Intelligence

By Sid Heal

In the darkest hours of World War II, Winston Churchill wrote a note to General John Dill, stating, "The great thing is to get the true picture, whatever it is."[1] The picture Churchill considered so important is called the "intelligence picture" and refers to a mental image of everything that is known about a situation at a given time. A complete intelligence picture includes not only what is known at present, but what has existed in the past and that which may exist in the future.

The importance of reliable and timely intelligence is nearly impossible to overestimate. It not only provides the underpinnings for understanding and insight but establishes a basis to formulate plans and make effective decisions. While scientific principles are critical, the intelligence function, more than any other, also relies heavily on the intuition, ingenuity and experience of the staff to avoid ineffectual searches and other unproductive efforts. It also discerns relevance and importance from a hodgepodge of random data.

The intelligence function involves gathering, recording, evaluating and disseminating all pertinent information relating to an incident. It attempts to fill the gap between what decision-makers know and what they need to know. In its most simple state, intelligence takes one of three forms.

- "Essential Elements of Information" (EEI) are critical facts that a commander must have to make a decision. EEIs are context dependent; that is, their exact nature will be determined by the unique circumstances for any given situation.

- "Assumptions" are defined as anything that is taken for granted or accepted as true without proof. Assumptions are used when an EEI cannot be obtained in time to be incorporated into the decision-making process. Thus, an assumption performs the role of a "substitute" for an EEI. In fact, a litmus test for determining if needed information is an EEI is to ask, "If I don't have this information, will I be forced to make an assumption?" If the answer is "Yes," then the information should be vigorously sought as an EEI.

- "Other Intelligence Requirements" (OIRs) describe information that is "nice to have" and complement the more critical EEIs by filling in the blanks and providing a more complete picture of the situation. EEIs, OIRs and assumptions are distinct but complimentary components of a complete intelligence picture.[2]

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Besides developing an intelligence picture, an implied responsibility for this function is the continual assessment of all information to determine relevance, accuracy and timeliness in forecasting the impact on the overall operation. Of all the components, the intelligence section is most concerned with the future since virtually all planning and refinements to an existing plan will be dependent upon the availability and usefulness of the intelligence provided.

The term "intelligence" refers not only to the product, but the process. A complete intelligence picture is never possible. It only reflects everything that is known up to the time it is presented. Consequently, efforts at obtaining reliable, relevant and timely information continue throughout the tactical portion of the operation—and even after it is concluded. The lessons learned from one operation lay the groundwork for the next.

While not as scientific as the logistics function, the intelligence function nevertheless requires a methodical and logical approach, not only to ensure that the product is reliable but that it is available in time to be incorporated into planning and decision-making. Too late is the same as absent. The intelligence process can be broken down into four sequential but interrelated steps.[3]

1. Direction stems straight from the operational mission. It identifies both the nature of the intelligence sought and the means to attain it. The commander participates in this portion of the plan by determining the critical information needed to make effective decisions, which will then become the EEIs. Next, personnel assigned to the intelligence function prepare a collection plan to ensure maximum efforts are focused on obtaining the essential information in the shortest amount of time.

2. Collection refers to those efforts made to obtain the information and make it available. The value of using a collection plan cannot be overstated. It provides both the guidance and focus of effort to efficiently obtain the information to support a commander's direction. Each mission needs a separate plan and will change with the tactical situation. Information obtained from collection efforts is generally "loose" data, which may take any variety of forms from oral reports, sketches, and diagrams, to computer data, maps or photographs. ("Loose data" refers to disjointed bits and pieces of information of undetermined value.)

3. Processing and production. In processing, loose data is analyzed and organized into a usable form. Charts and graphs may be constructed and/or maps may be annotated. Data may be put into computer data-

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bases and spreadsheets. In short, this step allows the significance of the data to become conspicuous so that the information can be further examined and analyzed.

Closely related is production. This is where the raw data first becomes intelligence[4] as the information is analyzed for relevance, reliability and accuracy. This is the point where "information fusion" takes loose data and combines the bits and pieces into new facts and indications through evaluation (determining value), integration (compiling related pieces of data) and interpretation (analyzing related data).

4. Dissemination. This final step ensures that the varying organizational components get the needed intelligence in an appropriate form and in a timely manner. There are two criteria that must be met. The first is timeliness. Intelligence that arrives too late to be incorporated into the decision-making process places a commander in pretty much the same position as a bystander. The second is to provide it in a usable form. Sending a computer disk to a field command post without a computer may seem absurd, but serves as an excellent example. No matter how valuable the data on the disk, it is not usable. More common incompatibilities may include extremely small-scale maps sent to local units or color sensitive information photocopied in black and white or sent through fax machines.

By its very nature, the intelligence function tends to be overshadowed behind the more glamorous operations and command and control functions it supports, but it is nearly impossible to overestimate its contribution to successful tactical operations. The intelligence function can be appropriately compared to that of a mentor because it provides the knowledge and guidance necessary to make informed and effective decisions. In the words of one leader, "I not only use all the brains that I have, but all that I can borrow."[5] ◂

Endnotes

1. Winston Churchill; Note to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, 24 November 1940.

2. In many military texts, these terms have now been replaced. The more contemporary concepts and definitions are Priority Intelligence Requirements (PIR) for essential elements of information and Intelligence Requirements for other intelligence requirements. For our purposes here, however, the traditional terms are more appropriate.

3. For simplicity and clarity, only four steps are described, but many military texts identify five steps by separating the processing and production steps into separate components. Still others add a sixth step called "utilization," which refers to the exploitation of the intelligence.

4. It is important to note the difference between information and intelligence. Information is defined as the knowledge or news of an event or situation gained through collection of facts or data. Intelligence, on the other hand, is the product of specific information relevant to the situation at hand.

5. Attributed to President Woodrow Wilson.