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THE GREAT SCUD HUNT: A CASE STUDY IN OPERATIONAL PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE EMPLOYMENT OF SOF

Maj S.B. Giberson

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Exercise Solo Flight

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Maj S.B. Giberson

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The history of warfare demonstrates a consistent use of non-conventional forces operating on the battlefield: they are what we would understand today as Special Operations Forces (SOF). In an increasingly complex world, military planners are faced with the challenges of anticipating emerging threats and assigning resources to counter those threats, all the while being necessarily cognisant of resource constraints and political agendas (Watson, 1991). Since the early 2000s, there has been a significant increase in the reliance on SOF to carry the fight to an elusive enemy who often exists without a defined homeland. However, prior to the Global War on Terror (GWOT) – in the wake of September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the US – SOF has been employed as a force multiplier throughout the entire modern war era. This lends itself to the notion that planning for employment of SOF will only become more imperative for operational level commanders and staffs as warfare continues to evolve.

In their simplest form, SOF may be described as tactical forces with strategic relevance by design. This implies that relatively small size force packages might achieve effects that are prescribed by national command authorities as opposed to theatre operational command imperatives. This impacts operational planners in two principle areas. First, planners may be expected to plan in much deeper detail for employment of small tactical units than they would for conventional missions that they could task to subordinate tactical formations. Second, planners may be faced with additional factors to consider such as direct political implications relating to the employment of SOF elements. Depending on the integration of SOF into the operational formation from the

operational design, staffs may be forced to conduct significant co-ordination functions they had not previously anticipated.

An important part of the design of SOF employment by the strategic level of governance is the aspect of discretion. A shortened chain of command between national command authority and tactically employed units allows for a significant reduction in the risks associated with potential exposure of the plan prior to execution. The danger is that SOF elements may end up being deployed into regions where friendly forces are already operating and without knowledge of the SOF mission, the risks of friendly force casualties increases dramatically. Therefore, operational planners must be cognisant of the potential for strategically directed forces to come in contact with theatre forces and build safeguards into any campaign plan.

A decade before the 9-11 Terror attacks in 2001, the first Gulf War demonstrated a glimpse of what was to come with respect to shifting focus towards SOF as a significant element of operational effects, even with a large conventional theatre of war. The employment of multi-national SOF units to search for Iraqi SCUD missile launch sites was a direct result of political decisions made by national command authorities of the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK). The employment of SOF in this role was imposed upon the overall operational commander, US General Schwarzkopf, contrary to the initial operational plan he had laid out and his staff and meticulously planned (CDISS, 1990). One lesson that can be derived for operational planning staffs is that they must be prepared to adapt to strategic level influences even once the operational design is set.

If operational staffs are going to be required to anticipate more common employment of SOF in their designs then they must understand the characteristics of these specialized elements in order to be better prepared to integrate effects across the entire spectrum of influence. In general, SOF are purpose built forces designed to adapt to operate in specific contexts be it environmental, risk, or political sensitivity based. Conventional forces generally rely on strength of numbers to impose overt superiority over combatant forces through standard operating procedures that can be templated and anticipated.

For the purposes of this discussion, we are going to look at the 1990 Persian Gulf War (subsequently known as Gulf War 1 following the invasion of Iraq by coalition forces in 2002) that was framed by a Western-Arab coalition to eject an Iraqi incursion into Kuwait and destroy Saddam Hussein's ability to threaten Western interests in the region (Pimlott, 1992). The war was characterized at the strategic level by Iraq using SCUD attacks against Israel to incite their entry into the war with the expectation that the fragile Arab-Western coalition would fracture if the Jewish state acted against an Arab one, even Iraq (Watson, 1990). The coalition, led by the US and heavily supported by the UK, manoeuvred to ensure that Israel refrained from military intervention and was provided with viable defences against the SCUD threat (Mace, 1999).

The coalition sought to achieve its aims through a double sided approach. First, anti-SCUD air defence systems were deployed by coalition forces into Israel to intercept incoming missiles. Second, the coalition announced to Israel that they would put their best military resources into finding the SCUD launch sites in the vast Iraqi desert and destroying them (Hallion, 1992). This line of operations explicitly involved the

deployment of SOF forces, namely US Delta Force and UK Special Air Service (SAS) (Mace, 1999). This decision by strategic political leadership had the effect of imposing an unanticipated planning and control factor upon General Schwarzkopf's operational theatre command. The operational design for the war as determined had been that no coalition ground forces would operate North of the Saudi Arabian-Kuwaiti border until sufficient forces were built up to defeat the Iraqi military in conventional warfare (Pimlott, 1992).

In the case of Gulf War 1, a comparison of SOF forces to conventional does not appear to indicate a significant tactical advantage to insert small elements into enemy territory and employ resources to support them while trying to build up a superior conventional force as soon as possible (Watson, 1991). For example, there was nothing particularly unique about the physical environment of the Arabian desert that required deployment of SOF that the conventional coalition forces were not already adapting to where required.

SOF elements did not have a technological advantage over conventional forces in theatre. In fact, SOF elements had significant shortcomings in communications and mobility support that actually caused them to impose additional burden on support networks in theatre (Hallion, 1992). The main factor in the decision to deploy SOF was the international political agenda to ensure that the Arab-Western coalition would not be dispelled by the possible intervention of Israel into the war (Pimlott, 1992). If Israel could be convinced that the most elite forces in the world were directly targeting the SCUD threat, then they would not feel the need to attempt to take matters in their own hands.

Gulf War 1 also highlights the challenges for operational planning staffs and commanders in working within a coalition context. A multi-national coalition is less like unified command than it is war by committee. Each contributing nation retains sovereign control over their own forces and is capable of acting unilaterally within the coalition, potentially to the detriment of the overall alliance. In the case of the deployment of multinational SOF, the UK unilaterally decided to insert SAS into Kuwait without US knowledge or coalition command approval in direct contravention of the operational commanders express desires (USDOD, 1992).

Initially, this action proved to be near disaster; there were no communication protocols established to link the SAS to strike aircraft so that they could effectively call for fire even when they did find SCUD sites (Watson, 1991). The resulting lags in time usually allowed the mobile launchers to be long gone by the time attack aircraft could be vectored to the site. The high risk, low reward nature of this unilateral action created distractions to the operational command and support efforts and most importantly led to the deaths and capture of highly trained SAS operatives by the Iraqis (Mace, 1999).

With the commitment by the US to Israel to insert Delta Force into the SCUD hunt, things began to improve for the command and control as well as support to SOF operations within Kuwait and Iraq. The US forces were able to allow their operators on the ground to talk directly to orbiting airborne command posts which could assign strike aircraft to targets as they were found (CDISS, 1990). The process still required refinement as initially there were no dedicated aircraft to the SOF elements and attacks were coordinated by available aircraft in the area. This once again would often lead to

too much time between sense and strike, with the result of the target getting away (Watson, 1991).

The insertion of US SOF, however, gave the coalition another line of multinational operations; support resources began to be shared by US and UK. This of course added to the joint staff's responsibility to plan and coordinate actions. The principal way this was approached was to break up the vast Western Iraqi desert into two Areas of Operations (AOs) divided along the main East-West highway (Watson, 1991). US AO was North and UK AO South. This allowed for freedom of action within a specified operational zone and allowed for better coordination with air assets to be more responsive to calls for fire from the ground.

At the strategic level, it was an anxious waiting game to see if Israel could indeed be persuaded to not retaliate against Iraq for SCUDs landing in Tel-Aviv (USDOD, 1992). Operational planners would have had to be busy planning for contingencies of losing Arab resources from the coalition and indeed perhaps drafting contingency operations to be prepared to fight against potential break away members from the coalition if they declared war on Israel. The deployment of both Patriot anti-missile batteries into Israel and multinational SOF into Iraq seemed to have convinced the Knesset that all that could be done to defeat the SCUD threat was being done. Israel honoured its commitment to refrain from intervention and the fragile Arab-Western alliance held against Iraq.

By studying the deployment of SOF to counter the Iraqi SCUD threat, we can clearly delineate differences in success at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of command. Post war assessments of the effectiveness of SOF in targeting SCUDs showed

that likely in excess of 80% of the strikes called in by SOF were against decoy launch sites (USDOD, 1992). The Iraqis had proved to be masters of deception as well as extremely proficient at firing the missiles in about half of the doctrinal time called to erect and launch the weapons (Pimlott, 1992). Luckily the warheads were horribly inaccurate which kept casualties to a minimum.

These assessments brought into question the worthiness of employing highly specialized forces in such a high risk, seemingly low value enterprise. At the tactical and operational level, the influence of SOF against the SCUD threat appears to have been at best overstated during the war (Pimlott, 1992). However, the argument can still be made that at the strategic level, the deployment of SOF acted as an insurance policy to a trusted ally; the SCUD threat to Israel was seen as a priority target for the coalition and this allowed the fragile alliance to remain intact and prevent the need for Israel to enter the war (USDOD, 1992).

The maintenance of the Arab-Western coalition was a strategic imperative to the successful prosecution of the war with international credibility (CDISS, 1990). SOF became a tool used by the coalition leadership national command authorities to achieve their desired end-states even though the employment was counter intuitive to the operational design of the campaign and in the end proved to be less than fully successful at the tactical and operational levels. Coalition joint staffs and commanders were required to divert resources from their main efforts to support strategic imperatives from political leaders. The lesson for operational planning staffs is that it is their professional responsibility to understand strategic implications of SOF assignments in their AO and

that in the end it is everyone's duty to ensure proper coordination and support to stated mission goals, and to make every effort to prevent unnecessary casualties.

The employment of tier one SOF forces in the hunt for SCUD missiles when conventional forces may have been better suited for the task (Mace, 1999) is a prime example of how forces employed by the strategic level directly can be superimposed over operational level plans and create unexpected burdens on operational headquarters. Gen Schwartzkopf wanted to wait until sufficient conventional forces were in theatre to push Iraq out of Kuwait and destroy their ability to project military power in the region. When a political imperative of maintaining the coalition superseded the carefully laid out operational plan, high readiness SOF elements could be deployed to ensure that the threat was being addressed immediately with a view to reducing Israeli casualties.

The employment of SOF by the strategic level of command can impact the operational level by forcing them to change key planning measures of effectiveness as well. In the original op designs for OPERATION DESERT SHIELD/STORM, the intervention of Israel could have been argued as a positive operational and tactical impact by adding more resources to the allied fight. However, the political risks of precipitating the collapse of Arab support for the alliance and reshaping the war along cultural lines would have been an operational failure as well as strategic. Operational level commanders and staffs must be flexible enough to understand and anticipate political nuances that may supersede the technical requirements of conventional power balance of warfare.

In 2009, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) created the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) as a distinct entity within the nation's

military. Combined with the Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) these two entities make up what is known as the operational level of force employment for Special and Joint operations. This has institutionalized the SOF and conventional streams within the CAF and has created the need for all operational planners to be versed in SOF effects.

CANSOFCOM is capable of employing its internal resources on order of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) through to the Commander of CANSOFCOM at which point the CAF Strategic Joint Staff may or may not be engaged. However, elements of CANSOFCOM may operate within a Joint theatre of operations and be required to be integrated or at least coordinate missions with conventional operational and tactical level headquarters. This is where operational planners must understand nuances of SOF employment and be prepared to conduct joint operations or support SOF missions while still managing to command and control their AO.

Anywhere CANSOFCOM is employed, there is likely to be a conventional commander who is responsible for the given AO, either domestically or on foreign deployments. Staffs within SOF and Joint commands must endeavour to have close working relationships based on a network of mutual trust and understanding of each other's roles. Planners at all levels must be aware of not only the military balance of power in a given conflict situation but also the balance of political intent and power associated with the greater area of interest for a given operation.

Planners must understand that SOF elements are small and vulnerable to attack once exposed. They often require transport, resupply and administrative support in addition to supporting fires. Very few SOF missions are capable of success without a significant amount of support from the in-theatre forces. SOF operational planners must

understand that although their missions may at time have command priority, required resources may take time to coordinate due to the fact that those resources may have been assigned in accordance with an operational design that had not accounted for insertions of strategic level mission requirements from outside the primary operational planning group.

As warfare continues to evolve in the early 21st century, the focus on SOF becomes more prevalent as the enemy becomes more elusive, the demand for response becomes more urgent, and the nature of conflict becomes more politicized. Despite their relatively small footprint, SOF elements present national command authorities with options of immediate response to extremely dynamic threat environments. Their rapid deployability and focus on discretion lend to their being forces of choice as opposed to forces of last resort. Operational planners and commanders will need to be more cognisant of SOF missions and their required support in order to ensure effective operations.

Once Canadian professional sailors, soldiers and air force personnel accept the reality of come-as-you-are conflicts, the more likely the strategic level is to default to SOF deployments sooner rather than later. All levels of command need to understand what SOF can and more importantly cannot do. As Gulf War 1 showed, the deployment of SOF elements may end up being a tactical and operational risk of highly skilled human resources for potentially very little effect and operational planning staffs must be capable of offering alternative solutions to meet emergent strategic intents. The other side of the equation is that commanders cannot afford to assume that their operational campaign designs will not be superseded by political aims that go beyond the mechanics of military force balances and retain flexibility as a key component of their operational designs. The

strategic national command authority will always retain the ability to deploy forces they control into established theatres. Operational commanders and staff need be aware of this reality and anticipate unexpected friendly forces in their AOs.

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