

## Operations

By Sid Heal

The operations component of a tactical organization is charged with the planning, assignment, coordination, execution and evaluation of tactical missions. In the simplest terms, this function is responsible for ensuring that the end state, as defined by the command and control element, is efficiently and effectively accomplished. While the intelligence and logistical components of a tactical organization are just as crucial, the operations component is far more conspicuous. This is where the proverbial “rubber meets the road.” Problems in obtaining timely and reliable intelligence or failing to provide logistical support may be nearly unnoticeable until the operations component attempts to implement some action. Consequently, failures and shortcomings from the other functions are often unjustly attributed to operations. This is one place where the “art of war” becomes the application of the science. As one philosopher said, “Action will remove the doubt that theory cannot solve.”<sup>1</sup>

The operations component allows the command and control element to focus on determining an acceptable end state, identifying enabling objectives and developing strategy without the necessity of personally supervising each of the subordinate tasks. Thus, the operations function can be divided into two predominate roles, planning and implementation.

Most operations will not require a written plan. Indeed, many situations are so spontaneous and dynamic that the time it would take to write out a plan would make it obsolete before it was even implemented. Generally, however, a written plan should be considered necessary whenever resources from more than one agency are used or when the incident is prolonged and requires changes in shifts of personnel or equipment. With one exception, collective planning (planning done by more than one person) is always better than individual planning. This method reduces the impact of personal prejudices,

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enhances perception, increases possibilities and results in a more accurate assessment of risk. The single exception is when speed is more important than precision. On these occasions, the experience of the commander can hardly be overvalued.

When developing a plan, an operational analysis is critical. This analysis is a fundamental but sometimes complex prerequisite to determine the best methods of translating the operational requirements from the command and control element into the actions necessary to achieve the desired end state. One tried and true system used by the U.S. military is called the METT-T method. METT-T is an acronym that stands for:

- Mission
- Enemy (or obstacle)
- Terrain and weather
- Troops and support available
- Time

This simple, five-part process is a good first step in gaining the situational awareness<sup>2</sup> necessary to make effective tactical decisions.

The **mission** statement is the most critical component of any plan<sup>3</sup> because it provides the basis from which all other plan-

ning must necessarily follow and from which the essential tasks are derived. It is a clear, concise statement of what is to be done and for what purpose. Of the two parts, the purpose is most important because when subordinates understand the intent of the mission, they are able to adapt and improvise to achieve it when they discover that the actual task would be unproductive. This concept is called “mission tasking”<sup>4</sup> and is an important method of promoting the initiative of subordinates without the necessity of itemizing each task or action.

The **enemy** component identifies the obstacle preventing attainment of the desired end state. For domestic law enforcement, the term “obstacle” serves as a suitable substitute. This component identifies the threat, whether it is adversarial or other situations such as fires, floods, earthquakes or HazMat spills. The essential characteristic of this step is that it clearly identifies whatever needs to be defeated, removed, circumvented or surmounted to succeed.

**Terrain and weather** is the next step and refers to the impact that these will have on the success of the mission. Most commonly, terrain and weather will impact a mission with such factors as trafficability, visibility or sustainment. Consequently, details such as precipitation, temperature, time of sunrise and sunset, wind speed and direction, humidity, slope, vegetation and other factors need to be considered.

**Troops and support** available are necessary to estimate efficiency, effectiveness and sustainment. It includes not only the number of personnel available, but what skills and equipment they possess and how long it will take to move them into action. When assessing this component, it is essential to understand that “troops” are always consumers. Depending on the circumstances, they must have food, water, shelter, rest, batteries, ammunition and so forth. Likewise, available support often requires special personnel to be useful. A helicopter without a pilot, for example, is useless.

**Time** is the final step. Time is always a critical component in plans because doing the right thing at the wrong time is just as unproductive as doing the wrong thing at any time. Furthermore, the time available and the time required may be incompatible. Consequently, time always imposes prioritization requirements and must be considered as an integral part of the planning process.

Once a plan is developed, the operations function is charged with implementing it. Thus, the implementation role is complementary to the planning role and just as essential. However, turning a plan into action is more involved than one might think. The plan at the end of the operation usually bears only a slight resemblance to the one beginning it. It is for this reason that the process is more important than the product. The perception and insight gained during the operational analysis and planning process provides a depth of understanding that can be attained in no other way. This is the predominant reason that it is preferred that the implementation of a plan is conducted by those authoring it.<sup>5</sup>

The operational imperative for implementation is to seek, gain and maintain the initiative. Initiative<sup>6</sup> refers not so much to action, but rather a freedom to act, and its impact on the success of any tactical operation cannot be overemphasized. Failure to gain and maintain the initiative dooms the response to one of reaction. As one of those wise old Greeks once said, "The art of war is, in the last result, the art of keeping one's

freedom of action."<sup>7</sup>

Seeking the initiative requires a predisposition for action. Commanders who are timid and reluctant to act allow the situation to continue to deteriorate. While a novice might interpret this concept as requiring some activity, the more experienced will understand that sometimes initiative is better gained by allowing conditions to develop where circumstances become more favorable for exploitation. These opportunities are always elusive, sporadic and fleeting. This means that they are difficult to foresee, occur with no regular or predictable pattern and pass quickly. The best commanders not only anticipate opportunities that might be exploited, but they are imaginative and resourceful in creating situations that make them more likely to occur.

Gaining the initiative requires opportunities to be exploited when they occur. Opportunities manifest themselves in any number of ways. A barricaded suspect may fall asleep, move to a position of disadvantage, or a hostage may escape. During a wildfire, a wind change may provide a respite to construct fire lines or reinforce vulnerable areas. A commander who is able to recognize and exploit opportunities is able to incrementally gain advantages that lead to success.

Once the initiative has been gained, maintaining it requires continuing actions. With suspects it means creating conditions that force a suspect to react. With natural disasters it usually means repeating or rein-

forcing the actions that proved successful in gaining the initiative in the first place. Because initiative is inextricably linked with time, maintaining an operational tempo<sup>8</sup> that provides for rapid response while avoiding delays is one sure method. Regardless of how it is accomplished, maintaining the initiative is essential for a successful resolution.

The operations component, like its fraternal twins, intelligence and logistics, is part of the triad of specialties involved in every tactical response. And while it is the most visible, it is not the most important. Each of the components rely and interact with one another so that a synergy occurs where the combined effect is greater than the sum of the individual efforts. As the old saying goes, "No one can whistle a symphony. It takes an orchestra to play it." ◀

## Footnotes

1. Tehyi Hsieh, Chinese educator, writer and diplomat (1881- ).
2. For more information on situational awareness, see "Situational Awareness and a Common Operational Picture," *The Tactical Edge*, Spring 2002, pp. 55-56.
3. For more information on the component parts of a plan, see "Components of a Tactical Plan," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2003, pp. 50-52.
4. For more information on the mission tasking, see "Mission Tasking," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1999, pp. 93-94.
5. In the fire services, it is common to have the intelligence function responsible for the planning role.
6. For more information on initiative, see "Tempo and Initiative," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1996, p. 75.
7. Xenophon, circa 430-355 BC, a Greek soldier and writer and disciple of Socrates.
8. For more information on tempo, see "Tempo and Initiative," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1996, p. 75.

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