

An Embedded Staff Officer in Afghanistan: observations from ‘The Engine Room’

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Introduction

Between October 2013 and October 2014, I was deployed in Afghanistan as the CJ35 (Future Operations) in Headquarters International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Command (HQ IJC). This was a unique experience, working with the US Army’s III Corps for three months and XVIII Airborne Corps for nine months.

In this environment, the robust and well-resourced CJ35 staff branch was at the centre of the planning, preparation and conduct of operations across Afghanistan. The constant high tempo, together with the routine requirement to conduct rapid but comprehensive deliberate planning, earned CJ35 branch the label of ‘The Engine Room’. This was more than a mere nickname; it was recognition across IJC that it was through the staff effort of CJ35 that the Commander and HQ staff generate tempo.

This article is not designed to describe the history or specifics of one deployment, my first to Afghanistan. Nor is it intended to comment on the success or otherwise of the Coalition campaign in Afghanistan. Such commentary will be left to others who have spent more time in the Middle East Area of Operations and, no doubt, have a deeper strategic perspective and understanding of that incredibly complex and fascinating theatre.

Many ADF officers have deployed to Afghanistan and other theatres as embedded staff officers. But no Australians had filled the US-designated position of CJ35 at HQ IJC. Hence, the purpose of this article is to offer key observations from this unique experience and to stimulate conversation regarding their relative merit. It presents four particular observations that may be of interest to the Australian Army and the ADF.

The first relates to the organisation of a senior headquarters for the planning and execution of operations, with particular reference to the CJ55 (Future Plans)-CJ35 (Future Operations)-CJ33 (Current Operations) continuum. The second delineates between planning during and at the conclusion of a campaign, and suggests that external planners have high utility in planning the latter. The third is that the Australian Army’s generalist training and education regime is in good shape. The final observation is that embedding senior Australian Army officers in US Corps and Division Headquarters during routine postings in peacetime could be an effective method of maintaining the current high level of interoperability with the US military.

The plans-execution planning continuum

HQ IJC was established in 2007 to provide operational-level command and oversight for ISAF within the geographic boundary of Afghanistan. It was established to include a CJ55 staff branch, a CJ35 staff branch and a CJ33 staff branch, each headed by a one-star officer. These three staff branches worked in different time horizons but combined to enable a very effective planning-execution continuum.

CJ55 was responsible for longer-term and strategic planning typically beyond 180 days; CJ35 was responsible for operational planning, typically from around 180 days in advance to approximately 1-3 days in advance of an operation; and CJ33 was responsible for the conduct of operations. The planning-execution continuum provided an organisational model which, nested into the HQ’s battle rhythm, provided a framework that enabled Commander IJC to order his thinking into the respective time horizons, and to get ahead of current operations. As a result, the Commander and senior staff were rarely surprised, and subordinate headquarters normally received plenty of time to conduct their own planning.

The longer-term planning conducted by CJ55 provided the staff with the time and space to think beyond immediate operational demands. This was an invaluable capacity that provided a mechanism to enable the Commander to look further ahead, discuss the development of complex issues that required

significant analysis and development, consider the second- and third-order effects of current activities or, alternatively, to refine desired outcomes and work backwards to define near-term objectives.

Once outline plans and concepts were developed, typically around 180 days prior to execution, CJ55 staff would conduct a hand-over of planning initiatives to the CJ35 staff. Continuity of planning was assured by CJ35 staff participating in CJ55 planning, and then CJ55 staff would remain in CJ35 planning until all parties were confident that the hand-off was complete. CJ35 staff would advance the planning process to produce executable plans with fewer assumptions and unknowns. They would also assume responsibility for planning requirements that arose within the 180 day planning horizon, without necessarily involving the CJ55 staff. This role placed the CJ35 branch at the centre of HQ IJC's staff effort, as the key integrator of staff branches, specialists and peer headquarters.

Prior to the execution of a planned activity or operation, CJ35 staff would conduct a hand-over with CJ33 staff. Typically occurring between one and three days prior to execution, this hand-over often involved the hand-over of the CJ35 action officer(s) who would carry the plan through execution. This method was successfully applied for the conduct of security support to the Loya Jirga in November 2013, the Presidential and Provincial Council elections in April 2014, the Presidential run-off election in June 2014, and several other lower-profile operations and activities.

The success of this approach leads to my first observation that:

The CJ55-CJ35-CJ33 planning-execution continuum is a very effective organisational model that has several potential applications for the ADF.

The planning-execution continuum has potential application to the ADF at the operational-strategic level. In particular, it could be applied in the Strategic Policy Division-Military Strategic Commitments Division-Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQ JOC) relationship, where Strategic Policy Division and Military Strategic Commitments Division could perform the 'future plans' function; the current HQ JOC J5 could perform the 'future operations' function; and the HQ JOC J3 could perform the 'current operations' function.

Such an arrangement would not only provide a clear delineation of responsibilities between Strategic Policy Division, Military Strategic Commitments Division and HQ JOC but also help to define the temporal planning and reporting responsibilities for each organisation. Such an approach fits within the current broad framework of current ADF doctrine. But it could also be made explicit in the next revision of the publication *Australian Defence Doctrine Planning (ADDP) 5.0 Joint Planning*.

Additionally, the deployment of a forward theatre command element could provide an opportunity for the ADF to utilise a CJ55-CJ35-CJ33 planning-execution continuum. While not previously attempted or envisaged, if HQ JOC ever chose to deploy a 'HQ JOC (Forward)', the 'future plans' function could be performed from Australia, while the 'future operations' and 'current operations' functions could be executed in-theatre.

Potentially expanding on either the Joint Task Force 633 construct (which provides command and control of all ADF elements deployed throughout the Middle East Area of Operations) or an established organisation such as Headquarters 1st Division, a 'HQ JOC (Forward)' would facilitate the situational awareness that only comes from being forward, at the same time allowing longer-term planners to maintain close links with policy organisations and intelligence agencies in Australia, while minimising the number of planners required to be deployed.

Planning the conclusion of a campaign

During 2014, much of the ISAF and IJC planning focused on the transition to the 'Resolute Support' mission on 1 January 2015. This transition marked the end of the 13-year ISAF mission and the beginning of a new mission, with a different emphasis, force posture and authorities. Transition planning was hampered by the much-publicised delays in the Bilateral Security Agreement and NATO status of forces processes, and related delays in announcements from Troop Contributing Nations, including the US, regarding details of their contributions beyond 31 December 2014.

While political machinations will always influence military planning, ISAF transition planning was also hampered by a lack of objectivity and lateral thinking among many ISAF planners. After 13 years of operations in Afghanistan, it was all too easy for planners (many with multiple Afghanistan deployments) to adopt a historical paradigm, and/or stick to a plan that was either outdated or no longer relevant.

This mindset, while not ubiquitous, was sufficiently prevalent during 2014 that planning for transitions and change became unnecessarily difficult or, in some formations, opposed outright. All too often, in-theatre planners were found defending the current plan, rather than objectively considering the relative merit of operational proposals.

This experience highlights my second observation:

When considering the conclusion of a campaign, planning should be led by an external planning team, rather than by those planners currently in the campaign.

An external team of planners would be less likely to succumb to extant 'group-think', less influenced by the tactical perspective of deployed commanders, less wedded to history or historical paradigms, and likely to have a more objective perspective.

Australian Army officer training

Heading a multinational team of up to 70 planners provided a unique insight into the planning skills of officers from over 20 nations. This experience also provided an opportunity to compare the planning skills of Australian Army officers with those of their international colleagues.

In this environment, the Australian Army post-staff college officers more than held their own, including in comparison with highly-regarded graduates from the US Army's School of Advanced Military Studies and the US Marine Corps' School of Advanced Warfare. In fact, my assessment is that Australian Army post-staff college officers are as good as graduates from either.

The quality, effectiveness and generalist planning credentials of Australian Army officers was constantly evident, and gained widespread praise from senior officers across the Coalition. This experience was especially evident when an Australian Army logistics officer became the planner of choice within CJ35 branch, with Coalition officers of all nationalities and ranks oblivious to his logistics background. This outcome, and the fact that an officer with a background in the Royal Australian Corps of Signals could perform the duties of CJ35 on a Corps Headquarters at war, illustrates my third observation:

The Australian Army's generalist training and education regime is in good shape.

The Australian Army's All Corps Officer Training Continuum (ACOTC) and the ADF's Joint Military Professional Education (JPME) combine to produce high quality generalist Army officers who require minimal additional preparation to perform to a high standard as embedded staff officers in coalition organisations. The Australian Army should seek to maintain the quality of this product by retaining the structure of the ACOTC and JPME, and consistently refine its content to ensure that it continues to meet Army's requirements.

As there was no opportunity during this deployment to observe the generalist planning skills of RAN and RAAF officers, and to compare them with US Navy and US Air Force counterparts, this observation is necessarily focused on the performance of Army officers. However, RAN and RAAF may wish to consider the structure and content of their respective generalist officer training and education regimes so that future opportunities to embed planners in operational-level coalition headquarters can be fully exploited.

Maintaining the relationship between the Australian Army and the US military

After 13 years of operations in a US-led coalition, with the possibility of more on the horizon, the ADF's relationship with the US military remains very important. One of the methods available to the Australian Army to maintain the current high level of interoperability with the US military is through the placement of officers in influential exchange positions. While many such positions currently exist, the value of these

positions must be constantly reviewed to ensure that opportunities for the Australian Army and the ADF are maximised, and requirements met.

While deployed, I noted the effectiveness and utility of the Canadian approach of embedding Deputy Commanding Generals in US Army Corps and Division Headquarters. The Canadian Army embeds a one-star officer in XVIII Airborne Corps as the Deputy Commanding General (Operations), and also embedded a one-star officer as the Deputy Commanding General (Support) in 101st Airborne Division during its time as Regional Command (East).

As 101st Airborne Division was replaced by 10th Mountain Division in Regional Command (East), the Deputy Commanding General (Support) appointment was filled by an Australian Brigadier who, as a result, gained significant influence in the most kinetic region of Afghanistan, as well as being presented with immense professional development opportunities. The Canadian approach is very similar to the recently-adopted opportunity to embed an Australian Major General in US Army Pacific, with the notable differences that the Canadians have applied this approach at the one-star level and have implemented it across multiple US Army headquarters.

US Corps and Division headquarters include multiple Deputy Commanding Generals, covering functions such as operations and support, in addition to an Assistant Commanding General who is, in essence, the second-in-command. These are highly-influential appointees, who work closely with their respective commanders, and typically are officers likely to be promoted to the next rank.

Therefore, the placement of senior officers in a US Corps or Division headquarters provides a unique opportunity to form a close relationship, develop a high degree of trust, and generate influence with a 'rising star' of the US Army. This leads to my fourth observation that:

The Australian Army should actively prioritise opportunities to embed star-ranked officers in senior US Army headquarters.

Embedding officers in US Corps and Division headquarters at the one- and two-star level, 'General Officers' in the US vernacular, would achieve far greater influence for Australia, the Australian Army and the ADF than could be achieved by a liaison officer or instructor. Such senior level interaction and relationships developed during routine postings in peacetime would provide invaluable avenues to maintain hard-won operational, capability and planning interoperability with the US Army.

Conclusion

This article has presented four key observations from my experience while deployed as the CJ35 in HQ IJC during 2013-14 that are relevant for discussion within the Australian Army and the broader ADF. The CJ55-CJ35-CJ33 planning-execution continuum, as practised within HQ IJC, is a very effective organisational model that has potential application to the ADF at the operational-strategic level. In particular, it could be applied to the Military Strategic Commitments Division-HQ JOC relationship, and also in a HQ JOC (Forward), should such a concept be considered in the future.

Additionally, when considering the conclusion of a campaign, planning should be led by an external planning team, rather than by those planners currently in the campaign. External planners are less likely to be influenced by the perspectives of deployed commanders, be less wedded to history or historical paradigms, and are likely to have a more objective perspective.

The performance of Australian Army post-staff college officers in planning roles across ISAF demonstrated that the Australian Army's training and education regime is in good shape. The ACOTC and JPME combine to produce high quality generalist Army officers who require minimal additional preparation to perform to a high standard as embedded staff officers in coalition organisations. The Australian Army should seek to maintain the quality of its all-Corps generalist training.

Finally, the Australian Army should actively prioritise opportunities to embed star-ranked officers in senior US Army warfighting headquarters. Such appointments would enable Australian star-rank officers to develop close relationships and generate significant influence with senior US Army officers. Such

relationships, developed during routine postings in peacetime, would help the Australian Army to maintain its hard-won operational, capability and planning interoperability with the US Army.

Brigadier Marcus Thompson graduated from the Royal Military College Duntroon in 1988 and was allocated to the Royal Australian Corps of Signals. He has served in a variety of regimental, staff and policy appointments. He has a Bachelor in Electrical Engineering with honours from the University of NSW, a Bachelor of Business Information Systems from RMIT, a Masters in Defence Studies from the University of Canberra, and a Masters in Strategic Studies from Deakin University, and is currently undertaking full-time doctoral research at the University of NSW at ADFA