

Unknown Knowns

Why we need joint SOF planners in the operational planning team

by CDR James L. Clark, USN

In 2003, I was a newly commissioned ensign assigned as the Assistant Operations Officer, SEAL Team Two (ST-2). We received a naval message from Expeditionary Strike Group 2 (ESG2), tasking ST-2 to conduct the beach reconnaissance of fourteen linear miles of beach with a SEAL platoon in support of the first-ever combined amphibious exercise in the Florida panhandle and provide the appropriate hydrographic and terrain analysis and products in thirty days from receipt. There were several problems with this request, not the least of which being we no longer used SEAL platoons to conduct hydrographic beach reconnaissance in support of an ESG. This task would have taken almost 60 days for a single SEAL platoon to complete. My commanding officer was perplexed by this message and directed me to engage with the ESG2 staff in order to have them rescind the message and release a new one.

Needless to say, the ESG2 staff was unreceptive of our request; their commander had issued the message, and if we were unable to support, we should respond in message traffic. After several hours of arguing that ESG2 had improperly tasked ST-2, and that a simple rescinding of the previous message and release of the language we provided would allow us to meet the ESG2 commander's intent, the staff finally agreed to allow me to make the case to the commodore. I explained that by directing a SEAL platoon to conduct the beach reconnaissance, he had directly limited my commander's ability to employ capabilities that could better accomplish the directed tasks in the allotted time. In less than fifteen minutes, the commodore agreed to rescind the previous message and release the new language ST-2 had provided.

>See bio on page 21.

I returned to the ESG2 staff fourteen days later, not with a single hand-drawn hydrographic reconnaissance chart of a small section the beach (which the ESG2 staff was expecting), but with two giga-bytes of side-scan sonar charts of the entire fourteen linear miles of beach, from the three-and-a-half fathom curve to the first major terrain feature above the high water line. The ESG2 staff relied on an outdated understanding of SEAL capabilities and how special operations forces (SOF) could support their requirements.

These questions demonstrate a lack of knowledge about how SOF capabilities and missions may be integrated into a large conventional operation or campaign.

SOF executes unexpected actions at unexpected locations when the enemy least expects them. To accomplish this, SOF operates in small formations, or teams, that are capable of operating as part of a larger, distributed force working toward a common end state across multiple domains. When you think of other SOF, what missions come to mind? Direct action and special reconnaissance, but that is only a small part of the SOF operational portfolio. A common misperception is that SOF begins and ends with counterterrorism (CT),

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As a student at Marine Corps University's Command and Staff College, I had the opportunity to conduct multiple planning exercises and war games. The focus of most of the exercises and war games was how to fight the MAGTF; however, even here at the "Cross Roads of the Marine Corps," there was an understanding that virtually every military action the United States undertakes will be a joint action. As one of only four joint SOF officers in the course, I was often asked very specific questions: "Can a SEAL platoon conduct a raid to ...?" "Can the Green Berets recon this target in support of ...?" or "Can SOF aviation penetrate an integrated air defense network?" The questions were often asked well into course-of-action phase of the planning process as a means of solving tactical shortfalls.

and this perception is based on the fact that SOF has played a very visible role in the current CT fight; but CT is not the only mission area in which SOF actively engages. A significant portion of SOF is deployed to support foreign internal defense and security force assistance, conducting operations by, with, and through a partner nation's security forces against state and non-state actors who threaten U.S. and partner-nation interests in dozens of countries that are not directly engaged in the CT fight. These two mission areas are often unknown to conventional planners but constitute a large portion of SOF's operational capability. SOF also conducts unconventional warfare to develop and support indigenous forces against state and non-state actors. Counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction,



Oftentimes, SOF will be involved in non-combat situations. (Photo by PFC Kenny Nunez Bigay.)

foreign humanitarian relief, hostage rescue, and preparation of the environment are a few of the other missions areas you can expect to find SOF operators conducting around the world. SOF is constantly engaged across the globe, as a function of “steady-state” operations, to develop and maintain a network of highly capable SOF partner forces to defend our allies and interests. SOF civil affairs operations and military information support operations capabilities are often leveraged by other government agencies, such as the Department of State, far from any active combat zone or crisis area. During a recent testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, GEN Raymond A. Thomas, USA, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, stated,

On a daily basis, we sustain a deployed or forward stationed force of approximately 8,000 across eighty plus countries. They are conducting the entire range of SOF missions in both combat and noncombat situations with a wide variety of Joint, Interagency, International, and Multi-national partners.¹ These small teams work by, with, and through this global SOF network to affect our Nation’s enemies.

There are several differences between the military decision-making process² and the Marine Corps Planning Process (MCPP), the most notable of which is

the emphasis placed on problem framing in the MCPP. The operational planning team leader’s guide states,

The ultimate goal of problem framing is to gain an enhanced understanding of the problem and the environment in which it must be solved. It is not enough to simply identify the problem. The Commander and his staff must understand why it is their problem.³

There are 30 pages associated with problem framing and 20 on course-of-action development. Problem framing sets the conditions, both enemy and friendly, for the rest of the planning process, and getting this process right is critical. Understanding the problem

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is critical to effective planning, but so is understanding the tools available to solve it. Conducting the enemy and friendly center of gravity analysis enables a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both in order to exploit enemy weaknesses through friendly force strengths. Prob-

lem framing is the foundation upon which the rest of the MCPP is built; get it right and you will build an executable plan, get it wrong and you will suffer the consequences.

SOF brings capabilities to the battlefield not found in other units and will most likely have its own geographic combatant commander-directed missions in virtually all future conflicts, contingencies, or engagements. A conventional operational planning team (OPT) should give serious consideration to requesting a team of joint SOF planners from the appropriate theater special operations command (TSOC) to support their effort. A TSOC serves as the geographic combatant commander’s special operations component command, responsible for all SOF and operations in the theater. Each TSOC has a J-5 section responsible for SOF planning in support of its geographic combatant commander. At a minimum, the TSOC planners can provide your OPT an understanding of what is currently in theater, what operations are active in the area of operations, the geographic combatant commander-directed tasks for the TSOC under current or projected conditions, and, most importantly, what capabilities are and are not available to the OPT for planning purposes. Regardless of the time allotted, every effort should be made to incorporate SOF planners as early as possible, even if it must be done remotely. Developing a collaborative environment will pay dividends should plans become operations. There is a high probability that SOF already has forces on the ground, either in the crisis zone or in countries directly adjacent to it. These forces not only provide realtime situational awareness but also often serve as an advance force for follow-on coalition operations. Working directly with the TSOC during the planning process can also help shape SOF operations. This may enhance the effectiveness of conventional forces by aligning SOF capabilities with specified or implied tasks developed during problem framing. As stated above, direct action and special reconnaissance are only two mission areas. SOF is able to conduct a wide range of missions across all domains

while maintaining a low profile. The 2003 U.S.-led coalition invasion of Iraq provides several examples of SOF operations in support of a conventional campaign; from hunting mobile ballistic missile launchers in the Western deserts to conducting unconventional warfare with Kurdish forces in Northern Iraq, SOF were critical to the overall initial success of defeating Saddam Hussain's military forces during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.⁴

Current and envisioned battlefields pose complex problems to the conventional planner. These complex problems may frustrate the capabilities available to the conventional force planner. SOF planners offer novel solutions to complex problems. SOF capabilities may support conventional objectives, reducing the risk to both mission and force. A joint SOF planning team should be brought into a conventional OPT, early in problem framing, if possible. Involving SOF planners will, at a minimum,

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reduce friction between SOF and conventional forces and may develop effective solutions to complex problems while maximizing the resources available to affect the enemy.

Notes

1. GEN Raymond Thomas, USA, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, "Statement to the House Armed Services Committee," Opening Statement, United States Congress, (Washington, DC: 2 May 2017).

2. Department of the Army, Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Handbook No. 15-06, Military Decision Making Process*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: March 2015).

3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MSTP Pamphlet 5-0.2, Operational Planning Team Leader's Guide*, (Washington, DC: May 2017).

4. Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, "A Nation at War: Special Operations; Covert Units Conduct A Campaign Invisible Except For The Results," *The New York Times*, (New York: 6 April 2003).



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