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RELATIVE SUPERIORITY AND THE IRREGULAR WARRIOR

In 1993 retired United States Navy (USN) Admiral and USN SEAL, William H. McRaven, then a Commander, authored a thesis entitled *The Theory of Special Operations* at the US Naval Postgraduate School. Two years later he published a book entitled, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare Theory and Practice*, which is based heavily upon his thesis. Within both he outlines the theory of special operations advancing the concept of relative superiority¹ as the principal factor that enables special operations forces (SOF) to succeed. Specifically, he addressed the question of how a SOF element with inferior numbers attacking a superior force gains superiority (McRaven, 4). Relative superiority therefore is a condition that exists when a generally smaller attacking force (inferior strength) gains decisive advantage over a larger or well-defended enemy (superior strength) (McRaven, 4). Once achieved, the attacking SOF force is no longer at a disadvantage and has the initiative and can secure victory. It is important to highlight that while relative superiority does not guarantee victory, it is necessary for success (McRaven, 2). Recent history has shown that this concept of relative superiority is not as unique to SOF as McRaven or indeed any SOF operator may wish as irregular warriors (insurgents, terrorists, guerrillas, etc.) have achieved similar successes. Specifically that an inferior irregular force gains decisive advantage over a larger one and the principal tool used to gain relative superiority is the Improvised Explosive Device (IED). To illustrate this, McRaven's methodology will be used to examine one specific example, that of the 2008 Taliban assault and prison break of Sarposa Prison in Kandahar, Afghan-

¹ Relative superiority as McRaven defines it applying to special operations is different than that of Clausewitz's relative superiority, which is defined as the concentration of superior strength at a geographically decisive point in a battle (McRaven 2).

istan, as well as an overview of a number of other examples culminating in a more hybrid threat such as that posed by the Islamic State.

In order to understand the potential for irregular warriors to gain relative superiority, it is first necessary to better understand it and the theory of special operations as presented by McRaven. There are three properties of relative superiority: it is achieved at the pivotal moment of an engagement, increasing the probability of mission completion; it must be sustained from that moment forward; and if it is lost, it is both difficult to regain and the likelihood of mission success decreases (McRaven, 6). The pivotal moment, that point in time and space when relative superiority is achieved, is often the point of greatest risk to the attacking force but once gained must be sustained. The sustainment of relative superiority requires the intervention of those Clausewitzian moral factors (courage, intellect, boldness, perseverance etc) throughout the conduct of the operation, particularly for those activities that require more time to accomplish such as a hostage rescue or a prison break (McRaven, 7). As SOF generally lack firepower relative to a larger conventional force² when they lose relative superiority, it is difficult to regain through force and consequently, they lose the initiative and the stronger force generally prevails. Thus it becomes key for the inferior force (SOF) to gain relative superiority early in the engagement, as the longer it progresses the greater the frictions of war, such as the will of the enemy, chance and uncertainty, will play upon the outcome of the operation (McRaven, 8). McRaven uses the Relative Superiority Graph (Figure 1-1) to illustrate when achieved.

² In the context of the case studies covered by McRaven (ranging from 1940 to 1976) this is true, however modern SOF are greatly enabled and supported by cutting-edge technologies as well as often benefit from dedicated combat and combat support assets that conventional forces or their foes could never call upon.

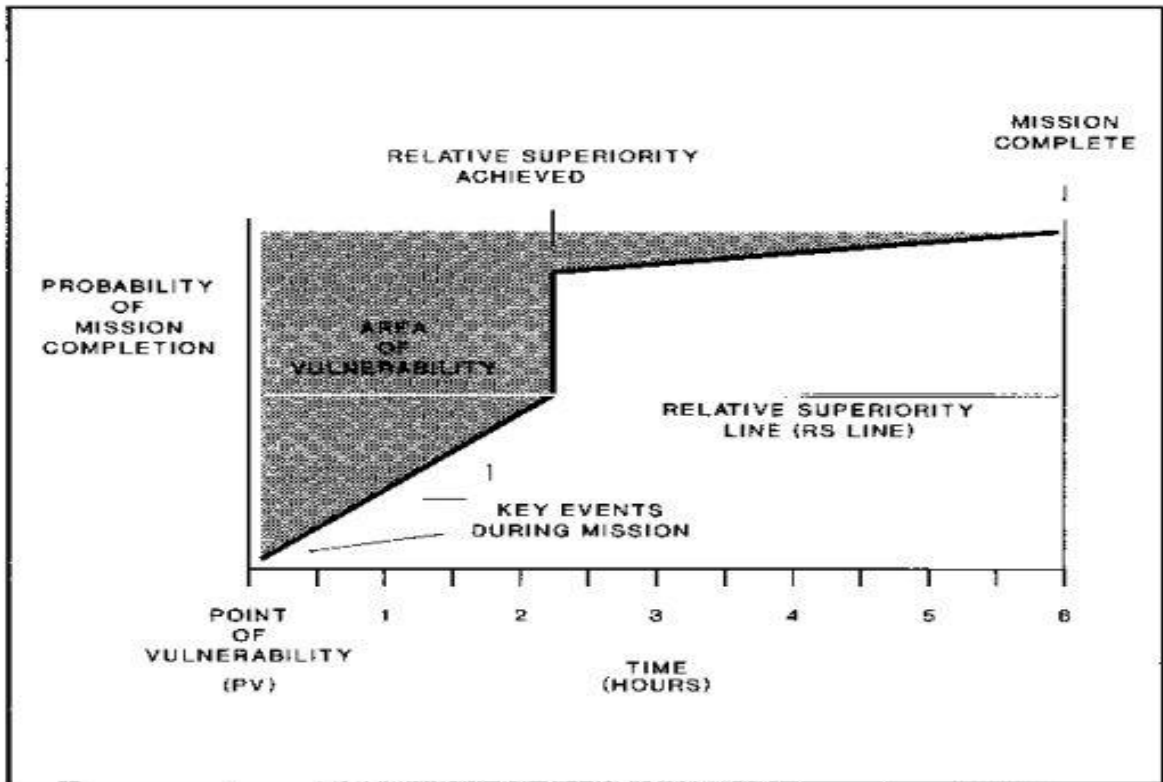
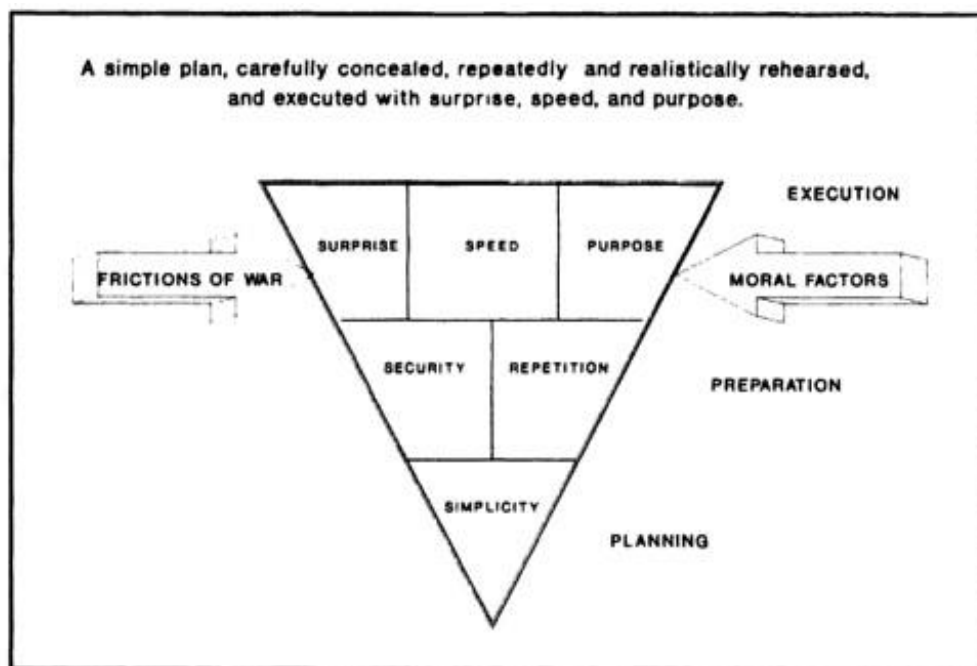


Fig. 1-1. Sample Relative Superiority Graph

The X-axis is time and the Y-axis is the probability of mission completion with the intersection of the two being the point of vulnerability (PV). He defines the, admittedly somewhat arbitrary, PV as the point in a mission when the attacking force reaches the enemy's first line of defences and it is at this point that the frictions of war start to impinge upon the success of the engagement (McRaven, 7). The area of vulnerability (AV) relates to mission completion over time and the longer it takes to gain relative superiority the greater the impact of the frictions of war (McRaven, 11). Following a previous analysis of eight historical cases McRaven posits six principles of special operations upon which the SOF element has some degree of control and that can have an effect over relative superiority. These principles are simplicity, security, repetition, speed, purpose and

surprise (McRaven, 8) and encapsulated within the planning, preparation and execution phases of the operation, to the latter I would include a redeployment element as a suicide mission where the entire assaulting element is destroyed by design is not considered a special operation. Figure 1-2 shows the special operations model and the interplay between the principles, the phases of the operation and the frictions of war as well as the moral factors of the combatants.



McRaven's case studies are examined in detail along the eight principles and the above model aids in the understanding of the relationship between them and relative superiority. It is noteworthy that relative superiority is emphatically and "strictly the purview of small forces [...and that by] virtue of their size, it is difficult for large forces to develop a simple plan, keep their movements concealed, conduct detailed rehearsals [...], gain tactical surprise and speed on target, and motivate all the soldiers in the unit to

a single goal” (McRaven, 12). Each of his case studies features the core offensive SOF activity called Direct Action (DA), which is defined in the current US Joint Publication

3-05 *Special Operations* as:

...short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted with specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets in hostile, denied, or diplomatically and/or politically sensitive environments. (USJP 3-05, II-1)

The version of USJP 3-05 referenced in the 1993 thesis stated that DA missions “are designed to achieve specific, well defined, and often time-sensitive results of strategic, operational, or critical tactical significance” involving many of the methods captured above (McRaven, 2).

In light of the above it is easy to understand how in 2011 *Wired Magazine* was able to claim that “Spec Ops Chief sketched out bin Laden Raid...in 1995” (Wired, 1) noting the publicized role of then-Commander Joint Special Operations Command, Vice-Admiral McRaven’s role in Operation Neptune Spear, the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan. The article highlights how he provided the blueprint for special operations and that the bin Laden raid is a modern example of his 1993 thesis:

A simple plan with a clear purpose? Check — kill or capture bin Laden. Secrecy? Most of the U.S. government didn’t even know, let alone the Pakistanis. Thorough rehearsal? At Bagram Air Field, the SEALs practiced on a model of the compound they built. Surprise? Most definitely. Speed? The whole thing was over in 40 minutes. No wonder: McRaven designed the plan. (Wired, 5)

Understanding the concept of relative superiority and the methodology used to examine it, its application can be examined through the lens of the irregular warrior. US Joint Publication 3-05 *Special Operations* defines irregular warfare as:

[...] a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Non-state ac-

tors often seek to create instability and disrupt and negate state legitimacy and governance to gain and maintain control or influence over and the support of a relevant population. Non-state actors use political, psychological, and economic methods, reinforced with military-type activities that favour indirect approaches and asymmetric means. (USJP 3-05, II-1)

An irregular warrior, in the context of this paper, is the non-state actor in the above definition - an insurgent, terrorist, guerrilla, etc. and since 2001 have become the principal adversary of many western democracies and alliances, most notably *Al-Qaeda* and its affiliates, the Taliban, *Hamas*, *Hezbollah* and most recently the so-called Islamic State. When compared to security forces, especially western militaries, the irregular warrior is a shabby combatant indeed. By comparison they are poorly equipped, have limited training and are not enabled by modern military technology nor are their operations informed by the manifold types of intelligence. Despite these shortcomings they have demonstrated the ability to conduct “spectacular” and successful attacks against superior forces and the successful ones, where the relative superiority is gained and mission is accomplished are initiated with IEDs, often vehicle and person-borne (suicide) devices. IEDs are a staple of asymmetric warfare and irregular warriors and their simplicity and lethality can aid a small, truly lightly equipped assaulting force in gaining relative superiority over a larger, better equipped and defended opponent. The 2008 successful Taliban raid and prison break on the Sarposa Prison in Kandahar City provides an excellent example of a small insurgent force conducting an audacious assault against a fortified position to achieve an operationally significant objective.

In 2008, Sarposa Prison was one of the showcase development projects for the Government of Canada (Coghlan, 4). Canada, through the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kandahar, was involved in the physical restoration of the mud-walled

Sarposa Prison and the training of its guards by Corrections Canada officials (Canwest, 2). In May 2008, approximately 200 prisoners went on a hunger strike to protest having been detained without charge for over two years and making allegations of ill-treatment and torture. Of the approximately 1100 inmates, 350-450 (reports vary) were Taliban militants to include numerous mid-level Taliban suspects recently handed over to the Afghan government by American forces (Coghlan, 3).

At roughly 2120 hrs on 13 Jun 2008, approximately 30 Taliban fighters executed a complex and coordinated raid on the prison. The assault began with the detonation of a massive two-tonne suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) at the prison's main gate (French, 8). The powerful device destroyed the prison's front gate and guardhouse and caused substantial damage to nearby buildings (Burton, 1) burying guards under rubble and killing scores of people (Canwest, 1). A second Taliban suicide bomber destroyed the rear gate of the facility. Hard on the heels of the explosions, an assault force on motorcycles surged into the prison, engaging the remaining guards and security forces with RPG and small arms fire. Furthermore, according to Taliban claims, cut-off elements established a number of roadblocks in order to prevent interference from security forces. In the ensuing battle following the IED detonations the Taliban assault elements engaged the surviving guards while others broke open the cell doors (Gall, 1). Within 20 minutes, all of the more than 1100 prisoners, 350-450 of them Taliban fighters, escaped on foot into the surrounding orchards and many were exfiltrated in vehicles staged nearby (French 8). In the following days, Taliban fighters and some of the new escapees moved north into the Arghandab district, taking over a number of villages (Burton, 2).

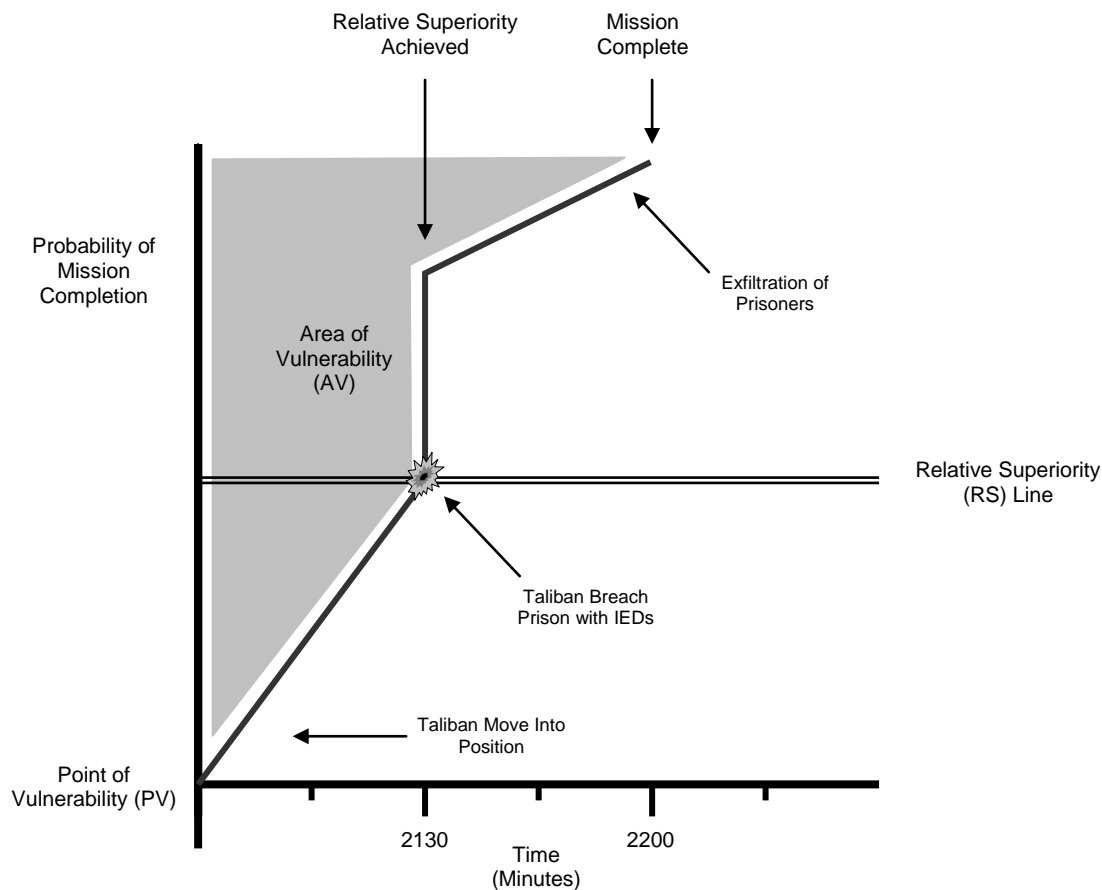


Figure 1-3. Relative Superiority Graph for the Sarposa Prison Break (2008)

Figure 1-3 graphically captures the moment, upon the detonation of the two IEDs, that the Taliban were able to achieve and maintain relative superiority. The graph shows the beginning of the area of vulnerability for the Taliban and the potential for the frictions of war to impact upon them as they move into position. This is particularly true as the SVBIED approached the front gate and guardhouse as it would represent the critical point at which the attacking force met fortifications. The massive explosions, occurring on opposite ends of the jail, are the first moments of contact between the two forces and it is at this moment that the Taliban achieve relative superiority. They are able to maintain it throughout, never losing the initiative by continuing to engage the security forces until the mission is accomplished, the prisoners freed and they redeploy throughout the Kan-

dahar area of operations. The use of IEDs was a critical factor in ensuring success in this operation. Had the IEDs not functioned or been prevented from detonating it is not certain that the operation would have succeeded or even been conducted. Ultimately, it was an audacious yet simple plan that was effectively concealed from the not-insignificant security force presence in Kandahar City (to include hundreds of ISAF troops and their attendant sensors and intelligence) and executed with surprise, speed and purpose. Indeed the only aspect of McRaven's special operations principles that cannot be verified is the degree to which the Taliban repeatedly rehearsed the operation, although given the discovery of numerous Taliban sand models found in Afghanistan, it is reasonable to assume that some form of mission rehearsal took place.

Whilst it is true that groups such as the Taliban can and do claim mission success even when a mission fails completely, by highlighting their presence and ability to strike rather than actually accomplishing an observable objective tangible results. Examples of these abound and while they should not be discounted for their effects in the operating environment (both physical and moral), they do not meet the threshold to usefully examine relative superiority. An example of this is the January 2014 attack on an ISAF outpost in the Zhari district of Kandahar province, where a complex attack with an SVBIED, PBIEDs and an assault element (dressed in coalition military uniforms) failed, resulting in all the attackers being killed and only moderate damage sustained to the outer perimeter of the base (Shief, 1). This "coordinated group martyrdom assault" as the Taliban termed and tweeted it, illustrates the point colourfully (and perhaps indicates the presence of Taliban doctrine writers).

The Sarposa prison break illustrates that irregular warriors are capable of achieving relative superiority in a similar manner to SOF as advanced by McRaven. The Haqqani Network, a Taliban affiliate, is infamous for facilitating and executing similar spectacular assaults, particularly in Kabul³ and in eastern Khost province⁴. Not all of these attacks resulted in mission completion, other than in terms of reinforcing the insurgent narrative and undermining confidence in the coalition and national security forces. In these instances, the smaller forces were not able to maintain relative superiority during the course of the engagement, the reasons for this are more likely due to the violation of some or many of the principles so successfully employed by the Sarposa raiders. Given limited critical resources, and their parsimonious employment by the irregular warrior against a foe, the IED and its importance in assisting the attainment of relative superiority becomes clear, but only when combined with a facsimile of operating principles, similar to that of SOF, and with a view or eye towards achieving effects similar to those of a direct action, particularly concerning strategic, operational or tactical significance. Relative superiority is not solely the purview of SOF. There is an element of unfairness in the comparison between SOF and the irregular warrior's failure to achieve relative superiority. When SOF fails, it brings national embarrassment, obstruction of the facts/message/narrative and can embolden the very enemy it seeks to undermine. When

³ In 2011 the Taliban executed a number of high profile IED-initiated attacks in Kabul against numerous western targets in the city, to include in September assaults on the US Embassy and NATO Headquarters.

⁴ The June 2012 IED initiated attack on FOB Salerno in Khost Province illustrates the planning and the devastation an IED can have on a position. The video, narrated by an Al-Jazeera reporter highlights various aspects of the mission. It ultimately failed, in that the insurgents were unable to maintain their relative superiority, ironically due to the quick and lethal response of resident US SOF. (<http://www.military.com/video/operations-and-strategy/afghanistan-conflict/massive-suicide-attack-at-fob-salerno/1752044616001/>)

the irregular fails, he can still seek to claim some modicum of victory in being able to make the attempt in the first place (if not proclaiming martyrdom and thus, success).

This latter messaging is particularly critical in recruiting the necessary pool of suicide bomber candidates. Modern irregular warriors, particularly violent Islamic extremist organizations have a seemingly unending source of these ‘precision’ IEDs and have used them to great effect. The Islamic State (IS) employs a mix of conventional and asymmetric tactics to achieve its operational goals (Jasper, 1). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to categorize how IS employs hybrid warfare and accordingly define its characteristics, it is noteworthy to highlight how IS employs IEDs not only to shape the operating environment but also at the decisive point to enable assaulting elements to gain relative superiority over larger Iraqi and Syrian military opponents and infrastructure.

What follows is an unclassified (for official use only) series of IS offensive vignettes developed by the Joint IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) J2 branch after observing numerous IS assaults.

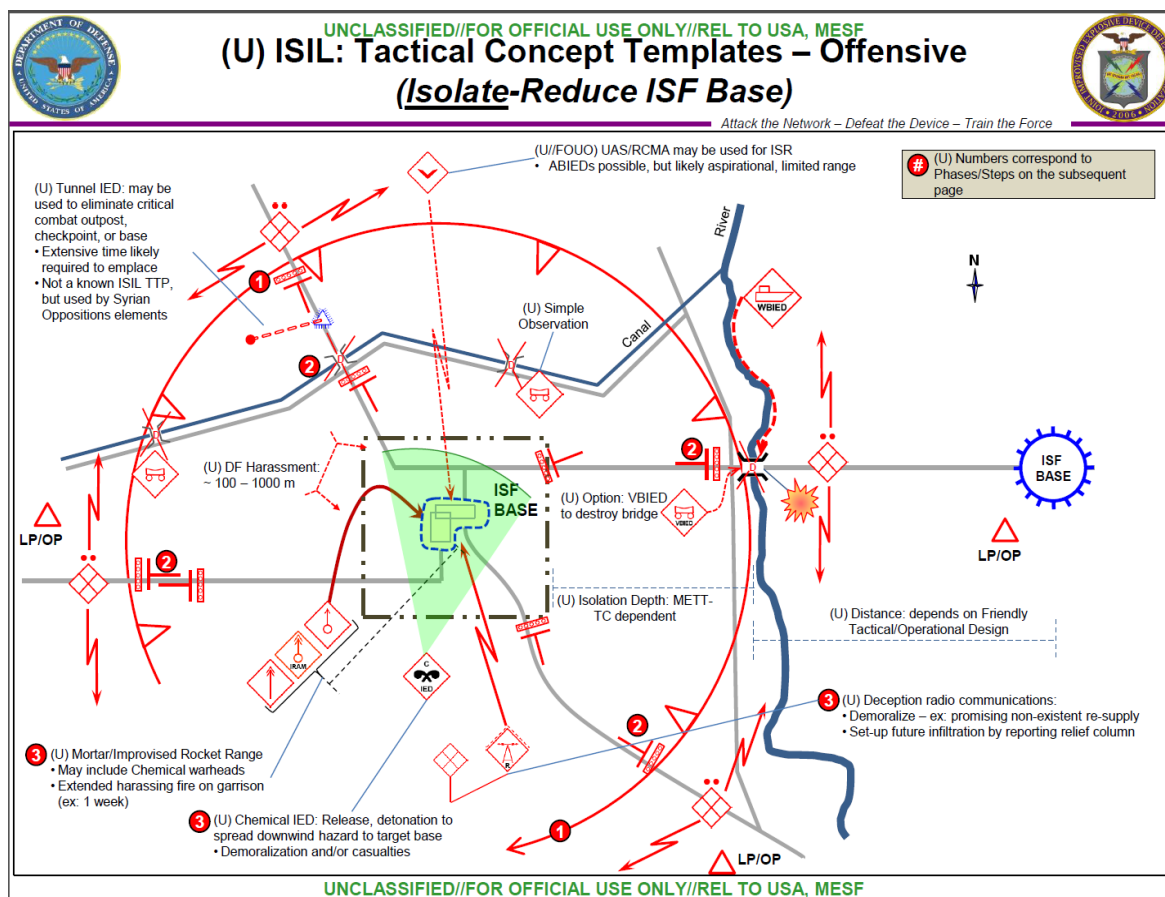


Figure 1-4. IS Isolation Phase of the Isolation and Reduction of a Strongpoint

The first step (1) in the Isolation phase is typical of a siege mentality and that is to deplete the defenders' food, water, ammunition and medical resources. This is achieved through the occupation of the surrounding area, specifically the key terrain. The second stage (2) is to establish blocking positions to prevent external relief/support. A key characteristic of this is the building of hasty defensive works, IED "minefields" and other obstacles based on an analysis of the environment and terrain. The third step in the above graphic (3) is that seeking to demoralize the defenders through the use of frequent indirect fires (improvised or conventional), chemical agents, communications and direct fires

(JIEDDDO, 4). Following the successful isolation objective, the IS begins the Reduction phase of the objective (Figure 1-5).

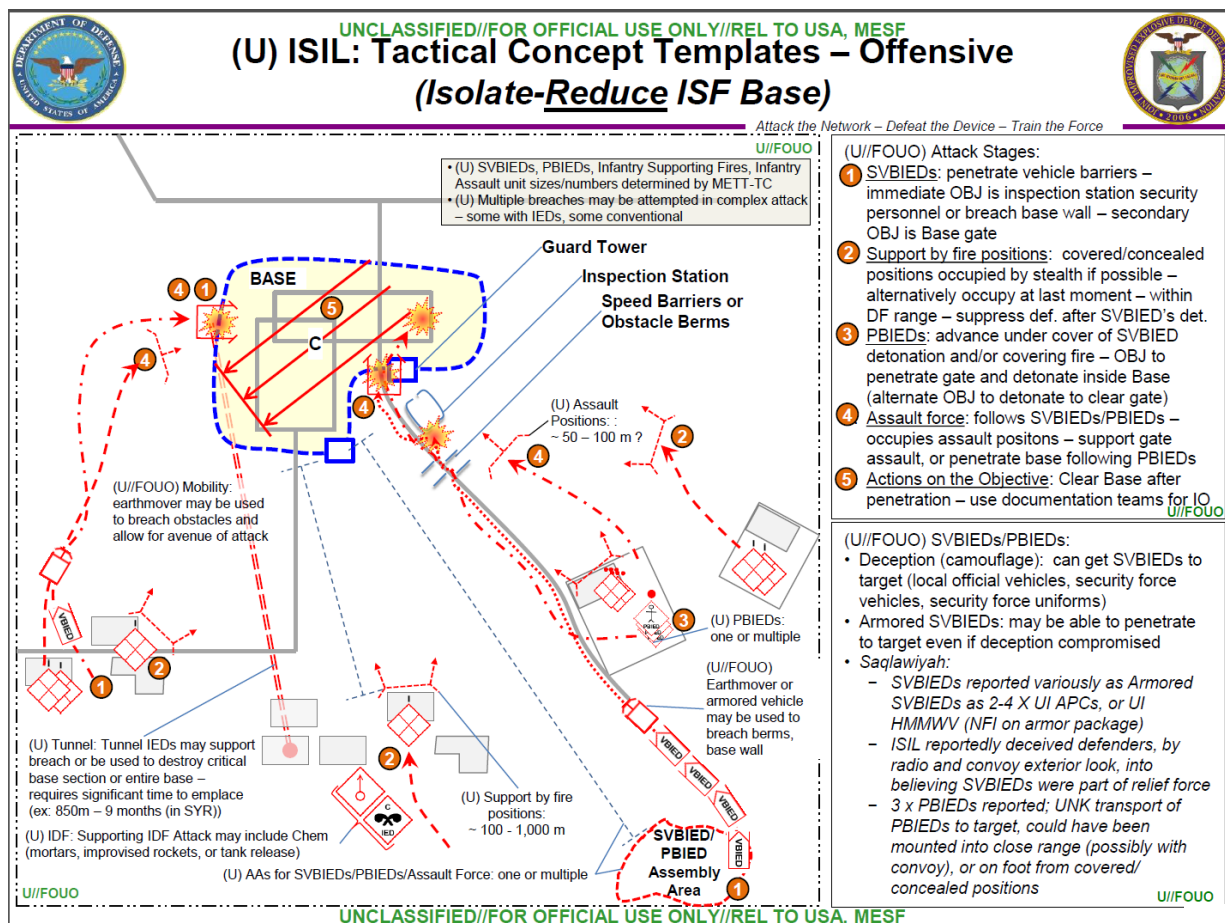


Figure 1-5. IS Reduction Phase of the Isolation and Reduction of a Strongpoint

As is evident from the description of the assault to the right of the graphics of the above figure, IEDs play a critical role in the assault. It is not difficult to extrapolate and imagine a similar graphic and template for the Sarposva raid. Indeed, but for the alarmingly coordinated nature of the entire IS operation, one that has, with little variation, been

played out dozens of times in Syria and Iraq, highlights the potential for a hybrid warrior to shift to solely asymmetric tactics in order to gain and maintain relative superiority.

What IS brings to the battlefield is not only a highly flexible and effective operational art but also staggering resources from which to sustain it. Unlike the Taliban insurgent, the IS militant can draw upon significant resources to support his operations. In particular their access to IEDs and ability to employ them in great number throughout their area of operations enables a lethal combination of capabilities. This combined with their ability to scale up or down technologically, tactically and morally further reinforces their potential to gain and maintain relative superiority. To this end relative superiority, that condition required when a smaller attacking force gains decisive advantage over a larger or well-defended enemy, is not the sole purview of SOF. Combined with, and adhering to, simple and effective operating principles, any irregular warrior, hybrid warrior or indeed small team of combatants can achieve mission success. That being said, as modern SOF are themselves greatly enabled by advanced technology, intelligence resources and firepower in their attainment of relative superiority, by contrast the modern irregular warrior lacks comparable enablers and is therefore left to improvise.

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