Psychological Operations in Support of Fires

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Paratroopers with Bravo Battery, 2nd Battalion, 377th Parachute Field Artillery Regiment, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, U.S. Army Alaska, prepare M119 105 mm howitzer ammunition during live-fire training at Malemute Drop Zone, Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, Jan. 16, 2019. Paratroopers from 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, and 2nd Battalion, 377th Parachute Field Artillery Regiment conducted an airborne forced-entry operation and follow on live-fire exercise while elements from the 6th Brigade Engineer Battalion acted as opposition forces. (Alejandro Peña/U.S. Air Force)
The operational challenge

The Fires community leads the Army in destroying, neutralizing and suppressing the enemy by cannon, rocket and missile fire as well as helping to integrate all lethal and nonlethal fire support assets into combined arms operations. Both the Field Artillery and Air Defense Artillery are critical capabilities as we transition from focusing on the counter-terrorism threat to fighting near-peer and peer threats. The 2018 National Defense Strategy articulated the threat posed by revisionist powers that seek to undermine long-term U.S. security and prosperity and the international order. As Psychological Operation’s (PSYOP) trained Soldiers it is our job to leverage the cognitive domain to amplify Fires’ ability to Decide, Detect, Deliver and Assess (D3A) and to Find, Fix, Exploit, Analyze and Disseminate (F3AD) to the enemy. By working together, we can increase lethality, capitalize on successful missions and frustrate the enemy’s plans/affect their decision-making process. This is all done in order to support the commander and ensure that end-states are met at any level of war.

For the past 17 years, following the attack on Sept. 11, the focus of the majority of the Armed Services has been toward counter terrorism and counter insurgency. However, given the revision of FM 5-0 Operations focusing toward conventional warfare, and the contents of the 2018 NSS, the Department of Defense has shifted focus from counter insurgency to engaging and winning in peer-to-peer conflict. This change of focus makes the kinetic capabilities of Fires and the effects cell all the more relevant in today’s conflicts. As such, psychological operations, provides planners to Fires who are a critical portion in the planning and targeting cell. The main goal of these planners are to augment the capabilities of these elements by offering cultural expertise, countering enemy propaganda and messaging in order to achieve psychological effects in support of commander’s objectives. Successfully integrated PSYOP can augment any Fires campaign, to accomplish the mission, exploit opportunities and achieve the commander’s desired end-state.

One of the issues we see when it comes to successfully integrating PSYOP into Fires is lack of involvement in the planning or targeting process. Psychological operations must be involved in the early planning stages at all levels of war to support Fires at the tactical, operational and strategic level. Without proper inclusion into the targeting process, PSYOP cannot be properly executed in order to achieve to greatest effects to further the objectives of Fires’ commanders. To quote Lt. Col. Clint Tracy’s article in the previous issue of Fires, “We’ll figure it [the mentality] out when it happens...Unfortunately your odds of figuring something out, on the fly, is practically zero.”

Given the fact that targeting is a complex and multidiscipline effort that requires coordinated interaction among many command and staff elements, it is an implied task to include PSYOP, as well as other information-related capabilities, in the targeting process.

PSYOP in today’s conflicts

Targeting is a critical component of the Fires warfighting function, which uses the D3A and F3DA process. In terms of where psychological operations gives added value to the process of D3A; first, in the decision process, PSYOP can offer commanders and staff input of cultural effects that could be created due to the operation. PSYOP can have stand-by operations exploiting the success of the operation and demoralizing the enemy. Second, on the topic of how PSYOP can augment the detection process, PSYOP can establish tip lines in order to report enemy activity. PSYOP is also capable of mapping civilian activity and cultural events to ensure civilian involvement in the ultimate area of oper-
ation, AO, is kept to a minimum. Third, when talking about how PSYOP can assist in the delivery cycle, PSYOP is capable of utilizing tactical deception in support of operations. This encompasses using a calculated act of deception in order to disrupt, deceive and degrade enemy operations. Some examples include, spreading misinformation in order to protect firing positions or possibly masking unit movements to and from the AO (OPSEC). PSYOP is also capable advising the supported unit on how to develop decoy fighting platforms, in order to distract enemy attention, keeping Fire forces in the fight longer. Finally in the assessment phase, PSYOP is capable of conducting their own job-related assessment and evaluation in order to determine effectiveness. When viewing assessment through the lens of targeting, more specifically for fires, PSYOP can help staff to provide accurate assessments that the commander’s guidance has been met.

In addition to being able to be incorporated into Fires Planning/targeting process, Psychological Operations can upset an enemy’s formation or tempo, interrupt the enemy’s timetable, or cause enemy forces to commit prematurely or attack in an organized fashion. A tactical PSYOP team (TPT) is a three man tactical-level PSYOP team that is capable of implementing several methods to deny the enemy the use of space, personnel, supplies or facilities to confuse enemy combatants into believing that U.S. forces are located in a certain position, therefore drawing the attention and forces of an enemy from the point of the principal operation; an attack, alarm or feint that diverts attention.

In addition, a TPT can target a village with a loudspeaker in order to divert civilians away from a targeted area, or influence a high-value target to commit to actions that benefit United States interests and actions. After Fires has engaged with a target, PSYOP Soldiers can recognize, collect, process, preserve and analyze information, personnel and/or materiel found during the conduct of operations by utilizing their sensitive-site exploitation skillset, the ability to scan and process an area for items of interest after any sort of direct action, or using tactical questioning when speaking with an enemy prisoner of war. In addition, PSYOP forces are trained and specialize in conducting key leader engagement (KLE) and can serve as a key tool in understanding the operational environment and working toward solutions within multinational forums. When properly done, KLEs can support the commander’s end-state and have strategic impact towards reaching overarching lines of effort.

The way forward and conclusion

In conclusion PSYOP, when correctly integrated with Fires, can make lasting contributions toward mission attainment. Currently, the challenge is incorporating these effects early on to synchronize these effects to support the commander’s end-state. PSYOP can support Fires on a range of missions from understanding the cultural terrain to influencing the cultural terrain in order to support organizational objectives. This can be done by PSYOP forces in all different shapes and sizes, from the planners in the targeting cell to the physical tactical PSYOP teams that circulate the battlefield messaging various targeted audiences.


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