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The intelligence function in the tactical operations center

By Blair Alexander



Oakland PD and Alameda County Sheriff's Office tactical dispatchers recording critical information during an actual yard search operation for an officer-involved shooting suspect

Scenario

An armed man has taken his estranged wife and two-year-old daughter hostage in a motel room. The watch commander has initiated a tactical team call out to assist in resolving this incident. As your agency's tactical commander, you respond to the scene and receive a briefing from the watch commander (now the incident commander) while the rest of your tactical team trickles in to the scene. You go back to your tactical operations center (TOC) and find your command post is abuzz with activity: negotiators are talking on the phone to the suspect, tactical dispatchers are logging the movement and observations of entry and long rifle elements as they establish containment positions and designated personnel are researching criminal databases to determine the suspect's background.

As you are listening to the radio and beginning to develop the situation, your head negotiator comes up to you and says that the suspect is irate and sounds like he is on the verge of shooting his wife. At the same time, the officer doing the database checks walks up and advises you that the person who is supposedly the suspect is currently serving a sentence in state prison.

Finally, one of your dispatchers grabs you by the arm and yells, "Did you hear the radio, sir? The suspect just pointed his gun out the window and fired at one of the operators on the inner perimeter!"

A decision point has been reached and action of some form is required. In order to make an appropriate decision under pressure, a commander must not only have information, of which there is usually plenty, but also intelligence. What most commanders don't know or understand is that there is a difference. As a result, at critical decision points, tactical commanders can find themselves deluged by irrelevant "noise" that serves only to confuse and overload.

The cause of this information overload is two-fold: one, tactical teams do not transform information into intelligence through systematic analysis; and two, they do not effectively communicate that derived intelligence to their tactical commanders. In other words, teams sometimes fall short when it comes to organizing their intelligence function.

This article will describe the basic tenets of the intelligence function and provide some concrete steps that a tactical team can take for improving their TOC's intelligence efforts in order to optimize this function.



Berkeley (CA) police conduct information analysis around map boards in the Tactical Operations Center

However, let's first briefly reflect on how the processing of information oftentimes works (or doesn't work) for many SWAT teams.

How information is often (mis)processed in TOCs

The command post for a SWAT team typically consists of the following elements:

- Command element — often just the tactical commander, perhaps an assistant and a scribe.
- Tactical element — these tactical operators (entry personnel and long riflemen/observers) are normally forward deployed to the objective site but sometimes have representatives in the TOC.
- Negotiator element — tasked with establishing/maintaining communications with the suspect, this element often establishes their own Negotiator Operations Center (NOC) within the TOC.
- Electronic research element — varies based on the SWAT team, but is tasked with doing electronic research on the suspects, associates and victims.
- Tactical dispatchers — again, varies from team to team, but usually is tasked with controlling radio communications, providing scribes and completing status boards.

Information will work its way into the TOC via any of these tactical elements, as well as from other sources. For example, the patrol officer who initially responded to the incident provides his observations; tactical operators report suspect movement from their containment positions; negotiators in contact with the suspect relay suspect demands; electronic surveillance personnel obtain and provide the suspect's criminal history from law enforcement databases; and tactical dispatchers receive citizen information called in to the dispatch center. Unfortunately, these tidbits of information often get transmitted, directly and without vetting, to the tactical commander.

In fast-moving incidents, it is not uncommon for a commander to simultaneously receive a virtual avalanche of information from a variety of sources,



Oakland (CA) SWAT Intelligence Chief (far right) conducts ongoing analysis of available information with members of the tactical negotiations element.

without the benefit of that information being filtered for relevance, reliability or priority. In an effort to “help,” subordinates constantly interrupt their tactical commander — a person with whom they often enjoy unfettered access — with the latest breaking news and important updates. Unfortunately, in their rush to provide these “critical” elements of information, subordinates invariably neglect to analyze the information they are providing. Thus, not only is the tactical commander's every available minute consumed with unsynchronized updates, but the commander now must expend additional time sorting through and assigning meaning to this ever-growing stream of raw data. It is no wonder that tactical commanders get overcome by events. The “fog of war”¹ is to be expected in any critical incident; this fog, however, should not be generated in large part by a tactical commander's own staff!

The basics of the intelligence function

Before considering the function of intelligence, I submit to the reader the following definition of intelligence: *Intelligence is the product that results from analysis of available data related to an ongoing critical incident or threat.*²

The components of analysis can be further segmented into the following activities or component tasks:

- **Collection** — data for all available sources is initially gathered and captured. Data that is not collected cannot go through the remaining steps.
- **Processing** — the data is then recorded on appropriate forms, charts or computer displays.
- **Integration** — the processed data is now compared to similarly collected and processed data, allowing the data to be placed in the context of the current incident. When context has been applied to data, that data has effectively been transformed into relevant information.
- **Evaluation** — relevant information is then examined in two dimensions: source and content reliability. Source reliability is a function of previous reporting from a particular source, while content reliability is the degree of confidence one has in the information based on its being confirmed by outside sources.³
- **Interpretation** — finally, the information is compared to all that is known about the current situation to understand what operational impacts that information will have, either immediately or in the future. At this stage, the information has been transformed into intelligence that can be made available to the tactical commander.

The purpose of intelligence is straightforward — to support the tactical

commander’s decision-making process. By doing so, the intelligence function also supports the rest of the tactical team by providing them with intelligence pertaining to their specific roles and activities during the operation. Intelligence is the key driver for operations. Without useful intelligence, the tactical commander can only make sound operational choices, and direct specific actions or activities, by sheer luck or instinct. A commander’s instincts and professional intuition are no doubt important, but these personal qualities must always be supplemented by trustworthy intelligence when choosing an optimal operational course of action.

The function of intelligence is the entire system (organizational structure,

people, tasks, reports, processes) that allows information to be transformed into intelligence. The intelligence function does not occur by happenstance; instead the function must be carefully designed, trained and supervised in order to render a consistent level of high-quality intelligence to the tactical commander.

Steps to improving the TOC’s intelligence efforts

1. **Organize for success.** The first step in installing a more effective intelligence function in the TOC is to establish an independent intelligence section. Too often today’s SWAT command posts suffer for the spreading of intelligence responsibilities across various tactical team entities that are not joined by a common purpose. The importance of providing solid intelligence to the commander necessitates an organizational structure that provides the unity of effort that this task requires. This structure must have clear lines of authority and strong leadership.

Diagram 1 demonstrates one way of organizing an intelligence section. In this

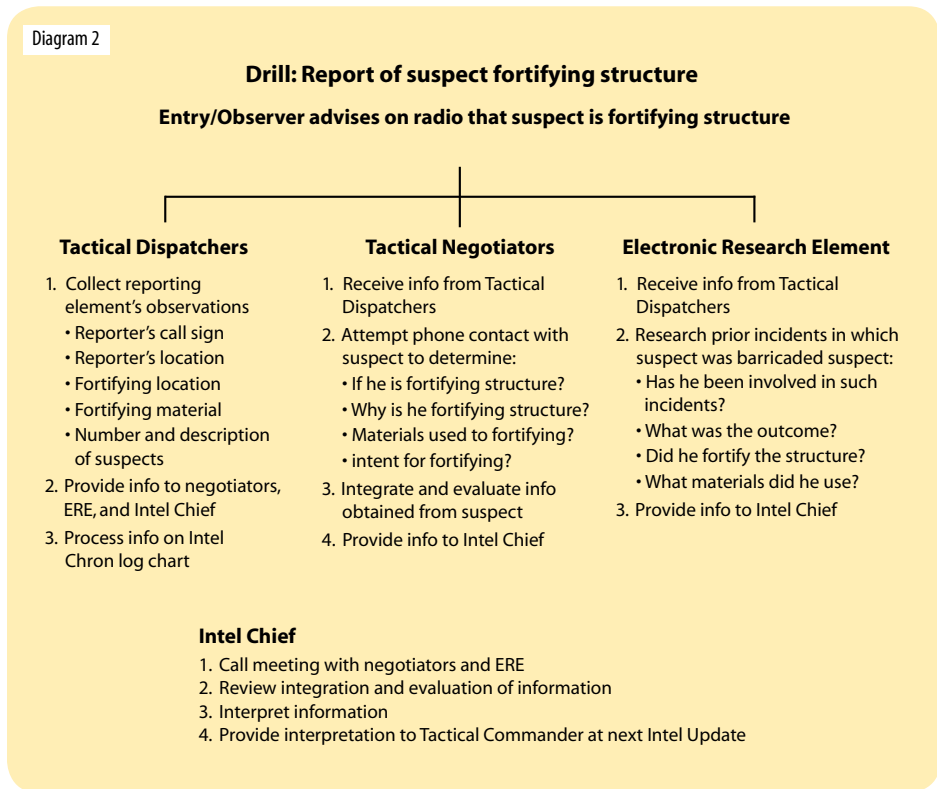
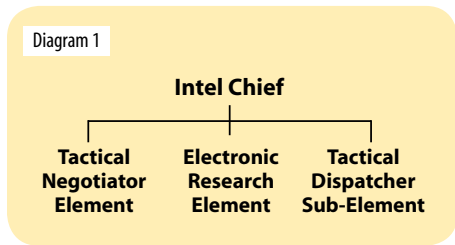
organization, the intelligence chief reports directly to the tactical commander, thus reducing the number of people trying to provide intelligence to the commander.

The *tactical negotiator element* is responsible for collecting, integrating and evaluating information they obtain from their communications with the suspect and any associates/citizen informants who call in to provide information. The *electronic research element* is responsible for collecting and integrating information they obtain via criminal database checks and the tracking of cellular phone transmissions. The *tactical dispatcher sub-element* (those not involved in providing operational support) are then tasked with processing (charting and making available to computer displays) information from the tactical negotiator element, the electronic research element and the entry/long rifle elements reporting in from the objective site.

As he monitors the analysis his team is conducting, the intelligence chief continuously integrates information to place it in context with the ongoing incident. Finally, as the situation dictates, the intelligence chief meets with the heads of the tactical negotiator and electronic research elements to perform the tasks of evaluation and interpretation.

2. **Establish pre-planned battle drills.** The second step is to institute procedures for analyzing incoming data. The process of collection, processing, integration and interpreting information must be codified if one expects the results to be consistently useful. One way to do this is through the use of intelligence “battle drills” and checklists. These drills and checklists serve to standardize the tasks each element in the intelligence section is responsible for performing during an anticipated event.

Diagram 2 provides a sample report drill for the scenario in which a suspect appears to be fortifying the structure in which he is barricaded. Although this drill does not include all the actions that members of the intelligence section may take, it does provide a baseline of activities and tasks



that must be executed when such an event is encountered. Furthermore, the drill clearly shows each element's role in the analysis process, such as collecting, processing, integrating, evaluating and interpreting. Drills such as this one should be developed for all anticipated suspect actions. Additionally, if a suspect employs an action during an incident that the SWAT has never encountered before, a drill should be developed as part of the team's post-operational debriefing.

3. Obtain your commander's key intelligence needs: A final step for enhancing the TOC's intelligence function is establish a clear listing of the tactical commander's Priority Intelligence Requirements (PIR).⁴ PIRs are intelligence requirements that the tactical commander has not only anticipated, but has stated he needs to know about as soon they are identified in the TOC. The commander's PIRs identify the key intelligence the commander considers critical for decision-making. PIRs concern both the suspect (including associates, weapons, criminal history, vehicles and time available) and the environment (terrain, structures and weather).

Below is a sample listing of tactical commanders' PIRs for a barricaded suspect incident:

- What crime has the suspect committed?
- What weapons is the suspect armed with?
- Where is the suspect located (including verified movement at the objective area)?
- What demands has the suspect made?
- What arrests does the suspect have for weapons-related crimes?
- What other people are associated with the suspect (pertaining to the incident at hand)?
- When and where were shots fired by the suspect?

The list of PIRs will be personally chosen by each tactical commander and reviewed regularly. This way the tacti-

cal commander can be confident that the intelligence requirements that he considers key will be made available to him as soon as they are known. Regardless of what is occurring during the operation, if anyone in the TOC becomes aware that any of the PIRs are being triggered, they have an immediate responsibility to interrupt the tactical commander and report that a PIR has been identified.

Conclusion

Tactical operations are characterized by their volatility, uncertainty and ambiguity. All too often tactical commanders become inundated by what seems like an unending series of "intel updates" which amount to nothing more than unanalyzed and unsynchronized bits of data. Commanders soon get buried in this mound of information and find themselves unable to make sound decisions — the operational choices that can mean the difference between peaceful incident resolution and, in some unfortunate cases, the tragic loss of life.

The end state for a team's intelligence efforts is to paint as clear an intelligence picture as possible so that the tactical commander can cut through the inevitable fog of war and make the best decisions possible. While acknowledging the challenges of improving the intelligence function in tactical operations centers, this article has endeavored to offer some techniques for enhancing those intelligence efforts. «

Endnotes

1. For a further discussion on the fog and friction of war, see Book 1, Chapter 7 of Baron Von Clausewitz's *On War*. Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976.
2. This definition has been modified from that which is shown in U.S. Army Field Manual 2-0, *Intelligence*, p. 1-3.
3. Methods for determining source and content reliability are detailed in U.S. Army Field Manual 2-22.3, *Human Intelligence Collector Operations*, pp. B-1 through B-2.
4. For a further discussion of PIR, see U.S. Army Field Manual 5-0, *The Operations Process*, p. B-9.

About the author

Lieutenant Blair Alexander is an 18-year veteran of the Oakland, Calif. Police Department,

where he is a commander of a street-level violence suppression unit. Lt. Alexander has served as one of the tactical commanders for his department's team for the past year and has more than 10 years of prior experience as an entry element operator. He also holds the rank of colonel (Infantry) in the U.S. Army Reserve, with more than 29 years of service. He is a graduate of both the U.S. Military Academy (West Point, NY) and the U.S. Army War College (Carlisle, PA).

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