected. Most veterans have a picture of their unit or their buds on a wall someplace. Some have pictures of wartime events and locations. Soldiers use these keepsakes to help heal, to help others understand their experiences, to remember lost comrades and old friends. But, these pictures and videos should not be made available to the world and our enemies during the conflict.

Check out AR 530-1 OPSEC and see what it says about what you should and should not post. “Just because it’s not classified doesn’t mean is not sensitive”, wrote a recently returning Iraqi war veteran.

OPSEC means keeping useful information out of enemy hands. Soldiers need to realize that a picture of a destroyed vehicle or a defensive position, even a mess tent, can provide as much information as a detailed description in words. No matter how powerful or sophisticated our warfighting capabilities are, they will be significantly reduced by this material falling into the wrong hands.