

Combat Intelligence: A Comparative Evaluation

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A former G-2 officer at Army Group level analyzes sources of battlefield intelligence.

Lyman B. Kirkpatrick

The "final after action" report of the G-2 section of the 12th Army Group, General Omar Bradley's command in the World War II European campaign, contains one chapter of particular pertinence to the work of the military intelligence officer. Chapter Three is an analysis of G-2 operations at army, corps and division level throughout the 12th Army Group command.

As one of the group preparing this now 16-year-old report, I visited the G-2 sections of each of the four armies, twelve corps, and 48 divisions that had served with the 12th Army Group, the largest ground combat command ever assembled by the United States. The purpose of the exercise was to obtain first-hand judgments from intelligence officers at all levels about what methods of intelligence collection had proved most valuable in combat. Organization and procedures were examined with only secondary interest. A questionnaire had been sent earlier to each of the commands, but we guessed that visits in person would evoke fuller and franker opinions; and this proved to be the case.

With the ever-looming possibility of a new clash of arms before us, a summary review of this digest of fairly recent experience may be of value.

Prisoners of War

By far the most profitable source of intelligence for all levels of the command-division, corps, and army-was prisoners of war. Some units estimated that as high as 90 per cent of their useful information came from prisoner interrogation. The corps calculated that from 33 to 50 per cent of all the information they received was provided by the interrogators in the prisoner-of-war cages.

The quantity and quality of prisoner information varied, of course, with the position of the individual captive-the higher his rank, the more useful the information, but also the greater his resistance to talking. Skilled interrogators, however, could generally get nearly anyone to talk, and as the German fortunes started to fade the prisoners offered information more freely. The rifleman in the ranks could generally contribute only items about the disposition and strength of his own unit and those immediately adjacent, but a non-commissioned officer who had just arrived from home leave would have a lot to say about everything from order of battle to the morale of civilians and bomb damage on the home front.

When the front was a static one along river lines, as it was in the Ardennes just before the Battle of the Bulge, intelligence suffered from the consequent shortage of prisoners. Here patrolling assumed an even greater than normal importance as an intelligence function, being charged with bringing in prisoners for interrogation. The survey showed that all too often patrolling was considered just another military chore, like KP duty, which every infantryman was expected to do. Some units, on the other hand, had established "permanent" patrol sub-units of selected personnel whose only mission was patrolling. These had high morale, their casualties were low, and they produced excellent results for the intelligence officer, both in reporting visual observations and in taking prisoners for interrogation.

Not the least important aspect of getting intelligence from prisoners was the speed and quality of processing it. The highly organized system of IPW (Interrogation: Prisoners of War) teams at division, corps, and army level to screen and interrogate the captives and produce reports was

indispensable in getting the intelligence rapidly to the place where it was needed.

Air Reconnaissance

Ranked as the second most important source of combat intelligence was aerial reconnaissance and photography. The use of aircraft for intelligence collection was not new in World War II, a considerable amount having been done in 1914-18; but it was now greatly advanced in techniques and in importance.

Of the two major methods of air reconnaissance used, visual observation by the pilot or observer was the fastest. The artillery observer, hovering in his light aircraft just out of reach of enemy fire and talking directly to the batteries, was an indispensable intelligence collector for the gunners. Observations made by pilots, those of the fighter-bombers particularly, provided a substantial amount of material on enemy movements, concentrations, and armor.

It was the photoreconnaissance planes, however, that probably made the great contribution of hard facts for the use of the division "2's," the corps planners, and the army and higher headquarters strategists. The camera recorded permanently for careful study and analysis details that no pilot's mind could catch and record as they flashed by at several hundred miles an hour. Whereas a pilot's report might state that he had seen "some thirty to forty tanks (probably Mark IV's) on the road from Trier to Echtermach," the photointerpreter would be able to specify that there were exactly 27 tanks, that they were Tigers, not Mark IV's, and moreover that tracks entering a pine forest at such-and-such coordinates indicated the refuge where the panzers hid out when the Allied fighter-bombers were aloft.

There were two handicaps in the use of photoreconnaissance as a major source of combat intelligence. First, there would be times when weather would ground the planes or cloud cover would obscure the targets, and of course even during good weather the photo planes were not effective at night. The enemy inevitably took advantage of such periods for major troop movements or relocation. It was the extremely poor weather for days on end at the beginning of December 1944 that blinded the Allied

aerial reconnaissance in the Ardennes and helped the Germans achieve surprise in their counteroffensive now known as the Battle of the Bulge.

Second, it took time to process the film, make the basic interpretation, and get the material to the combat lines. Although this was well organized and generally efficient, it was never quite fast enough in rapidly moving situations. Yet it was the fast armored divisions that particularly needed and were eager to get all possible photographic cover of areas in their path of advance. "Experience in the European Theater," the report says, "showed that often all planning failed to be optimistic enough and that rapid breakthrough of armor overran maps and terrain appreciations." Here photography deep behind enemy lines was needed.

Sigint

Generally considered the third most important source of information on the enemy in combat was signals intelligence, something not much more complicated or sophisticated than listening in on a party line, the line here being the nearby ether. The listening units on both sides could easily pick up chatter between tanks, aircraft, and even different units when the situation was fluid and land lines either not yet laid or too frequently cut. Even the most security-conscious often dropped their guard in the heat of battle, and it didn't require terribly brainy cryptographers to read through double-talk or crack simple pseudonyms. With the aid of information from prisoners, documents, and other sources, it was easy to translate such a message as "This is Eagle Tac calling Lucky Forward" into "This is 12th Army Group Tactical Headquarters calling 3rd Army Advance." The report commented: "Through its radio intelligence activities the [Sigint] unit repeatedly produced enemy information at critical periods that was not obtainable from other sources, and often of decisive moment tactically."

Efforts to maintain signal security provided some moments of humor. During the Battle of the Bulge the Germans overran all of the ground lines connecting 12th Army Group headquarters with the forces to the north. It was possible to get a call through on land lines by routing through Rheims or Paris, but this was generally about as effective as

trying to communicate with the North Pole through a megaphone, and even so not necessarily secure; the far-ranging German patrols could be happily listening in at some tap. Consequently most calls were put on VHF radio, and the operator would admonish the caller "Remember, the enemy is listening." One colonel, highly frustrated in trying to get his message through, snapped: "Well I hope to hell he can hear better than I can!" Another story, perhaps apocryphal, features an officer who used to answer his field phone by saying, "This is the enemy, who are you?"

Documents

The fourth most prolific source of combat intelligence was captured enemy documents. In the words of the report, however, "Combat troops must be indoctrinated with the importance of enemy documents as a source of enemy intelligence, and this must be stressed during operations. It is highly probable that much intelligence, possibly of great value, was lost due to failure on the part of troops effecting the capture to recognize the importance of what probably appeared to be documents of little or no value."

To a large degree documents served only to confirm other information, as on order of battle, T/O and E of enemy units, etc. But there were instances when they had a broader, independent value, particularly those in such categories as enemy after-action reports. For example, the German 3rd Parachute Division's report of its fight against the 29th U.S. Infantry Division at St. Lo in the Normandy battle proved exceedingly valuable in showing us our mistakes and as material for training in enemy tactics.

Agents

Agent's reports ranked an over-all fifth in value for information on the enemy. The assessments by different units ranged all the way from zero to very great, but there was universal agreement that the field armies should have working with them personnel trained in the handling of

espionage agents. The armies varied widely in the amount of experience they had had with the use of special units for getting agents behind enemy lines: the Third Army kept an OSS unit all the way through the European campaign, while the First Army got rid of its OSS detachment shortly after landing in Normandy.

The use of agents was unquestionably the intelligence collection technique least well understood by the military personnel. There was also inadequate forward planning for placing agents in key spots. These two elements undoubtedly reduced the value of espionage in the battle for western Europe below what it could have been.

The best use of agents was made in the battle for France, in two carefully planned long-term operations, one from England and one from North Africa, mounted well before D-Day in Normandy. It had to be assumed that German counterespionage might cripple the effectiveness of the French resistance at the time of the Allied landings, and it was decided that alternate sources of intelligence should therefore be in place. For months before the invasion, accordingly, the British, French, and Americans in a tripartite effort infiltrated radio-equipped intelligence teams by air and sea into all of the key areas of France. The teams were told to get in place and establish agent networks, but not to come on the air until ordered. These operations proved highly successful, with amazingly low casualties, and provided a considerable amount of valuable combat intelligence. The French resistance, however, was fortunately not crippled by the Gestapo, and it too provided intelligence until all France was liberated.

After the fighting moved eastward out of France there were no longer any agent networks to provide combat intelligence. Advance planning had not foreseen that the Germans would fight on their own soil, and so no preparations had been made. Here, in an area where the population was hostile, when whatever resistance to Hitler existed was either cowed or in concentration camps, the need for agents carefully placed in the path of the advance was theoretically at its greatest. The efforts of the OSS to recruit and drop or infiltrate Germans behind the lines proved, with few exceptions, pitifully inadequate to the difficult task of getting good agents in the proper places. Most of the Germans dropped either got themselves picked up promptly and executed, or else headed for home to hide out. Fortunately, the enemy front was collapsing, prisoners were plentiful and talkative, aerial observation was uninhibited, and the need for agent reports was actually not great.

In Wars to Come

What these experiences of World War II offer in the way of guidance for the future depends, obviously, on when, where, and how the new battle is fought. Some contingent generalizations can be made.

In any war of the future fought with conventional weapons, much of the past experience will still be valid. Prisoners will be captured, and prisoners will talk in direct proportion to the skill of the interrogators. Aerial reconnaissance will be more sophisticated, using unmanned drones, television, and photographic missiles. It will also face a better defense, one equipped with gun-laying radar and other new devices. As long as fighting units communicate there will be signals. Documents will continue to be carried and be left behind. And finally, espionage will be of value if there is advance planning, if networks can be established behind enemy lines, and if the population is not too hostile.

In a limited nuclear war the relative value of some of these sources will probably change. Prisoners will be fewer because of the remoteness of contact and they will be less knowledgeable, although they will probably surrender in larger numbers when there is contact. Documents will also decline in importance for similar reasons. Aerial observation and signals intelligence will become of paramount importance. Agents in place in advance of the conflict will help-provided they are in the right place at the right time.

In an all-out nuclear conflict, previous experience in combat intelligence may count for very little, and those forms of collection, such as prisoners and documents, that depend on direct contact with enemy forces may be eliminated altogether. The rapid mobilization and recovery of intelligence resources in the recuperative phase following the first blow may well prove to be the key to such victory as is possible. In this war there will be vast areas of destruction mutually inflicted in the opening minutes. The side that can most quickly discover the extent of damage to the enemy, ascertain the retaliatory force and strength remaining to him, and strike and destroy that in the second, probably decisive blow, will emerge victor. Only the rapid collection and effective use of intelligence can make this blow effective, whether the intelligence

comes from signals, aerial observation manned or unmanned, or agents well established in advance in key areas of the enemy country. On this survival may depend.

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