

# Freeze Frame

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## Cutting to the chase

Making a great image is just one half of the equation to outstanding photojournalism.

Sure, an outstanding image is what draws the reader into a story or makes them want to read further.

In the second part of the equation, a photojournalist has to be able to write a supporting outline or caption to completely tell the story.

For the sake of this month's article, we will use the term "caption" since the Department of Defense released the new Captioning Style Guide in October 2011.

The first paragraph on the first page of the guide pretty much sums up why we should all be able to write captions for our images.

It reads: "This publication provides a standard method of writing captions for DoD imagery. The guidance provided will help photographers, videographers and all who produce or manage DoD imagery write and edit captions that are accurate, clear, concise and meet DoD style standards."

The operative words here are "accurate, clear, concise" while adhering to the department's standards.

### Constructing a caption

If we think back to our Defense Information School training, we all should remember the ABC's – Accuracy, Brevity, and Clarity.

Following the ABC model, the style guide gives us the basic guidance on writing effective and informative captions.

"The first sentence contains the 5 W's and is always written in the present tense using active voice.

"A caption describes the moment the image is captured, not what came before or after, so the first sentence will be written as if from that moment.

"The second sentence should almost always be written in past tense. This sentence gives background information on the image. It explains why the image is significant and places it in a larger context.

"When providing background information in a caption, include information that explains the significance of the action in the image."

But what about when you have three or more people in an image? How do we effectively communicate the story behind the image? The style guide gives us guidance for this situation as well.

"When identifying people in an image, use the rule of three; provide the full name and rank and/or title of every person when there are three or fewer people in the image. It is not necessary to individually identify everyone should there be four or more people present, although there may be some cases (such as with high-level officials) where that would be appropriate."

This brings us to this month's example.

### Getting to the point

The attached image was posted on the Army Public Affairs Center milBook website a few months ago that was pulled from AKO. At the risk of embarrassing the photographer, I have removed their name from the caption.

While I understand wanting to make sure that everyone gets their name and photo in "the paper", "the magazine", or "the website", there has to be a better way to caption this image.

The focus of the image is Gene Wilcher, a patient at the Carl Vinson Veterans Affairs Medical Center, being visited by the Soldiers pictured with him.



Spc. Troy S. Stemen, a native of Columbia City, Ind., and a human intelligence collector for Company B, 4-3 Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, along with Spc. Skee J. Ferguson, a Clermont, Fla., native, and an unmanned aerial vehicle operator for Company B, 4-3 BSTB, Lt. Col. Matthew D. McCollum, commander of 4-3 BSTB, Sgt. John R. Berger, a native of Winchester Center, Conn., and a human intelligence collector for Company B, 4-3 BSTB, Pvt. Aubrey L. Johnson, a native of Farmington, N.M., and a signal support systems specialist with Company C, 4-3 BSTB, Spc. Kalan B. Willess, a native of Phoenix, Ariz., and a cable systems installer for Company C, 4-3 BSTB, and Spc. Luan Reed, a native of Thailand and a imagery analyst with Company B, 4-3 BSTB, visit Gene Wilcher, a veteran receiving medical care at the Carl Vinson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Dublin, Ga., on Veterans Day, Nov. 11. (Photo by Sgt. Snuffy Smith)

Unfortunately, you can't figure that out until the last line of the caption! The first part of the caption is all about the Soldiers standing in the background. There is so much military-speak; the reader is going to tire out before they get to the end of the caption.

Or worse, they're going to turn the page or click off the website if it is an online photograph.

The lengthy caption poses many questions – at least in my mind.

Was Wilcher part of this unit? Why was he singled out when you can plainly see another patient in a bed behind the group? What is Wilcher's story? Was he wounded in combat? Please tell us.

Kudos to the photographer for gathering very detailed information on each Soldier standing behind Wilcher but I'd like to know more about him.

If this were the only image I had to publish, I would propose the following caption in its place. It may not be the only way to write the caption but it cuts to the chase and gets to the focus of the image.

*Soldiers from Fort Stewart, Ga. visit Gene Wilcher, a patient at the Carl Vinson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Dublin, Ga., as part of a Veterans Day community outreach program, Nov. 11. Wilcher, a veteran of (insert branch of service, campaign, etc.), said spending time with the Soldiers (insert his thoughts, comments here.). The Soldiers are with 4th Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division.*

I would then list the individual Soldiers and their hometowns as the last sentence, useful for marketing via DVIDS.

The thing to remember with captions is this: describe what is going on in the image while informing the reader of its significance in a concise manner.

If you do not have your copy of the latest DoD Captioning Style Guide, you can download the pdf at:

<http://www.defenseimagery.mil/dms/dvi-documents/StyleGuide-111027-print.pdf>

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