



# THE INTELLIGENCE WARFIGHTING FUNCTION IN CRISIS: TRAINING, TRUST, AND READINESS

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## A Call to Action

The dry Mojave wind clawed at Brent's face as he stepped away from the chaotic scene at the tactical operations center. It was only day six at the National Training Center (NTC), and the Stryker brigade combat team was coming apart. Brent, a seasoned observer coach/trainer, had seen bad rotations before, but this was different. This wasn't just friction in a complex training environment. This was a collapse. He ducked behind a HMMWV, pulled out his phone, and dialed a familiar number.

Miles away in the southern Arizona desert, a phone rang inside the instructors' bullpen office at the Military Intelligence Captains Career Course. Jake, who had taught most of the junior intelligence officers in this rotation, answered the call. Brent didn't waste time. He recounted what he'd just seen: intelligence sections completely out of synch with brigade operations, no coherent enemy picture, collection plans that ignored priority intelligence requirements, and commanders making decisions in an information vacuum.

"They knew the enemy was maneuvering," Brent said, voice tight. "They had the right tools, but they were improvising intelligence processes mid-fight, like they were learning their jobs in contact."

Jake was quiet for a moment. Then: "That's not a training gap we can solve with doctrine. If commanders aren't listening and S-2s can't command influence with their analysis, we've moved beyond technical failure. That's a trust issue. A failure to prove intelligence relevance at the point of decision."

Brent nodded without speaking as Jake's words settled in. The implications were obvious. Without deliberate, structured training and rehearsals of the basic warfighting functions before deployment, intelligence sections were being asked to perform in combat what they'd never actually practiced outside of a classroom.

As Brent gazed out over the all-too-familiar scattering of blinking lights in the NTC desert, he knew the upcoming after action review wasn't just about products or collection plans. It was a call to action: for junior intelligence officers to own their warfighting function, for commanders to reinvest in their S-2s, and for senior leaders to mentor and enforce standards that prevent collapse before contact—because in the next war, there won't be a phone call. There won't be a reset. There will only be the first fight, whether we are ready for it or not, and those blinking lights may be burning Strykers.

## The Intelligence Readiness Gap

This vignette highlights a gap between the foundational instruction provided in professional military education and the continuous application and reinforcement required for operational intelligence execution. While professional military education effectively establishes a strong and necessary doctrinal foundation, sustained proficiency requires deliberate training at echelon. Learning loss resulting from doctrinal fundamentals not being reinforced, compounded by force structure changes, poor communication, and insufficient collective training, undermines the operational effectiveness of battalion and brigade intelligence officers.

This capability gap has profound operational consequences. Intelligence officers unable to effectively integrate with command decision-making processes hinder operational agility, contribute to missed opportunities in shaping the battlefield, and erode the foundational trust necessary for intelligence to inform maneuver at echelon. To bridge this gap, S-2s must assert proactive ownership over their professional development, improve communication with their field-grade officers, and receive sustained mentorship and oversight from senior intelligence leaders.<sup>1</sup>

## Perishable Skills and Structural Challenges

Doctrinal instruction provides officers with the foundational knowledge needed to execute the intelligence warfighting function tasks, but without sustained and deliberate training, proficiency erodes rapidly. Intelligence fundamentals are a perishable skill set, requiring iterative reinforcement to maintain operational effectiveness. However, as operational deployments have decreased, administrative and security-related responsibilities increasingly consume intelligence sections, diverting focus from core analytic and collection tasks.

Routine garrison requirements such as security programs, arms room oversight, and personnel management often dominate intelligence officers' time, reducing opportunities for

collective training and practical application. While intelligence doctrine assigns these responsibilities, they must not come at the expense of the intelligence section's primary mission of enabling commanders to understand and shape the operational environment through timely, accurate intelligence.<sup>2</sup>

Compounding this issue, changes in force structure further challenge the sustainment of intelligence proficiency.<sup>3</sup>

The restructuring of intelligence and electronic warfare battalions at the division level has reduced opportunities for collective intelligence training and integration at the brigade and below levels without additional coordination. Previously, the Military Intelligence Training Strategy enabled cross-training between brigade and battalion intelligence sections, fostering a baseline of competency across formations. Without the support of dedicated intelligence units, battalion S-2 sections must now self-sustain their training efforts but often lack the resources, expertise, or prioritization necessary to do so effectively.

Without intervention, these structural and doctrinal gaps will continue to degrade the ability of intelligence officers to deliver timely, relevant intelligence to their commanders, ultimately reducing the Army's capacity for effective decision making at echelon.<sup>4</sup>

### **Intelligence Training Misalignment and Proactive Solutions**

A fundamental misalignment exists between intelligence training and unit-level exercises. A pervasive misconception suggests that brigade- and battalion-level training events should serve as opportunities for intelligence sections to refine their individual skills. However, these exercises are not designed for intelligence-specific skills development but are instead for intelligence integration into collective training objectives.<sup>5</sup> Intelligence sections are meant to serve as enablers, providing commanders with the necessary intelligence to drive maneuver decision making.

Due, in part, to this misalignment, intelligence officers often enter major training exercises underprepared, attempting to refine their fundamental analytical, collection, and dissemination skills while simultaneously supporting the broader mission.<sup>6</sup> This reactive approach leads to suboptimal intelligence outputs, diminishing the commander's trust in the S-2 section's ability to provide timely, relevant, and actionable intelligence.

To correct this deficiency, intelligence officers must secure dedicated training opportunities outside of large-scale unit exercises to develop their technical competencies in a controlled environment.<sup>7</sup> Before integrating into unit training, S-2 sections must conduct iterative internal training that focuses on intelligence-specific tasks, such as intelligence preparation of the operational environment (IPOE), intelligence estimate production, targeting synchronization, and collection management.<sup>8</sup> This requires proactive engagement with command leadership to advocate for the time, resources, and prioritization necessary to sustain intelligence readiness.

Without deliberate pre-exercise preparation, intelligence sections will continue to struggle with both technical proficiency and operational credibility.<sup>9</sup> Intelligence officers must take the initiative to align their section's training with both doctrinal requirements and unit objectives, ensuring that intelligence remains a force multiplier rather than an afterthought in operational planning and execution.

### **Developing and Sustaining Tactical Intelligence Proficiency**

Intelligence officers must take immediate ownership of their section's training and development upon arrival at their unit. The priority is a comprehensive assessment of the section's competency in executing its core warfighting function tasks, as outlined in Field Manual 2-0, *Intelligence*. These tasks are: support to force generation, support to situational understanding (specifically IPOE), intelligence support to targeting, and information collection.<sup>10</sup> Beyond doctrinal understanding, the intelligence section must demonstrate its ability to characterize the operational environment to commanders effectively, anticipating their information requirements and providing them with the situational awareness necessary for decision superiority.

To sustain readiness, intelligence officers must integrate intelligence-specific training into broader unit training objectives, ensuring that the section can support operational planning rather than functioning in isolation. This requires a progressive, structured training plan that starts with building fundamental skills, such as IPOE, threat tactics, and targeting integration, and continues with advanced application in live training environments.

Recognizing that external intelligence support elements like the military intelligence company are no longer available,

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battalion S-2s must take proactive measures to cultivate self-sustaining intelligence training. This includes leveraging reachback resources, such as doctrinal templates, intelligence estimate shells, and case study analyses, to ensure standardization and professional development. Over the past few years, the Military Intelligence Captains Career Course has refined its curriculum to ensure it remains accessible beyond graduation. This enables battalion S-2s to leverage pre-built training materials, standardized rubrics, and doctrinal templates to assess and develop their personnel without the need to create operation orders and annexes from scratch. These resources facilitate continuity in training and enhance the ability of intelligence officers to sustain operational readiness at the battalion level.

### **Strengthening the Communication Link Between S-2s and Commanders**

Success in intelligence operations links directly to how well intelligence officers communicate training priorities to leadership. Subordinates will always focus on what their leaders emphasize, making it critical for field-grade officers, especially battalion executive officers and commanders, to prioritize intelligence training explicitly. Without clear prioritization, competing demands will inevitably overshadow intelligence development, leaving S-2 sections underprepared to support operations.

Prioritization alone is insufficient. Battalion S-2s must take an active role in engaging their executive officers and commanders to ensure understanding, resourcing, and execution of training requirements. Without deliberate communication, intelligence training risks being underfunded, deprioritized, or ignored altogether. Headquarters and headquarters company commanders often struggle to articulate the staff's training efforts to higher headquarters while protecting allocated training time from competing demands. Frequently, the intelligence section is a target for additional duties when it does not effectively communicate its training priorities. New S-2s should proactively build a relationship with their headquarters and headquarters company commander, using the commander's experience to navigate the training calendar for securing dedicated time for intelligence development. This level of coordination alone places the S-2 ahead of most staff officers in their battalion.

To drive effective training integration, intelligence officers must link their section's training plan to the unit's mission-essential tasks and operational objectives.<sup>11</sup> This alignment ensures that intelligence efforts directly support the commander's ability to make informed decisions. Commanders, in turn, must clearly articulate their expectations for intelligence proficiency, ensuring that S-2 sections are focusing on warfighting readiness rather than administrative or non-mission-essential tasks.

Proactive dialogue with commanders and executive officers is essential. Intelligence officers must not hesitate to advocate for the necessary training time, resources, and doctrinal alignment necessary for success. Well-prepared intelligence sections are force multipliers; ensuring their readiness is not just the responsibility of the S-2, but of the unit's entire leadership.

### **Maximizing Mentorship and Counseling for Intelligence Leaders**

The brigade combat team S-2 is not a battalion intelligence officer's direct supervisor, but they are an invaluable resource for professional development and training advocacy. Intelligence officers should actively engage with their brigade S-2 early in their tenure, leveraging the brigade S-2's expertise, network, and influence to secure training resources and refine intelligence warfighting function priorities. Brigade S-2s play a crucial role in ensuring the intelligence warfighting function effectively integrates across the formation. They must proactively communicate to their fellow field-grade officers the value of intelligence at echelon, ensuring its value is understood and leveraged appropriately. Competence, reliability, and demonstrated operational relevance build credibility with the staff—having an advocate who can vouch for the intelligence section's contribution is essential to ensuring its place in decision making.

A battalion S-2 should approach their initial counseling with their commander prepared to discuss intelligence priorities, training gaps, and expectations for support. This ensures a shared understanding of how intelligence integrates into the unit's mission and sets the conditions for success. This discussion should define commander expectations, intelligence priorities, and acceptable risk levels. Intelligence officers must communicate their capabilities and shortfalls early to ensure alignment with mission needs.

Failing to establish the intelligence warfighting function's credibility early will result in the sidelining of the intelligence section and relegating them to administrative tasks rather than shaping operational decisions. S-2s must emphasize their role in threat analysis and warfighting tasks. If the S-2 does not assert their value, they will quickly find themselves relegated to arms room inspections and weather slides. This is the moment to reinforce that intelligence is a critical enabler, not an afterthought. This is *your* job; do not assume your predecessor established this credibility for you. Even if they did, you owe your commander proof that you can ensure the intelligence section remains relevant and indispensable.

Effective mentorship is critical for navigating the complexities of the military intelligence officer corps. Officers without


a mentor should proactively seek one, either within their brigade or through structured programs like the Define and Design Your Success Mentorship Program at Fort Huachuca.<sup>12</sup> This underutilized program offers valuable frameworks for professional growth and intelligence leadership development. Whether you are branch detailed or pure military intelligence, at the tactical level or with the Intelligence and Security Command (operational intelligence), or a combination of these, others have navigated and excelled in the same challenges you now face. If there is one underutilized asset in the intelligence profession, it is mentorship. A trusted mentor will help you navigate the complexities of your role, offering insights that extend beyond the broad recommendations provided here. The challenges may not be as simple or as complex as they seem, but the right guidance can make them manageable.

Successful intelligence officers take ownership of their development by seeking mentorship, asking informed questions, and leveraging the experience of seasoned professionals. Regular engagement with field-grade officers and more experienced peers is essential to ensuring readiness for combat operations and aligning intelligence efforts with commander expectations.

### **Closing Thoughts: Winning the First Fight**

In his 2024 article for the Modern War Institute, Major General Curt Taylor, Commanding General of 1st Armored Division and Fort Bliss and former Commanding General of the National Training Center and Fort Irwin, noted, "The National Training Center's mandate since our founding forty-two years ago is to prepare the Army's combined arms formations to win the first battle of the next war."<sup>13</sup> These words encapsulate the enduring necessity of readiness—ensuring that from day one, intelligence professionals are not just present but pivotal in the fight. Intelligence officers must take ownership of their training, build credibility with their commanders, and integrate seamlessly into operational planning.

History has shown that the first fight is often the most consequential, and those who fail to adapt early pay the highest price. Intelligence sections that are unprepared, disjointed, or sidelined will not have time to recover in combat. Success is determined long before the first round is fired, through training, mentorship, and proactive engagement with commanders.

The Army cannot afford for its intelligence warfighting function to be an afterthought. The responsibility lies with every intelligence officer to ensure that when the next war comes, the commander is making decisions based on accurate, timely intelligence because in the first fight, there are no second chances. 



## Endnotes

1. Elizabeth K. Schloemann, "Keeping Army Intelligence Training Relevant in a Rapidly Evolving World," (master's thesis, United States Marine Corps University, 2023), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1178193.pdf>.
2. Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2025), 26.
- 3 Department of the Army, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Force Management, *Army Structure (ARSTRUC) Memorandum 2025-2029* (Department of the Army, 2024).
4. Cortis B. Burgess, "News from the CTC: Intelligence After Action Review Trends at the National Training Center," Center for Army Lessons Learned, October 21, 2020, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15040coll4/id/214/rec/1>.
5. Schloemann, "Keeping Army Intelligence Training Relevant," 38.
6. Burgess, "Intelligence After Action Review Trends."
7. Ibid.
8. Schloemann, "Keeping Army Intelligence Training Relevant."
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10. Department of the Army, FM 2-0, *Intelligence* (GPO, 2023), B-1—B-24.
11. Schloemann, "Keeping Army Intelligence Training Relevant."
12. "D2YS Mentorship Program," Units/Tenants, U.S. Army Intelligence Center of Excellence (USAICoE), U.S. Army Fort Huachuca website, last modified May 24, 2024, <https://home.army.mil/huachuca/units-tenants/usaicoe/D2YS-mentorship>.

13. Curt Taylor, "Preparing to Win the First Fight of the Next War," Modern War Institute at West Point, February 23, 2024, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/preparing-to-win-the-first-fight-of-the-next-war/>.

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