The War in Iraq

Planning in Operation Iraqi Freedom

Observations of an Australian Liaison Officer

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In late 2002, the Australian National Headquarters Middle East Area of Operations attached the author as an ADF liaison officer to Third US Army’s Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) to support campaign planning for what was to become Operation Iraqi Freedom. The author was embedded (integrated) in CFLCC as a lead planner and this article describes ten observations made during the experience of working in a coalition headquarters. The views outlined are not offered as formal solutions to the problems involved in military planning at the operational level of war. Rather, they are presented as personal observations and are designed to encourage debate within the ADF on the conditions Australian military professionals might expect to confront in the vital area of coalition operational planning.

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Observation 1: Defining the Battlespace and Establishing Clear Command-and-Control Procedures

Defining the battlespace and establishing a clear command-and-control system should be regarded as the very essence of effective planning at the operational level of war. All other operational functions—including manoeuvre, fires, logistics, intelligence and force protection—rely on a clear demarcation by an operational headquarters of battlespace parameters and command-and-control organisation. Yet, in Operation Iraqi Freedom, such procedures faced frequent challenges. For example, the establishment of appropriate battlespace parameters for CFLCC during the war in Iraq was impeded by the Coalition’s undertaking operations too close to the vicinity of international boundaries. There was also poor liaison between CFLCC and the Coalition Forces Special Operations Component Command, especially during preparations to invade Iraq from Kuwait. Some planners in CFLCC felt that Central Command (CENTCOM) had largely abdicated its responsibility for deciding the extent of battlespace jurisdiction between CFLCC and Special Operations command. There were, for instance, misunderstandings over operational and tactical control between Land Component Command and Special Operations elements.

CFLCC was overly burdened by command responsibilities that included two corps-level headquarters and ten brigade-sized units. Consequently when CFLCC prepared to attack Iraq on D-Day, 19 March 2003, it found management of two corps level headquarters, namely those of US V Corps and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, to be difficult. CFLCC’s actual land power amounted to only three divisions, the US 3rd Infantry Division, the US 1st Marine Division and the British 1st Armoured Division. Such a force really only required a single corps-level headquarters. By having two subordinate corps headquarters in the field, CFLCC faced complexities in assigning an appropriate battlespace to each command because of the realities of restricted terrain and limited lines of communication.

Observation 2: The Dynamics of the Planning Process

The C5 Plans Operational Planning Group and the C35 Future Operations Operational Planning Team were the centres of gravity for CFLCC planning during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Many of the planners in the C5 Plans Operational Planning Group had experience from Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. As a result, the group became an ideal forum for dealing with complex, long-term operational issues arising from the complexities of the planning process, and represented a key agency in supporting the Commander CFLCC, Lieutenant General David McKiernan.
In contrast, the C35 Future Operations Operational Planning Team was staffed by much less experienced officers, some of whom were captains. The C35 Team was established in February 2003, only weeks before the commencement of operations and was expected to provide quick solutions to problems for a corps commander. These solutions often had to conform to the corps commander’s decision cycle of ninety-six hours—a cycle of time that parallels that of an Air Tasking Order used to shape the deep battle.

The role of lead planners in both the planning group and team was critical. Lead planners were responsible for preparing the agenda for planning sessions and for any preparatory research. Prior to planning sessions, lead planners would reconcile the work of their groups with the specified tasks laid down by CENTCOM and Commander CFLCC. This approach had the effect of stimulating the activities of the planning staff in areas such as intelligence, aviation, engineering, topography and imagery.

**Observation 3: Branch and Decision Point Planning**

During Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, branch planning based on contingency options became synonymous with the process of decision point planning. For example, on D-Day on 19 March 2003, Lieutenant General McKiernan could list seven decision points in support of his operational plan. These decision points remain classified in their particulars, but in general they dealt with synchronising operations, exploiting tactical opportunities in the field and controlling operational phases. In the headquarters, each decision point was outlined by means of a graphical representation overlayed on a map. In addition, Commander CFLCC’s Critical Information Requirements were carefully related to dealing with each decision point in turn, and this process enabled the battle staff to track the progress of field operations as they unfolded.

The C35 Future Operations Planning Team developed the system of issuing fragmentary orders for each of the seven decision points. Each of these fragmentary orders was then staffed throughout the headquarters and placed in a ‘warm status’, pending any requirement for their use. This system of pre-prepared fragmentary orders was useful, in that it served to give CFLCC’s subordinate commands the opportunity to provide direct input before orders were issued as formal documents. However, it was discovered that the process of converting decision points from a graphical and text representation into a fragmentary order that defined tasks appropriate to the operational level of war required a concentrated intellectual effort by the C35 Team. A clear danger in writing fragmentary orders at the operational level is that planners may be tempted to list too many tactical tasks for execution by subordinate commands.
CFLCC planners tried to write fragmentary orders that synchronised operational functions. However, once the land campaign commenced, there was little that Commander CFLCC could do to influence operational events, especially south of Baghdad as V Corps and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force attacked their objectives. Once battle commenced, all that Commander CFLCC could concentrate on was influencing selected decision points. He could exert influence in areas such as operational intelligence, by reassigning his collection assets to support a specific decision point, and by attempting to shape the battlespace by redirecting operational fires.

A key observation to be drawn from Operation Iraqi Freedom is that, in a dynamic military environment, there may not be time to develop branch plans fully, and therefore planners must consider developing decision points to support a Commander's operational vision. The Decision Point method worked effectively for CFLCC during the Iraq campaign and decision points were often a focus for planners to consider events in a campaign framework and not merely as a sequence of disaggregated tactical engagements.

**OBSERVATION 4: PROVIDING A PLANNER’S OPERATIONAL VIEW**

Operation Iraqi Freedom demonstrated that planning is never a neat and tidy process. The Iraq campaign tended to draw many commanders and their planning staff into the dynamics of the unfolding battle and its likely course over a ninety-six-hour period. The integrity of planning was also affected by pervasive intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets that now allow any participant—from the President of the United States or the Prime Minister of Australia down to at least battalion command level—to understand the course of events. Excellent situational awareness throughout the battlespace facilitates operational success but it also raises the real possibility of interference in military planning by politicians.

Based on observations of Operation Iraqi Freedom, it is clear to the author that military planners are morally obliged to insist that optimum warfighting solutions be followed at all times. The CFLCC war plan for Phase III, the military hostilities phase of the invasion of Iraq, was excellent, but planning was clearly underdeveloped for Phase IV, the post-hostilities period. Military planners need to be prepared to challenge assumptions and orthodoxies even if this challenge leads to disagreement. In Operation Iraqi Freedom, there was, for instance, planning disagreement over battlespace responsibilities and command-

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and-control procedures between V Corps and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force. It was nevertheless important to air these issues, given that operations aimed against the enemy’s centre of gravity depended on planning clarity.

**OBSERVATION 5: THE CONTINUED NEED FOR WRITTEN ORDERS**

When it comes to military planning tools, Microsoft Power Point seems to have become a lifeblood in the 21st century. Power Point enables fast, accurate and effective relaying of complex material in a graphical form to large bodies of people. For example, prior to D-Day on 19 March 2003, the entire Operation **Cobra II** plan could be briefed in less than sixty minutes to any audience, regardless of size, using Power Point slides. Yet, there comes a time when military planners must begin the actual process of preparing detailed orders—often a reluctant enterprise in CFLCC.

When trying to convert hundreds of megabytes of computer-generated slides into a ‘five-paragraph’ written order—the American equivalent of the Australian military’s SMEAC (Situation, Mission, Execution, Administration and Logistics and Command and Signal process)—planners struggled with both brevity and clarity. The American military writer, Ralph Peters, has called Power Point ‘a tool of the anti-Christ’ and, in the context of clear planning procedures, he is largely correct. The lesson is clear: military planners must, for the sake of clarity of purpose, ensure that operational teams write concise fragmentary orders. The process of clear writing is vital, in that it often starkly illuminates important issues that require guidance, such as ‘deconflicting’ the battlespace, ensuring careful subordinate tasking and streamlining command-and-control procedures. Because of its brevity, a five-paragraph order quickly focuses the staff mind on the requirements of operational synchronisation—something that can become lost in the electronic blizzard of a computer-driven headquarters.

During Operation **Iraqi Freedom**, the currency of value in CFLCC ultimately became, not the much-lauded computer slide, but the old-fashioned written fragmentary order. The latter was used to direct all actions within the CFLCC battlespace and became the only product after D-Day on 19 March 2003 that the generals serving in CFLCC had either the time, or the inclination, to read carefully. In the opinion of the author, after D-Day, CFLCC staff could have saved hundreds of hours of labour, if they had simply concentrated on writing orders, rather than producing complicated and ultimately redundant Power Point slides.
OBSERVATION 6: THE NEED TO MENTOR PLANNING STAFF

Isolation in a military headquarters puts a premium on positive human and military interaction and can make a significant difference to a planning team’s morale and performance. Many of the mid-ranking planners at CFLCC were expected to work with little guidance and some lacked a Command and Staff College education. Often planners had the huge responsibility of writing fragmentary orders that were responsible for the actions of the Third United States Army, and its attached Joint and Coalition forces. Many mid-ranking planning officers at CFLCC only communicated with their superiors when mistakes were made or when tasks were completed.

This impersonal, relentlessly outcome-driven environment called for mentoring of staff teams by the lead planners. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, mentoring of staff was often neglected in the 1600-strong CFLCC headquarters. The CFLCC Commander, Lieutenant General McKiernan, noticed this problem and informed his principal staff at Camp Doha in Kuwait on 19 May 2003 that officers should, as he put it, ‘never be too busy to lead soldiers, check the small details, and correct mistakes’. ²

OBSERVATION 7: THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF PLANNING IS IMPORTANT

The ‘back-to-back’ US-led Coalition campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2001 and 2003 had the combined effect of exhausting the energy and creativity of many expert planners. By May 2003, many of the military planners in CFLCC and other US warfighting headquarters in Iraq had spent almost two years in continuous planning and were under enormous psychological and physical pressure. These problems were exacerbated by the tendency of lead planners within CFLCC to compromise their skills and judgment by working hours that were beyond normal endurance. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the author witnessed many planners reach fatigue point due to their inability to manage overwhelming workloads or to create a phased system that balanced effort with rest.

The lesson is clear: commanders must ensure that key members of their planning staff are not driven into ineffectiveness by unrelenting demands on their time and by crushing workloads.
individuals can continue to be effective over the long term. Given the character of
the War on Terror, future military operations are likely to be complex, demanding
and unpredictable. As a result, the human dimension of military planning requires
careful consideration.

OBSERVATION 8: THE PROBLEM OF ACCESS TO THE US SECURE
INTERNET PROTOCOL ROUTER–NETWORK (SIPR–NET)

Despite Australian and British involvement in Operation Iraqi Freedom, there were
restrictions placed by the United States on non-American use of the SIPR–NET
(the US military’s top-secret Intranet system). To compensate for this communica-
tion restriction, CENTCOM developed an alternative joint American, British and
Australian Intranet system known as CENTRIX–X. The aim was to create a commun-
ications interface between the top-secret US SIPR–NET and the Coalition allies.
However, when used in CFLCC by allied planning staff, the new system proved
to be an abject failure, with difficulties experienced in registering foreign plan-
ners with CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa, Florida.

Rather than attempt to set up an entirely new system such as CENTRIX–X, it
would have been far easier and more practical to have modified the US
SIPR–NET in order to permit Coalition nations special limited access to the
network. Such a modification would have allowed basic e-mail connectivity within
CFLCC between embedded Anglo-Australian planners and their US counter-
parts. Without e-mail connectivity, it proved difficult to participate fully as an
embedded allied member of a US warfighting headquarters. For the author, lack
of access to SIPR–NET facilities meant that information had to be moved around
between American machines and allied laptop computers by means of compact
or floppy disks. Such an approach was a time-consuming and inefficient method
of communication.

In terms of modifying the US SIPR–NET in order to permit American allies
limited access to American communications traffic, there needed to be a virtual
fence or firewall created. A firewall system could also have been combined with
use of an access-monitoring system in the American secret network. The technical
creation of a virtual fence or firewall system needs to be pursued as a long-term
standardisation project by American allies such as Britain and Australia.

A Coalition officer who is not embedded within the US staff system as a fully-fledged
member becomes nothing more than an observer of events.
OBSERVATION 9: THE ADVANTAGES OF A US MILITARY EDUCATION

In terms of serving as an allied planner in a US-dominated headquarters, there is an advantage in possessing an American military education, particularly in a course such as advanced warfighting. The author was fortunate to have possessed such an education and found that it was invaluable in understanding American military mores as well as the character of joint and single-service US doctrine. The military planning for Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, in CFLCC, V Corps and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force was dominated by US Advanced Warfighting Program graduates from the US Army and the US Marine Corps. Given a common intellectual background, graduates of the US Army’s School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) and the US Marine Corps’ School of Advanced Warfighting (SAW) quickly identified with one another during the Iraq conflict.

Indeed, within CFLCC alone, there were fourteen US Army or US Marine Corps advanced warfighting graduates. Two of the generals serving in CFLCC—Major General William Webster, Deputy Commanding General, Operations, and Major General James Marks, the headquarters’ intelligence chief—were SAMS graduates. It is noteworthy that the CFLCC Chief of Plans, Colonel Kevin Benson, a SAMS graduate, followed his service in the Middle East by becoming Director of the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas in July 2003. Colonel Steven Brown, the Chief of Future Operations Plans, was a SAW graduate. The lead planner for Operation *Cobra II*—the plan that was executed by CFLCC during Operation *Iraqi Freedom*—Major Evan Huelfer, was not an advanced warfighting graduate. He was, however, a high-calibre officer who had attended the Command and General Staff College and who possessed a doctorate in history.

Despite the advantages of an American military education, allied military personnel need to exploit their special knowledge meaningfully. It must be realised that a US advanced warfighting education will be only of passing interest if a Coalition officer cannot work alongside American colleagues as an embedded planner. A Coalition officer who is not embedded within the US staff system as a fully-fledged member becomes not much more than an observer of events. In a busy headquarters fully preoccupied with war planning, observers tend to be viewed as
extraneous by senior American officers. Major General James Thurman, the CFLCC Operations commander, described a liaison officer without embedded functions as being similar to ‘[the] dog [that] won’t hunt.’

**OBSERVATION 10: THE NEED TO EMBED LIAISON OFFICERS EARLY AND OFTEN**

The nation that chooses to embed its military planners within the American military system—and to do this early and often—has an opportunity to contribute significantly to the development of a coalition war plan and, ultimately, to the success of any ensuing campaign. Given the compartmentalised nature of current American war planning, it is only through the system of embedding an officer within the US command-and-staff system that an allied nation can achieve an intimate understanding of American military objectives.

Once integrated into a US headquarters, American commanders will usually employ an allied country’s military planner in a variety of functions. Inside the environment of a US-dominated headquarters, a foreign planner will be embraced as an equal and will be trusted to lead planning teams, write detailed plans and conduct liaison on behalf of the particular US warfighting headquarters. In short, because of the multinational character of many contemporary military operations, the US armed forces welcome embedded or integrated planners, especially from its closest allies, Britain and Australia.

**CONCLUSION**

This article has attempted to detail the observations of one Australian lead planner who served in CFLCC headquarters during Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. Since it is highly likely that the ADF will be involved in more coalition warfighting operations with the United States in the future, it is of the utmost importance that we collect a body of knowledge that can assist Australian officers in preparing for multinational operational planning. Issues such as battlespace definition, US-allied secret communications difficulties, planning group dynamics, branch and point planning and the requirement for clarity in written orders are elements of the environment that ADF officers can expect to confront in a coalition warfighting headquarters. Above all,
the management of the human dimension must be better appreciated. Operation *Iraqi Freedom* demonstrated that it is not by computers that campaigns are fought, but by human beings, and it is with the latter’s intellectual capital, their sense of duty and, above all, their dedication that wars are ultimately won.

**ENDNOTES**

2. Lieutenant General David McKiernan to his Principal Staff, Camp Doha, Kuwait, 18 May 2003.
3. Major General James Thurman to Principal Staff, Camp Doha, Kuwait, 16 May 2003.

**THE AUTHOR**

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