Pentagram moves to digital age, ends decades as printed newspaper

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Today marks the end of an era. Pentagram readers will no longer smell fresh ink or feel crisp newsprint. This printed edition is the last. Beginning next week, the Pentagram will become an online-only publication.

"This is a very sad day for us at the joint base," wrote Col. Kimberly Peeples, Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall commander, in an email. "The Pentagram is iconic. The editors and writers made it the reputable, beloved and valued information source it's been for years! It will be hard to replace and will be sorely missed." The Pentagram was printed by a private company at no cost to the Army. The printer's revenue comes solely from ad sales. While low ad sales have been threatening the overall newspaper business for some time, COVID-19 made it especially hard-lining for the Pentagram.

The command left the door open for bringing back the print version after COVID-19 is over and the economy recovers, but for now the change is immediate.

New Beginnings

Although saving the Pentagram became a top priority for Peeples, she understands how technology and the current pandemic is affecting print news.

"It has been one of my priorities to keep this print edition of our newspaper going even in these tough days for the newspaper industry," Peeples said via email. "I know there is an important segment of our community that doesn't rely on digital media for its news. However, with COVID-19, it just is not feasible to print a full news-paper any longer." Still, Peeples wants to reassure readers that her staff will find ways to continue communication with the joint base’s key audiences, especially the veterans community.

"Welcome to the digital age," emailed Glenn Wat, JBM-HH chief of staff. "You know no matter what may change, the Army goes rolling along. During COVID-19, we have learned that social media tools can keep us connected. We have had tremendous success with our virtual town halls and video briefs. An online newspaper will be another dimension of our communications"

Julia Simpkins, JBM-HH command information officer, will lead that effort.

"Our aim is to maintain continuity in command information sharing," said Simpkins in a text. "I don't view this happening as a bad thing, but as a evolution. The online world is taking prominence in the world of storytelling. News stories are no longer just stories. The methods of putting out information evolves, but the need for that information is a constant..."

Pentagram History

I was able to access a collection of bound copies of the newspaper in the Fort Myer library because it is closed due to the pandemic, so I reached out to some other sources for a look at the history of the Pentagram. A Google search turned up an article Jim Goodwin wrote about the newspaper in 2015. Goodwin was the paper’s editor from 2014 to 2016. The Pentagram traces its roots to 1949 when the Military District of Washington published the Fort Meir Post, according to Goodwin, who was able to access the archives for his article. This newspaper "served those who worked at or lived on any installation within the Military District of Washington, according to a look at Pentagram archives," Goodwin wrote. The Pentagram News started sometime before 1957, Goodwin continued. This paper appears to be the actual predecessor to our current newspaper as it was printed by a civilian contractor at no cost to the government and became a weekly published every Thursday. Kim Holien, former historian at JBM-HH, wrote in an email that his personal knowledge of the Pentagram goes back to the 1970s. His father retired in 1973.

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That nearly 63-year-old edition contained a story about his father’s retirement on Summerall Field, wrote Holien. "At that time the Retirement Ceremony consisted of a cement block about four inches high and about ten-foot-by-ten-foot or thereabouts," he wrote. Goodwin explained that the Fort Myer Post changed its name to the MDW Post and eventually went away. In 1983, the word “news” was dropped from the title of The Pentagram News. Early Days

My search for historical information found former staffers from various generations who offered personal memories of their experiences with the publication to help me give a proper tribute to the paper. A friend connected me with Steve Abbott who was an Army specialist fire working on both the MDW Post and as the editor and The Pentagram News as the senior military reporter from 1975 to 1979. Abbott remembers the monthly MDW Post as the Military District’s official publication at the same time the organization was also printing The Pentagram News.

"Those two papers could not have been more different," Abbott wrote in an email. "The Pentagram News — The "Pent", was part of the official name in a serious publication written with the knowledge that it was read by the highest level military and civilian leaders in the Pentagon... The Post was definitely targeted to our younger enlisted soldiers. It was great fun to edit and write for the Post." As reporters we were able to be truly journalists and present both sides of a topic (for both papers) … we generally were able to cover current issues, in a balanced fashion, even if they were somewhat controversial. I remember having meetings with (my public affairs boss) after an edition had come out and he related some spirited conversation he had with a high military type about how we had covered a particular story.”

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