The Necessity of Human Intelligence in Modern Warfare

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Since the early days of the Revolutionary War, the United States Army has relied upon actionable intelligence in order to find, engage, and defeat enemy forces. With the complexity and technology of warfare changing dramatically over time, Army personnel have had to adapt their tactics, techniques and procedures for gaining superiority in the arena of actionable intelligence. In many of America’s early conflicts, there was a heavy reliance on human intelligence which focused almost exclusively on spy networks and ground reconnaissance in order to gain reports on enemy activity. As the nature of warfare progressed, however, large-scale conflicts which relied heavily on information gathered by sophisticated technology such as signal and imagery devices became the forefront of the United States Army’s effort, oftentimes at the expense of training and implementation of proven human intelligence techniques. Although the U.S. Army has in past campaigns relied heavily upon signals and imagery intelligence, success on the battlefield while engaged in insurgency and counterinsurgency requires increased human intelligence collection in order to defeat the enemies of today as well as tomorrow.

Almost all military leaders recognize the necessity of accurate, timely and actionable intelligence. In yesterday’s wars, the only real possibility of gaining information and a tactical advantage was by human means. As demonstrated in The Philippine War from 1899-1902, U.S. Army officers quickly realized that victory would mean exploiting the Philippine guerilla’s extensive secret network. In order to infiltrate their clandestine organizations, the Army employed spies, document exploitation of captured records and extensive analysis in order to achieve their ends. The value of this information became evident throughout the campaign as key leaders within the guerilla organization and enemy movement patterns and locations became
identified, giving the Army a significant tactical advantage. (Birtle, 1998) Due to the small size of these guerilla forces and lack of technological advancements at the time, Army leaders quickly realized that the defeat of cellular organizations could only be accomplished by human means. Likewise, the lack of some military leaders to rely on human intelligence has met with disastrous consequences. During the American Indian Wars, Lieutenant Colonel George Custer ignored the advice from his indigenous Indian scouts and continued to move toward battle in at the now famous Little Big Horn. As a result of this error in judgment, 267 Army fighters lost their lives. (American Military History pg 337)

As warfare progressed with the ages, so did technology. Modern battles as early as World War I began to rely more and more heavily upon radio communication and radar. In order to gain the necessary tactical advantage to defeat the enemy, the U.S. Army began to invest an increasing amount of time, training and resources toward platforms which would defeat and exploit enemy signals. One of the best examples of how signals intelligence was utilized was during the conflict between the United States and Japan during WWII. Allied forces were often able to pinpoint locations and capabilities of the Japanese army and navy by intercepting and deciphering radio transmissions between Japanese units and higher command. This intelligence enabled the U.S. Navy to effectively locate and engage those forces, oftentimes with no warning, which ultimately led to victory in many Pacific battles. (American Military History pg 177) One of the greatest signals exploitation techniques ever utilized took place during the Korean War where American communications reconnaissance companies would “triangulate” enemy positions by having two or more teams intercept the signal. This would allow the Army to pass their locations on to artillery units which could engage the enemy positions without anyone ever
having laid eyes on them. (The Story of the NCO, 2007) Smart military commanders began to see the value in this type of intelligence and soon recognized that they could maximize returns and minimize risk to their soldiers by heavy investment in these technologies.

The increasing reliance on signals and other technology-based intelligence has certainly proven effective, but not without a price. With the ramp-up to and following the Cold War, the U.S. Military and various intelligence agencies moved away from human intelligence at an ever increasing rate, obviously favoring less risky methods of gaining enemy information. Side-viewing sonar, accurate cameras, acoustic and seismic devices and a multitude of other high-tech devices became the norm during this time which with it increased spending and training for U.S. soldiers. (American Military History pg 261) This ever increasing demand created a vicious cycle where new technologies would need to be developed to counter enemy devices, and a discovery and implementation by the enemy of our new technology would create a new invention.

With the increase in technical sophistication of intelligence gathering and of warfare in general, so did the number of specialized technology support personnel. It has been estimated that nine out of every ten soldiers deployed during Vietnam conflict were in some sort of technical support role, many in the signals intelligence field (The Story of the NCO, 2007). With such a large increase in the number of support roles, the number of regular infantrymen and battlefield collectors of intelligence collectors decreased by percentage. The Army created entire new sections and units devoted entirely to signal and other technical reconnaissance (The Story
of the NCO, 2007) Although effective, the utilization of these technologies in warfare has in many ways decreased the human element in combat, has led to more infrastructure and spending and lessens interaction between humans, to which all human intelligence is predicated upon.

Prior to the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks on September 11th 2001, the structure and key leadership of the Al Qaeda was largely unknown. Although the U.S. had used technology to locate and destroy suspected terrorist training camps within Afghanistan, the cellular and highly secretive structure of the organization seemed to operate with impunity throughout the area. (American Military History Pg 463) Only after the U.S. military actually entered Afghanistan and began engaging in ground combat and thus, human collection, did the extent of the organization begin to take shape. Although the U.S. had the most capable technical intelligence platforms on the planet, most soldiers and historians agree that the most valuable information in the Afghanistan conflict was obtained through questioning and interviewing the local populace as well as detainees. (American Military History pg 472)

Although many modern battlefield successes can be attributed to signals and other types of technical intelligence operations, the necessity for human intelligence during counterinsurgency operations has never been greater. Irregular forces often are organized in discrete, loosely organized cells that limit communications and mask their actions by blending in within the local populace. In addition, many modern day communications devices utilized by smaller rogue forces use complex encryption technology that cannot be exploited without national assets that are not readily available to the ordinary soldier on the battlefield. Many of
our aerial reconnaissance platforms have proven ineffective against small elements such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban, hiding in caves or among the population within cities. The inception of the internet has now provided the enemy with an anonymous method in which to communicate, organize and plan hostile actions against U.S. forces and its citizens alike.

Those skeptical of an increased reliance on human intelligence would likely believe that the nature of our current conflicts is somewhat of an anomaly; one where future battles will again be predicted on adherence to the old air land battle doctrines of the Cold War. Looking at potential threats throughout the world one could make an argument that China, North Korea, or Iran would pose a greater threat than the small cells of Afghanistan or Iraq and justify an increase in technical assets used toward intelligence. Although these larger enemies do pose a threat, due to nuclear self assured destruction and sheer distance from one another, the likelihood of such a massive altercation seems remote. However, we could see battle again soon against these adversaries, not on our respective sovereign soils, but more likely by proxy, against smaller forces that operate in secret and difficult to detect through technical means. With the reports of Iranian and Chinese backing of insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, one could argue that this small-scale proxy war is already taking place.

America has, by its own success, created an environment where asymmetric warfare and counterinsurgency is a necessary enemy strategy in order to defeat our tactically and technically superior force. Warfare has evolved from one of small armies and bands fighting each other, to enormous scale maneuver battles, and back again to one of decentralized fighting among
populations with highly cellular units. Although the sheer size of our military makes it often
times slow to adapt, the ability of our Army to recognize the lessons and see the value of human
intelligence as adopted by such forces as the Indian and Philippine Scouts has never been greater.
Since the U.S. military will likely continue to encounter less organized, cellular, state-sponsored
armies, the reliance on human intelligence to defeat the small irregular forces will be necessary
in order to be successful in the modern age of warfare.
