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## THE CASE FOR NARRATIVE LED OPERATIONS IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

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**JCSP 43**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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ARMED FORCES**

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The modern era is a world in which information is created, shared and processed at speeds never before seen. This information sharing has a direct impact on how contemporary militaries plan and fight modern wars. While the effects of information on a military campaign were first realized in Vietnam, the impact of media on military operations has dramatically increased since that time. The use of modern technology means that information is shared instantaneously and impacts multiple audiences around the world simultaneously. As such, modern militaries have found themselves conducting warfare in a new realm, the realm of information. As the world moves into this information age, militaries have increasingly seen their enemies weaponize information to achieve success. The term “information warfare” has been coined to discuss the manipulation of information during warfare in order to achieve substantial advantage over ones enemy. With the increase in the ability to propagate information, the idea of information warfare has become increasingly relevant. Most recently Russia utilized information warfare to resounding success in its conflict with Ukraine. One of the few areas where ISIS has been successful against conventional Western militaries is in the conduct of information warfare. Dr. Sebastian Gorka, a current National Security Advisor with the White House, emphasizes the importance of information warfare when he states that “today we face a foe who knows that wars start with ideas, and depends on them far more than weapons.”<sup>1</sup> While most conventional militaries have struggled to combat adversaries on the information plane, one of the most effective means to combat the enemy is via “Narrative Led Operations”. Narrative Led Operations encompass far more than information operations, public affairs, and counter narratives, and instead look to

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<sup>1</sup> Sohail A. Shaik and Robert D. Payne "Narrative in the Operations Process" Asymmetric Warfare Group, (Germany: Dagstuhl Publishing, 2014), 112.

shape the planning and conduct of military operations based upon the stated principles of the nation. While much theoretical work has been done regarding Narrative Led Operations, very little doctrine exists on how to implement this theory. This paper will discuss the methods in which Narrative Led Operations can be incorporated into Canadian military doctrine. Narrative Led Operations provides the framework to enable a nation to translate its values to military action. In doing so, a nation shields itself from attack on the information plane. If Canada is to achieve military success within 21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts, it must embrace the concept of Narrative Led Operations and incorporate it into its mission planning and operations.

Narrative is a difficult concept for militaries (and military planners) to comprehend. When one hears the word narrative, the immediate instinct is to default to the idea of “story.” As a result narrative is often thought of as simply “messaging” and subsequently dealt to either public affairs or information operations specialists. This misunderstanding of narrative results in most military headquarters viewing narrative as merely a small part of the overall plan, or simply a resulting component of the plan. Most planning staffs would give little time to the consideration of narrative during the construct of campaign planning. In fact, the military professional sees narrative as an aside to planning and operations. For most, narrative is merely the story used to tell of the successes of military operations, a means to curry public support, or to counter the enemy’s message. Narrative, however, is much more than a story. Narrative is the guiding principle behind a military involvement. It is the direct link between political/national will and military action. NATO defines narrative as “the translation of an organizations mandate and vision into a fundamental, persistent story of who the

organization is, what its guiding principles are and what it aspires to achieve.<sup>2</sup>” The purpose of the narrative is further elaborated upon by Thomas Nissen of the Royal Danish Defence College who states that “the purpose of narratives is therefore to foster a shared understanding of who we are, what we do and why, where and when we operate and how we execute our mission.<sup>3</sup>” In looking at these definitions, we see that narrative is not just the story of what a professional military does, but rather the elaboration of an ethos which serves to guide an organization in successfully accomplishing a mission within the framework of its stated values and goals. This underlying concept of narrative has always existed within the Canadian Armed Forces, but it has not been given the preeminence needed to succeed in the modern battlefield. Narrative Led Operations will allow the Canadian Forces to translate its ethos to tangible action on the ground, greatly improving its odds of long term success on modern operations.

Narrative has become a buzzword in recent years, with governments, businesses and strategists all attempting to implement the concept to garner success. However, there exists very little in Canadian Forces doctrine pertaining to narrative. While the word narrative is used repeatedly to discuss concepts like *Commander's Intent*, there is little Canadian doctrine which directly applies to the more current concept of narrative. There are only two references in CAF Doctrine which specifically refer to narrative within its modern definition. *Canadian Forces Joint Publication 3.0 – Operations* discusses the concept of narrative in relation to strategic communications stating that “Strategic communications also serve as the bridge between public diplomacy, led by foreign affairs

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<sup>2</sup> John Shy and Thomas W. Collier "Revolutionary War." In *Makers of Modern Strategy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 839.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Elkjer Nissen. "Narrative Led Operations." *Militaert Tidsskrift*, 2013, 75.

and CF Operations, again ensuring coherence of the narrative.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, *Canadian Forces Joint Publication 3.9 -Targeting* states that “CAF targeting activities will always be planned to be coherent with the overall Government of Canada strategic-communication framework and mission narrative.<sup>5</sup>” While each of these publications reference the importance of narrative, there is no elaboration or exploration of the concept. The fact that narrative is not mentioned within doctrine is indicative of both its recentness as a concept as well as the general lack of attention to which the Canadian Forces has paid to it. Within the CAF manuals on operational planning, there exists no mention of the development, employment or benefits that would come with deployment of a narrative at the operational level. Even within the newly emerging concept of military design methodology, little relevance is paid to the construct of the narrative in its use by the Canadian military. If the Canadian Forces are truly serious about maintaining credibility, support and motivation of its soldiers, it must rectify these shortcomings. Understanding that narrative is more than a buzzword, and can be effectively employed on the operational level to ensure continued support at home and abroad is instrumental moving forward. The Canadian Military must work to define narrative and subsequently incorporate it into its doctrine via Narrative Led Operations. In doing so, they will take a concept which they have already recognized as important, and utilize it effectively to achieve success on operations.

While narrative alone may serve as a guiding principal for campaign planning, it becomes infinitely more useful if employed within the framework of Narrative Led

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<sup>4</sup> Department of National Defence, B-GJ-005-300/FP-001. *Canadian Forces Joint Publication 3.0: Operations*. (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2010), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Department of National Defence, B-GJ-005-309-FP/001. *Canadian Forces Joint Publication 3.9: Targeting*. (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2014), 5.

Operations. Narrative Led Operations function upon the understanding that the narrative is prime in the construction of a military plan and the execution of its mission. This is terrifying and counterintuitive to most military planners. Narrative Led Operations identify the need to fight the war on the field of perception. Rather than adapting our narrative to match our operations, Narrative Led Operations propose to adapt our operations to match our narrative. In doing so, a mission gains and maintains legitimacy across a host of audiences. Moreover, it allows for operations to have relevance on the information battlefield. Narrative Led Operations are defined as follows:

“Narrative Led Operations are the purposeful strategic narrative led analysis, planning and execution of operations for the purpose of creating a clear linkage between the strategic intent and the campaign design in order to ensure that the words of the political level are matched by the deeds, images and words of the Joint Force.”<sup>6</sup>

Narrative Led Operations provide a means to link a nation’s purpose with its military action through placing primacy on narrative at every stage of both the planning and execution of a military operation. In linking the words and deeds of a joint force to the stated aims of a country, it is possible increase a military’s legitimacy across numerous fronts. In conventional operations, the enemy or media can target a military’s actions, demonstrating how its deeds do not meet its words. This significantly degrades a military’s legitimacy in the eyes of its public, its soldiers, and host nation population. Narrative Led Operations allow a force to operate from the moral high ground by ensuring that a military’s actions mirror its words, from planning to execution. As the Canadian military commonly identifies public support as a centre of gravity, legitimacy is vitally important. Within Narrative Led Operations, every aspect of mission planning is

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Elkjer Nissen. "Narrative Led Operations." *Militaert Tidsskrift*, 2013, 75.

analyzed in comparison to the stated narrative. In doing this, a force only acts within the boundaries of the narrative crafted for an operation.

In order for Narrative Led Operations to be successful, there is the requirement for a strategic narrative. This strategic narrative will be the base from which the operational plan originates and will shape every subsequent military action. As it stands, most nations adopt and maintain a strategic narrative when it comes to their military missions. It is imperative that this strategic narrative is crafted early, as it serves as a base for the development of the plan. Ideally this strategic narrative should be provided by the government, however it may also be provided by strategic planners within the military. In the same way that a higher commander's intent is analyzed, so too is the strategic narrative. In order to be utilized for Narrative Led Operations, strategic narrative must adhere to guidelines. It must provide detailed guidance regarding the who, what, when, where, why and how of an operation. "A strategic narrative is also not a cosmetic operation, but involves the art and craft of presenting a coherent strategy that connects means to an end."<sup>7</sup> Analysis of the strategic narrative will lead to the formulation of the "mission narrative". Mission narrative will serve a variety of purposes. It will provide common azimuth for all subordinate forces while truthfully and accurately communicating to our soldiers, public, host nation and enemy exactly what the mission is and plans to achieve. Dr. Kem of the US Army Command and General Staff College details the importance of the creation of the mission narrative: "Not only is the narrative useful in communicating to others, the act of constructing the narrative itself is

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<sup>7</sup> Beatrice DeGraaf, George Dimitriu and Jens Ringsmose "Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War.." (New York: Routledge, 2012) 359.



a key learning event for the command.<sup>8</sup> In examining the strategic narrative, military planners gain insight into how the military operation should be conducted. Composing the narrative will guide military commanders and operational staff on the why of an operation, and set the parameters for what must be achieved during operational planning.

Design is a concept understood and employed by most modern western militaries as a means of framing a problem and subsequent solution. It forms the roadmap for a military plan. Often, it is built around a nations “centre of gravity” and sought “end state.” This would remain unchanged, but in order to conduct effective Narrative Led Operations, the narrative would also guide the process of Operational Design. During the military design process, the determination of *End State, Operational Objectives, Lines of Operation and Decisive Points*, would all be matched against the previously determined mission narrative. If any aspect of the operational design does not hold true to the accepted narrative and work to advance that narrative, it would be disregarded or adapted. In other words, the narrative would shape the operational design. In doing this, the framework of the operation, as well as the subsequent mission, is assured to remain in line with the stated strategic narrative. Essentially, this allows the values and ethos defined in the narrative, to be built in to the guiding element of a campaign plan.

Once the Strategic narrative has been effectively parsed and the operational design constructed, it is paramount to utilize it to guide the development of the operational plan. In his discussion of the narrative in operational planning, Dr. Kem

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<sup>8</sup> Dr. Jack Kem "Planning for Action: Campaign Concepts and Tools." (Fort Leavenworth: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2012) 107.

makes note that while the narrative is neutral, the use of it is not<sup>9</sup>. While military planners in the Canadian Forces may choose to disregard the narrative during operational planning, in doing so, they cede the “narrative terrain” to their adversary. This allows the adversary to build their own narrative and exploit failures of the Canadian Forces to adhere to their own stated values and aims. As such, through each step of the Canadian Forces’ Operational Planning process, adherence to the narrative must be considered. All aspects of plan development starting with the commander’s intent and planning guidance and moving forward through risk assessment, measures of effectiveness and the selection of courses of action, must fit within the narrative framework. During the war gaming process, each action by both the friendly and enemy forces must be evaluated against the narrative. If a portion of the plan does not support said narrative, it must be altered to ensure that it does. In doing so, not only does a force shield itself from claims of illegitimacy by doing exactly what it states it would do, but it also builds credibility of the stated narrative. Soldiers, media, host nation and home front all see that the military is behaving exactly as it stated it would. In doing this, military planners must remain true to the narrative. The narrative cannot be altered to fit to a plan or course of action. As previously stated, military planners are loathe to allow narrative to drive planning, and “there is a tendency to phrase the narrative to fit what is going on operationally and tactically rather than letting the narrative inform these operations.<sup>10</sup>” Operations adhering to the stated narrative will be successful not only on land air or sea, but also on the plane of perception. They will remain true to their stated aims, and ensure that a military’s plans do not allow for attacks on its credibility.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Elkjer Nissen. "Narrative Led Operations." *Militaert Tidsskrift*, 2013, 70.

The final aspect of ensuring success via Narrative Led Operations is the conduct of the planned operation. This is often characterized within the mantra of “walking the talk” and is critical in providing social proof<sup>11</sup> that a military is acting transparently upon its stated aims and objectives. If a military force does not conduct itself within the framework of the defined narrative, then the narrative fails. Every soldier must be understand and act upon the narrative. To this end, the narrative must remain simple. Often military narratives try to encompass every aspect of an operation. “Too many western strategic narratives are far too complex and framed in equivocal diplomatic language, unless the narrative is comprehensible by soldiers and audiences, also in theatre, it will be ignored.<sup>12</sup>” The narrative must be crafted and distributed in a manner which allows for every man or woman in uniform to understand and embrace it. In understanding the narrative, all levels will be able to weigh their actions and decisions against it. This will allow for smoother execution of mission command while simultaneously advancing the narrative on the ground and increasing the credibility of a mission. When the narrative is derived from the strategic level and subsequently embraced and executed at the tactical level, it means that military operations are planned and conducted in line with the intents and values of the nation. While most soldiers are reluctant to read reams of orders and strategic planning, a well-constructed narrative is easy to promulgate, understand and embrace. Narrative Led Operations will allow for every member of the Canadian Armed Forces to maintain the operations focus and credibility while simultaneously working to strengthen the role of the Canadian Military

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<sup>11</sup> Mann, Scott. *Narrative Strategies*. <http://www.narrative-strategies.com/scott-mann> (accessed February 02, 2017) 8.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Elkjer Nissen. "Narrative Led Operations." *Militaert Tidsskrift*, 2013, 71.

at home and abroad. Whereas a soldier may have traditionally been unaware of the strategic importance of the mission they are undertaking, a boiled down, easily digestible narrative ensures that the soldier is executing the mission and conducting his duty in line with the will of his nation.

If properly introduced into Canadian doctrine, Narrative Led Operations have the potential to dramatically increase the success on modern day operations. While the Canadian Armed Forces may be adept at planning and conducting operations on the traditional battlefields, it has often found itself at a loss when it comes to information warfare. While it is understood that winning the hearts and minds of the local populace, maintaining domestic public support, and maintenance of morale are all critical factors in mission success, it is via the information battlespace that these vitally important aims are often lost. In examining existing doctrine, it is evident that the Canadian Forces understands the importance of the narrative on ensuring credibility of the mission at home and abroad but it does not possess doctrine or strategy to incorporate the narrative into its planning and operations. The means to effectively link narrative to Canadian Forces Operations is via Narrative Led Operations. Narrative Led Operations will shield a military campaign from the majority of vulnerabilities of the information battlespace. During military planning, it is imperative that a narrative is crafted outlining the values and aims of the mission. From here, this narrative must permeate every aspect of the planning and conduct of the operation and must be clearly understood by every soldier, sailor and airman from private to general. Every decision, line of operation, objective, course of action and comment must be weighed against the guidelines of the narrative and abandoned if they do not fit within its context. In doing so, the Canadian Armed

Forces will maintain legitimacy. For a military which consistently identifies national support of an operation as a key centre of gravity, Narrative Led Operations is of the utmost importance. If a forces actions, words and deeds remain in sync with the narrative, it is aided significantly in the winning of the information war. This will enable the Canadian Forces to have success in any mission on which it endeavors.

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