



THE THREE PILLARS OF IRREGULAR WARFARE EDUCATION

By Paul Burton, SWCS senior instructor
and retired Special Forces officer

Photo provided by Adobe Stock

Irregular Warfare education is a holistic, iterative, and lifelong learning process that has a different set of key knowledges as base requirements at certain points in an Army special operations force (ARSOF) Soldier's career. These key knowledges are represented by three pillars of Irregular Warfare education: institutional training and professional military education, personal self-study, and unit-level experiential learning. The process used to train and

education might be delivered while remaining sensitive to how the addition of more training and education competes with other mandatory Soldier skills, professional development, and career schools tied to professional military education.

Three pillars of IRREGULAR WARFARE education:

- **Professional military education**
- **Self-study**
- **Experiential learning**

educate Soldiers about Irregular Warfare—in many regards—is not unlike other education development and learning models. What is different and unique is how this education is delivered and managed.

First, we will address why Irregular Warfare education is important and answer the question: What has changed to warrant this need? Finally, we will offer recommendations on how this

WHY IS IW EDUCATION IMPORTANT?

Decades of focus on violent extremist organizations have created a dearth in intellectual thought and a similar lack of discourse with regard to lessons of counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, security force assistance, and foreign internal defense as key activities of Irregular Warfare. The repetitive nature of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq left the post-Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) special operations community and portions of the interagency at a loss to further propagate less violent and non-kinetic irregular activities. Many of our interagency counterparts lack the capability and capacity to advance Irregular Warfare education despite the value of integrated deterrence commensurate with these irregular approaches in keeping our overseas activities below the threshold of armed conflict. The execution of these interagency partnerships is essential to the ARSOF Irregular Warfare effects resident in combatant commander campaign plans. The ARSOF and interagency partnerships are integral to protracted struggles against peer and near-peer adversaries across the competition continuum. The importance of outreach to our interagency partners, shared experiences, and the establishment of a community of interest in which lessons can be shared in common symposia or forums are key features of an effective Irregular Warfare education.

As the Department of Defense returns its focus to peer competition, there is a gap in the experience level and knowledge in this thought process. An effective education program can shorten the learning curve. Policy and its interrelationship with

Irregular Warfare activities is often misconstrued to be more associated with kinetic and violent aspects of warfare instead of appreciating the nuances of irregular warfare that tend to be non-kinetic and nonviolent. Irregular Warfare is often complex and ambiguous, and these very characteristics demand an academic approach to how all the instruments of national power—when properly measured and mixed—offer outcomes well below the threshold of armed conflict. Options for Irregular Warfare training and education policy present challenges as well as opportunities, and the proper framing of the problem at an interagency and allied level is vital. Education is key.

PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION

Presently, our peer competitors are waging Irregular Warfare against the United States and our allies. There has been a call to arms or a mobilization, of sort, in the realm of Irregular Warfare operations and activities, but there needs to be a concerted attempt to educate practitioners ranging from Soldiers to statesmen. Our whole-of-government approach must not only characterize our irregular threat, it must also capture our concerted irregular approach to engage competitively, manage crises, and avert conflict. The Department of Defense can help mitigate policy strategy disconnects by educating commissioned and noncommissioned officers during initial entry level training and professional military education at all levels. Cadre and staff at our training and educational institutions should be Irregular Warfare literate prior to delivering their instruction.

The role of professional military education is perhaps the most important pillar of Irregular Warfare education because both the instructor and the students are witness to check on learning and documented standards to capture the learning outcomes. Both officer and noncommissioned officer levels of knowledge and proficiency align within a career model along a prescribed timeline, consistent with rank and levels of responsibility, and – most likely – follow-on assignments.

SELF-STUDY

Most senior officers and noncommissioned officers who consider themselves Irregular Warfare literate acquired that knowledge by simply being more curious than others and through aggressive self-study. While there were some basic one-week courses at places like Hurlburt Field, courses at the Command and General Staff College and the War Colleges do not touch on the subject. There is not a series of book called All You Need to Know to be an Irregular Warfare Expert, so reading on a broad range of topics help practitioners frame the art of Irregular Warfare in context. Successful Irregular Warfare students must develop a comprehensive understanding of its historical relationship to world events, global commerce and domestic economics, including transportation, communication, and their distribution networks and associated vulnerabilities, sociology and cultural factors, political science, especially the failures of totalitarian regimes, and logic and critical thinking. The list of subjects for becoming Irregular Warfare literate is inexhaustible; however, the important starting point is a commitment to lifelong learning and a methodical, self-study program.

Next, Irregular Warfare case studies serve as tools to portray images of the past on a screen of the future (Neustadt and May). Case studies should focus not only on the violent and warfare aspects of the incident, they should also consider the geopolitical, economic, and sociological basis upon which events occurred across a broad spectrum of time. Finally, if an Irregular Warfare operation supports a particular combatant command's theater campaign then ARSOF Soldiers must have the experiences and exposure to the conventional domains of air, land, sea, cyber, and space so they can integrate the human and information dimensions to effectively provide value to the broader campaign plan objectives. Developing a private, focused, deep reading list is one portion of this program, and it should be concentrated on the level of knowledge and skill set required for the particular pay grade and unit of assignment.

EXPERIENCE

Experience typically would not be a pillar in an education program. For the ARSOF Soldier, the experience developed through multiple varied types of overseas deployments including partner nation and interagency integration – helps build a foundation that pays dividends during future crisis scenarios or incidents when such experience is necessary to develop credible military options. Coupled with the other pillars of Irregular Warfare education, expert training, and experience produce special operators capable of offering prudent, pragmatic plans for the proportional and precise use of the military at every echelon. After several key developmental, broadening assignments and overseas deployments not normally viewed as “ARSOF typical,” the special operator will have the proper breadth and depth of experiential learning in the art and science of Irregular Warfare operations and activities.

CONCLUSION

While Cold War plans and campaigns were developmental and adjusted across nine presidential administrations, the Cold War was bipolar. Today's challenge is multipolar and faster paced with greater complexity and considerable ambiguity. When considering what constitutes threats to our nation's security – from COVID to natural disasters and from cyber to finance – a proper Irregular Warfare education and adept application of the art are even more essential. Mistakes in this present peer competition will be made, but Irregular Warfare education will help mitigate their frequency and intensity. It will ultimately assist the United States in gaining the relative strategic and operational advantage.

Presently, the United States military is experiencing a resource shortfall in both manpower and dollars, and it cannot afford poor planning and execution of Irregular Warfare lines of effort in broader campaigns. Understanding Irregular Warfare at the master's degree level should be the goal of every ARSOF Soldier so that they can educate their interagency and conventional counterparts on the role of ARSOF-executed Irregular Warfare in the present peer competition. An irregular approach to peer competition, like the Cold War, will likely take decades – with peaks and valleys of operational successes. The long win will be accomplished by institutional, personal, and experiential training and educating our force in the art and science of Irregular Warfare.

Note: Paul Burton is a retired Special Forces colonel who is still active in the community. The views expressed in this article are solely the authors and do not represent any organization.