Tasking Success
Defining mission accomplishment through task analysis
by Col Wayne A. Sinclair

"Lieutenant General David McKiernan (Combined Land Forces Component Commander for Operation Iraqi Freedom I) couldn’t get General Tommy Franks (Commander, US Central Command) to issue clear orders that stated explicitly what he wanted done, how he wanted to do it, and why. Rather, Franks passed along PowerPoint briefing slides that he had shown to (Defense Secretary) Rumsfeld...CENTCOM set up an office to do Phase IV planning before the war but it never produced anything...it never actually produced a usable blueprint for running postwar Iraq." —Thomas Ricks, Fiasco

The irreparable costs of incomplete and flawed planning associated with Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) will seldom be far from the consciousness of an entire generation of military planners and senior decisionmakers. While the “too little, too late” characterization of the disjointed and ad hoc “Phase IV” (i.e., postconflict stabilization) planning usually invokes the most handwringing, the planning oversight did not end there. At both the operational and tactical levels, the U.S.-led coalition was slow to recognize the causes and understand the complexities of the growing insurgency movements and adapt its responses accordingly. To the degree that a planning effort should influence what actually gets done, one could argue that the years-long delays in organizing, equipping, and training for counterinsurgency operations—to say nothing of applying and adapting sound practices at all levels—might also be traced back to incomplete or inadequate planning. My intent is not to attempt to analyze any of OIF’s more widely acknowledged shortcomings; OIF simply provides a more familiar illustration of the degree to which a military campaign’s ultimate success depends upon a full understanding of all that a given mission requires. Despite all of the scrutiny a mission statement and commander’s intent typically receive, they are not enough to ensure that all requirements and expectations are understood and conveyed across the breadth and depth of the MAGTF. Given that a postfacto analysis of any campaign is not entirely fair to those operational planners who had to navigate the murky waters of intelligence estimates, flimsy planning assumptions, and vague or conflicting policy guidance, we might ask how, from a procedural perspective, the planning could have been done differently to bring about a better outcome within the context of the Marine Corps Planning Process. The purpose of this article is to answer this far-reaching question by first highlighting the relationship between task analysis and mission accomplishment and then offering commanders and staffs at all levels a structured approach to discerning implied tasks.

Too often such axiomatic wisdom as “no plan survives first contact” serves as an excuse for poor planning and weak planning products while the fact that the unit “in contact” is far less likely to survive without a plan is entirely overlooked. Indeed, few skills are more fundamental to Marine commanders and staffs than to clearly convey intentions and to develop and issue complete, executable orders. The purpose of the Marine Corps Planning Process is to facilitate a common understanding among commanders, staffs, and subordinate units of a given mission or problem set and the “how” to accomplish or resolve it. As the process moves forward and a concept of operation emerges, the staff must cooperatively determine, articulate, and assign tasks (with associated purposes) those separate actions that cumulatively amount to mission success. Along with the commander’s indispensable role in overseeing the execution of a given mission and the staff’s responsibility to effectively align resources, the tasks to subordinates found in an operation order (OpOrd) are the primary means of clearly communicating what needs to be done and why, thereby increasing the probability of overall mission success.

Yet how to systematically develop tasks within the planning process is not
widely understood or well supported by training, professional military education, or doctrine. Consequently, the methods used and the results gained from task analysis efforts can vary widely depending on the time and skills available to planners, as well as the degree of experienced oversight on hand. Whether the intended recipient is a fire team leader, a platoon commander, or a MEF commander, the importance of properly tasking subordinates demands the focused attention of every Marine involved in the production of a plan or order.

**Background**

With over 4,000 years of recorded military history to consider, the use of a standardized OpOrd is a surprisingly recent advancement. Countless battles have been lost and campaigns have unraveled because orders failed to clearly and concisely convey what was expected to be accomplished by whom and why. Napoleon Bonaparte was renowned for his long, detailed orders that were difficult to grasp by all but his most experienced marshals. A scan of several written orders from the American Civil War reveals that many contained insignificant details, irrelevant suggestions, and unwarranted prescriptions for addressing every imaginable contingency. Without doctrine, the personalities and peculiarities of commanders generally dictated the quality and value of orders.

The quest for clarity and succinctness in orders achieved its first major breakthrough in 1906 when the Assistant Commandant of the U.S. Staff College, Army Maj. Eben Swift, advocated the use of a common “field order” for the purpose of addressing “the tactical and strategical details incident to a state of war and the prospect of contact with the enemy...” To organize and disseminate a commander’s operational intentions efficiently, Swift proposed a framework for field orders comprised of five logically sequenced paragraphs. The new format was better structured to provide subordinate commanders and their staffs a fuller appreciation of what was expected of them within a given situation.

Although Swift did not prescribe names (only numbers and subject matter) to the subdivisions of the field order, generations of military officers in nearly every English speaking army eventually came to remember them by the acronym SMEAC—a memory-aiding tool based on the heading of each of the five paragraphs: situation, mission, execution, administration and logistics, and command and control. The relatively rapid and widespread adoption of this method of expressing a commander’s will, coupled with its continued use today, bears testimony to the importance of this little known milestone.

**The Impact of SMEAC**

While largely taken for granted today, the use of the five paragraph order told 20th century subordinate commanders for the first time not only exactly what was expected of them, but also the larger context in which they would operate. This included an assessment of the enemy situation, the likely impacts of weather and terrain, the tasks of adjacent units, the logistical support and challenges they could anticipate, and the location of the higher commander. Of even greater importance, the five paragraph order served as the driving mechanism for greater staff involvement in the formulation of orders. Staff members had to understand the larger operating environment and work together to produce the order while maintaining their functional expertise and designated battle staff advocacy. While a commander’s influence on the tactical operations of subordinate formations would continue to be impacted most by his personality and leadership style, the role of the staff became central to discerning and clearly communicating the commander’s intentions.

Though every Marine Corps officer is taught the basic components of an OpOrd at The Basic School, gaining...
a comfortable level of proficiency in plans and orders development requires extensive practice in the Operating Forces. Even years of experience must be fortified by a fluent understanding of the Marine Corps Planning Process, especially when the order involves tasks for all elements of a MAGTF, to say nothing of joint and combined operations. Unfortunately, many professional military education curriculums above the captain level do not provide an appreciable degree of focus and repetition on plans and orders writing.

Aside from the concept of operations, the most important byproduct of the planning process is the comprehensive and integrated list of tasks to staff sections as well as all subordinate and assigned units. After all, tasks contained in the higher command’s OpOrd form the basis of subordinate units’ missions. Experienced commanders and staffs typically look first at the tasks assigned in a particular order to ascertain the quality of planning, the depth of analysis, and the adequacy of the forces available and listed in Annex A: Task Organization. Furthermore, a review of all tasks within an OpOrd will further solidify the concept of operations and help break complex operations into more digestible pieces in the minds of those whose ability to grasp and execute their part of the mission may decide mission success. Finally, when taking on difficult missions in an unstable and politically nuanced environment, tasks offer a useful means to establish a clear and consistent approach to specific types of operations across the MAGTF. Tasking to achieve not only a unity of purpose but also a unity of method in this manner may seem counterintuitive to some Marine commanders and perhaps contrary to the principles of “mission command” and its maneuver warfare underpinnings. However, specified tasks offer an accountable and structured means to mitigate risks in those increasingly common situations where policy guidance, strategic “redlines,” resource shortfalls, host-nation considerations, alliance or coalition limitations, and doctrinal prescriptions will largely dictate how certain operations are conducted more than commanders’ personalities, experience levels, and their staffs’ creativity. The wide variance of counterinsurgency and/or counterterrorist methods employed by U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 9 years—with an equally wide range of effectiveness—makes one wonder what was being tasked and how this changed over time. In far too many cases, infantry battalion commanders, after being heavily reinforced, were assigned an area of operation (i.e., labeled “battlespace owners”) and simply expected to “figure it out.” While a comprehensive analysis of hundreds of still-classified orders would provide a more definitive answer, I found that over the course of three deployments with Multinational Force-West (MNF-W) in Al Anbar Province, Iraq, between 2004 and 2008, specified tasks at all levels of the MAGTF, particularly regiments’ and battalions’ assigned areas of operation, changed drastically. Naturally, as higher guidance, operational experience, key leader education, and unit training expanded and improved, operational commanders and staffs across the Marine Corps talked and thought a great deal about the best practices of counterinsurgency operations. As this understanding of the conflict in Iraq increased, the tasks in MNF-W campaign plans and subordinate OpOrds became more precise, more complete, more consistent with counterinsurgency doctrine and, most tellingly, did not allow for a wide variation in counterinsurgency operations from one battalion area of operations to the next. While hardly surprising, this incremental and evolutionary improvement in effectiveness underscores the vital role that tasks can play in establishing suitably detailed and consistent operational practices. It also suggests that the sooner and more rigorous the task analysis in the planning process, the better are the chances of “getting it right the first time” and shortening the costly period of “discovery learning” that too often accompanies difficult and/or unfamiliar missions. Successfully achieving a desired outcome must involve a clearly communicated expectation in the form of tasks. For this reason above all others, the inclusion of a subsection within Paragraph 3: Execution, dedicated exclusively to assigning staff and subordinate tasks remains unchanged since the inception of the standardized field order.

The Criticality of Tasks

Since higher tasks become subordinate missions that reflect a commander’s understanding of an operation, the quality of his planners’ task analysis efforts may well determine the degree of success that “mission accomplishment” actually achieves. Properly performed, task analysis is a comprehensive planning procedure that facilitates the development of the concept of operations by determining what needs to be done and by whom, as well as where, when, and why. Task analysis is thus a primary means to facilitate top-down integrated planning that aligns the MAGTF’s activities in time, space, and purpose in order for their cumulative consequences to achieve the “single battle.”

Largely as a result of operational experiences, Marine Corps doctrine now better addresses the environmental factors that contribute to a comprehensive task analysis, though the linkage is not well constructed. The recently published Marine Corps Planning Process (Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 5-1, August 2010) offers a modest improvement over its predecessor in the context of “problem framing,” the first planning step previously known as mission analysis. As a precursor to task analysis, planners are directed to intelligence preparation of the battlespace (IPB) products and a useful list of environmental considerations in order to aid one’s understanding of the battlespace, the problems therein and,
by implication, what needs to be done. As before, three separate categories of tasks are introduced: specified, implied, and essential.

As the name suggests, specified tasks are explicitly stated within the higher headquarters OpOrd or initiating directive—assuming that such a document was issued—and are thus a matter of locating through careful reading. Implied tasks are the most challenging to identify. They entail those actions required within the context of the mission but are neither stated nor part of a standing operating procedure. They are discovered by analysis; exactly what must be analyzed will be explained shortly. Finally, essential tasks are those derived directly from specified or implied tasks that actually define mission success and apply to the entire force. They are usually quite limited in number and are reflected in the overall mission statement. Choosing which tasks are essential is a separate but important activity largely driven by what is ultimately considered as mission accomplishment.

The higher command’s plan or order is the foundation for the vertical nesting of concepts as well as clearly establishing the main and supporting efforts for a given operation. While it may be the first source for specified and implied tasks, the higher order is far from the only one. To aid the staff in setting conditions for success through the orders process, a comprehensive checklist approach to task analysis is needed to ensure that what constitutes mission accomplishment is well defined and effectively communicated.

**Getting It Done**

There is no fail-safe formula for identifying and categorizing all specified and implied tasks for a given problem or mission. What follows is a generic starting point for a planner’s task analysis checklist. Using these categories, planners can apply the energies of core operational planning team (OPT) members to facilitate research that draws further input from all OPT participants and reaches out to subordinate units to identify implied tasks for the MAGTF command element as well as all subordinate units. In many cases, the ability of planners to ask the right question at the right time is the single most useful means to drawing out implied tasks in an OPT setting.

**Assumptions.** One of the main differences between a plan and an order is the presence of assumptions. Plans have them; orders do not. Planning assumptions are suppositions about the future used to frame a problem and continue planning. If an OpOrd is issued that was based on an existing concept plan or operation plan, the plan’s assumptions must first be refuted (inaccurate or not applicable to the situation) or validated (determined to be factual) before the order is completed. This reconciliation process often points to followup tasks for both the originating command’s staff and its subordinates. Also, although higher headquarters assumptions may be accepted as facts in the absence of contradictory information, subordinate planners would do well to challenge an originating plan’s assumptions and determine if any new or modified tasks should be included in the resulting order.

**Commander’s guidance.** Written initial planning guidance provided by the commander and staff notes from briefings or other verbal exchanges should be thoroughly reviewed for both specified and implied tasks.

**IPB.** Relevant products from each of the four IPB steps should be analyzed for tasks pertaining to the military aspects of terrain, capabilities, intentions, leadership of the enemy, and other features of the operating environment (e.g., demographies, economic conditions, organized crime, smuggling activities, etc.) based on the types of operations envisioned. U.S. Army Field Manual 34–130 (FM 34–130), *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield* (Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 1994) provides superb guidance and numerous
examples on how to work through this process for a wide range of missions for various sized units with differing time constraints. As an example, the FM's 1994 edition included a subchapter on counterinsurgency operations (primarily written from experiences gained in Vietnam but current doctrine at the time of OIF) that offered a wealth of potential implied counterinsurgency tasks that were surprisingly relevant but largely overlooked in the early years in Iraq.

Subject matter experts (SMEs). Depending on the type of operations contemplated, the threats and geographic locations involved, the relevant historical, language, and cultural factors of concern; and any number of other environmental considerations, SMEs are essential to understanding the problems and potential solutions associated with a given mission. Planners must determine and schedule their SMEs, support requirements for planning early on; very often their services will be in much demand. These may include private contractors with insights into the situation at hand, interagency representatives with regional or topical experience, vetted local nationals, expatriates, anthropologists, missionaries, and linguists. Implied tasks are derived from solicited SME inputs and used to drive MAGTF actions or enabling activities to set conditions for success relative to the problem statement, the operational design, and/or the mission.

Relevant MOSs. Similar to the SMEs identified above, some specific billets and/or MOSs may be valuable to understanding the implications of a given mission and should not be overlooked. Liaison officers, foreign and regional area officers, technicians, and specialists associated with or belonging to specialized units that offer unique skill sets and capabilities germane to the mission (e.g., space support, computer network operations, military information support operations, etc.) should be consulted during the planning process. MOS SMEs’ training and experience can provide a new understanding of certain specified tasks while drawing out previously unknown implied tasks, both to better leverage their organizations and to ensure that all capabilities of the MAGTF are brought to bear or external resources are requested if necessary.

Experience. Seek out insights from all sources of firsthand experience in the anticipated types of operations to help find planning oversights and blindspots that could inform tasks analysis. Sources could be of any grade and include allied and/or coalition military personnel. Scour books, periodicals, after-action reports, and recorded lessons learned (e.g., Marine Corps Combat Lessons Learned database and the U.S. Army's Center for Lessons Learned) that cover topics, locations, terrain, threats, and/or types of operations that may be related to the mission at hand.

Doctrine. Review operating concepts, precepts, and established tactics, techniques, and procedures for the types of operations, environment, and tactical tasks in the higher order. Doctrine will also help identify the sequence and types of units/organizations that perform these tasks. Though clearly explained in doctrinal publications, some important activities associated with lesser known operations should be tasked specifically. The wishful assumption that relevant doctrine has been read and understood by those who need to carry out related operations has proven to be very risky.

Center of gravity (COG) analyses. Unfortunately, COG products of considerable intellectual exertion and great debate early in a planning process are set aside and forgotten about during subsequent planning. Both friendly and enemy COG analyses products (e.g., friendly critical requirements to provide or reinforce, friendly critical vulnerabilities to protect, enemy critical vulnerabilities to target, etc.) offer a deep reservoir of potential friendly actions that deserve thoughtful consideration during task analysis.

Lines of operation (LOOs). Although not yet specifically addressed in Marine Corps doctrine, LOOs are an established part of both U.S. Army and joint U.S. doctrine (e.g., FM 3–0, Operations (Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 2008) and Joint Publication 5–0, Joint Operation Planning (Joint Staff, Washington, DC, 2011)) and guide joint operations. They help to logically organize a topically related sequence of actions and intermediate objectives leading toward a shared end state. LOOs have been heavily used in joint operations over the past decade and continue to figure prominently in campaign designs in Afghanistan and can be found in all geographic combatant command theater campaign plans as well as many of their contingency plans. Examples of LOOs used by the MAGTF in Iraq include “security force development,” “economic development,” and “tribal engagement.” Numerous implied tasks for staffs and subordinate organizations lie concealed in LOOs. Of note, emerging joint doctrine further breaks LOOs into subordinate lines of effort and lines of action to refine or amplify the type or sequence of related activities and tasks.

Making It Count

Once compiled, tasks should be “binned” or placed in a logical time sequence in accordance with the operational design. Those that do not clearly lend themselves to an order of execution should be categorized as simultaneous, cyclical, or enduring to inform the development of courses of action, the next step in the planning process. Finally, as tasks are aligned with staff sections and subordinates, the planners have the vital responsibility of ensuring that all available resources (e.g., forces, logistics, battlespace, etc.) are appropriately matched with the tasks, which may involve shifting assigned forces or, in the case of resource shortfalls, initiating requests for additional forces or support. Few things are more frustrating for a subordinate commander in receipt of a fragmentary order with a demanding and entirely new set of tasks than an entry beside task-organization that simply states “No Change.”

Once the OpOrd is completed and issued, each receiving commander conducts his own planning and returns to provide a confirmation brief to the issuing commander. This is much more than a scripted formality. In essence, the subordinate commanders use confirmation briefs to verify their understanding of the higher commander’s intent, the assigned mission, who supports whom.
and how, what resources shortfalls remain, and what constitutes success based on the key tasks to be accomplished. In preparation for the confirmation brief, the higher headquarters planning team must conduct a detailed crosswalk of the subordinate plan or order to ensure that all tasks are properly accounted for in their concept of operations. The value of this final step in the planning to execution chain cannot be overstated. One can only reflect on how many times in history a well-conceived and planned operation went awry for lack of clear communications and understanding between commanders at different levels about what was expected from each.

Conclusion

While the commander’s intent generally offers a broad vision of success, complex operational realities must be given due consideration through rigorous task analysis. Identifying and assigning the right tasks for subordinates are thus critical skills for all Marine leaders. Beyond appreciating the role tasks play in mission accomplishment, a methodical or checklist approach to task analysis is the best way to ensure that the resulting tasks are appropriate and complete for all aspects of the mission and operating environment. By systematically uncovering, assigning, and resourcing all of the potential tasks of a given operation, a commander is better equipped to understand its true scope and demands, both in human and material terms, and thus be in a far stronger position to know what is required to get it right the first time.

Notes

2. Though timelines and contingency types will cause the level of detail to vary, operations plans are generally identical to operations orders except that plans contain assumptions that must be validated or refuted prior to transitioning a plan into an order.
4. The single battle concept is a unique Marine Corps doctrinal term and a tenet of the Marine Corps Planning Process that allows the commander to view the entire battlespace as an indivisible entity in that actions anywhere can influence actions everywhere. Put another way, the goal is to ensure that the “whole” of MAGTF actions are greater and more impactful than the “sum” of the parts.
5. JP 3-0 has the same four steps common to both Services (Army and Marine Corps) and very similar joint doctrine (Joint Publication 2-01.3, Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment, Joint Staff, Washington, DC, 2009). The four common steps are (1) define the battlespace, (2) determine battlespace effects, (3) evaluate the adversary, and (4) determine adversary courses of action.