



—BLACK KNIGHTS— BACK FROM THE BRINK

A potential approach to redefining
the profession of Psychological Operations.

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL TRENT HICKMAN

“If everyone is thinking alike, then somebody isn't thinking.”

— *General George S. Patton, Commander,
First United States Army Group*

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Soldiers interact with indigenous role players during exercise Black Knight, the culmination exercise for the Psychological Operations Qualification Course. Students must demonstrate interpersonal adaptability, interact and negotiate effectively with diverse individuals and cultures. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT 1ST CLASS JACOB BRAMAN

I think we can all agree that the profession of influence has suffered a considerable degradation of perceived efficacy on the modern and future battlefield, while the threats psychological warfare would hope to combat have lately become profoundly salient. Russia, China, Iran and many others have long realized that they must use asymmetric means to oppose our will on the global stage, and few capabilities are more asymmetric than those which directly affect an adversary's will to fight.

In this light, it is more important than ever that we do whatever it takes to make the regiment as effective as possible. But what perceptions and skills must change and how can we address them? As supposed branding experts, we have taken very little proactive interest in how our customers perceive us, and seemingly even less interest in the quality of support they receive. This vacuum of direction and concerted effort has left us open to hostile takeover by leaders from outside our community who have limited vested interest in the quality of our wares and the future of what we offer. Inevitable discussions of adding us as generalists to the Special Forces military occupational specialty toolkit have become commonplace in a time when the technical tools of influence become shockingly more specialized by the day.

Rather than rehashing the woes of the past, I would like to concentrate on some general modifications our community might undertake in order to structure a way forward in service to the demands of quickly changing global challenges. In my opinion, a good start would be to focus on four specific pillars of change: *knowledge, specialization, structure and semiotics.*

KNOWLEDGE

It is consistently evident from newly minted practitioners attending training at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana, that the primary (if not singular) skill being taught to both special operations forces and conventional forces support elements at the schoolhouse is the oft lauded *Seven Step Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Process*. This process is extremely important to understand and

practice; however, it is also critical that we as practitioners, and leaders, fully understand the context which fostered its genesis in the first place:

This process was created in order to protect a commander from the risks posed by injecting products into an environment that endure beyond his/her tenure.

What this means is the process is meant to govern our activities and mitigate risk where pear-shaped products may pop up later requiring defense. The process does not actually teach us how to influence a target audience's behavior, because it does not begin and end with behavior. It begins and ends with dialectic and rhetorical product and therefore lends itself to measures of performance with less regard to measurable outcomes. But how do we fix this without throwing the baby (seven-steps) out with the bath water?

We need to take our Black Knights back to the basics of influence psychology in order to make them better.

In 1936, a German-American analytic psychologist named Kurt Z. Lewin found that he could analyze two virtually identical patient personalities that manifested with vastly different behaviors. In discovering why that was, Lewin came up with what became "Lewin's Heuristic Equation" and the founding principles of social psychology were born. It reads as follows:

B = f (P,E)...where, **B**ehavior is a **F**unction of the **P**erson/Population and the **E**nvironment.

In other words, if we are talking about psychological operations, we first must fully define our TA behavior to the binary level in order to fully define our measures of effectiveness into a "Yes" or "No" answer. Once defined, we can change one of the two functions above in order to affect behavioral change. Since often we cannot feasibly change a person/population without time, trust and probably a couch, we have to focus our activities and the activities of our supported units on what we have available to inject into the environment. We do this, however, with a clear understanding of the population we intend to influence. This is the foundation of our profession and craft.

Notice, I mentioned nothing of "messaging" or "products" or "loudspeakers", or "radios", or "social media", or "SOF/CF", etc. This is a method for thinking

about problems concerning behavior with a targeted eye on simply *solving* them. The *Seven Step PSYOP Process* can be used to leverage product and information tools into that framework, but that process is far from the only way to influence. With a robust understanding of this methodology, we allow ourselves to apply influence in *any* environmental context, regardless of tools or authorities available. We allow ourselves the freedom to see beyond a prescribed process designed to limit our exposure to risk to a place where we may use all resources immediately available to influence behavior on the battlefield. Instead of sending out radio messages, leaflets and whispers to keep a population from using a bridge, maybe just build a new one and blow the old one up, for example.

To their credit, the curriculum developers at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School's 5th Battalion are working to incorporate this science of influence back into their curriculum. In addition to Lewin's Equation, they should bring back studies on the Theory of Planned Behavior (for long-term effects) and Social Judgement Theory (for dialectic and rhetorical product focused work). Those changes cannot happen quickly enough.

SPECIALIZATION

For decades, we have treated and trained our practitioners as generalists, despite the unassailable assertion that the tools available to influence a TA have broadened to the point we can scarcely any longer enumerate them. Only one other branch has as few career fields as we do (Armor) and they really only have one tool to work with — tanks. In nearly every other field, from Special Forces, Infantry, Aviation, Medical Service, and Logistics, to Artillery, Air Defense, Intelligence, etc., new technology and capabilities have always required specialization.

To that end, what sorts of tools are available? Today, a 37F must learn how to operate tactically, in an embassy, and as a planner from various tactical and operational contexts, all the way to the strategic. The tools out there to influence various targets are no longer limited to loudspeakers, face to face, print and broadcast media. Perhaps we should consider new career structures to match new approaches and capabilities of influence. For example: a 37B to operate tactically, a 37C to conduct cyber attacks and social media injects, a 37E to fabricate special effects for deception, a 37F to analyze human factors for consumption, a 37M for graphics design, a 37V for audio and visual effects. Of course, these are just spitballs. The point is to have a baseline understanding of influence and deception for each to apply using their various tools and within their respective sub-disciplines. This would create a critical level of flexibility on the modern battlefield necessary for what I will discuss below.

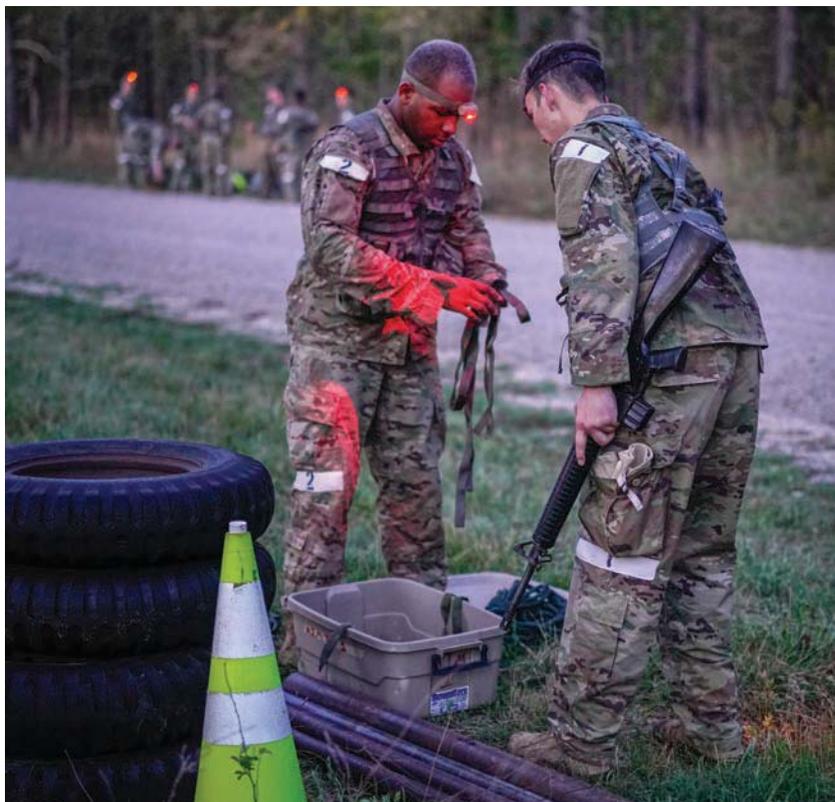
STRUCTURE

In 2008, the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment and its two attached battalions controlled Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. Strategists based the size of the elements required to control that area on the space they needed to control. Just like any maneuver unit might, they considered how many boots were required to control how many square miles of ground. Doctrinally, in parallel to the two battalions fielded, their support requirement

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from PSYOP was no more than two Tactical PSYOP Teams. The problem with this was that maneuver and PSYOP each has a completely different focus. Maneuver focuses on geography, while PSYOP focuses efforts against population concerns and demographics. This left six personnel (only two above the rank of E5) responsible for manipulating the behavior of 2.3 million people, basically door-to-door under often intense fire. Effects were difficult to achieve.

Recently, delayed force-design upgrade plans sought to answer this glaring shortfall in coverage by increasing the level of support from a detachment to a company of PSYOP for a Brigade Combat Team. Although notionally a step in the right direction, effectively quadrupling the support level from before, it too



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would have inevitably fallen far short of success, because it still fails to consider the things that PSYOP does. Doctrine needs to change fundamentally to accept models such as that outlined in Michael Aquino's *Mind War* or as practiced in Russia's Gerasimov Doctrine. We need to practice influence nested with, but apart from, force of arms in terms of planning considerations, where manning is concerned. We need to become modular.

If we develop the capacity to tailor the level of support to consider things like population dynamics, demographics, level of information sophistication, literacy, mission parameters and other TA characteristics, we can influence the modern battlefield far more efficiently. Our structure must consider these effects and behavioral objective based attributes of mission sets in order to maximize the results from influence efforts. Fortunately, the fix will not be too much of a challenge, once the other three pillars are implemented.

SEMiotics

A pathological sense of humility has not served us well; we have been the Quiet Professionals since the term was coined and exceedingly too quiet, long enough.



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The moves toward selectivity when choosing future Black Knights is a success story of fairly recent changes; however, running a selection process alone is only half the equation. The other half is drawing enough candidates to the selection process to actually *be* selective against force generation needs. In this regard, our Special Forces brothers again outperform us. Psychological Operations formations recognize the need for something to signal its identity, but also fear ridicule, because deep down, whether we are willing to admit it or not. Soldiers fear being seen as frauds in a SOF community most view as experts. And if we are really honest with ourselves and each other, we actually will be seen that way... for a while. Ask any Security Force Assistance Brigade soldier. The trick is to eventually back it up with quality, and to ensure that everyone who completes, has completed or will ever complete the qualification pipeline receives the tab/hat/whatever. All must have that expert image, whether active or reserve, even us "paper tabber" dinosaurs before we are out to pasture. Building unity and posterity through legacy is another tried and true path to legitimacy.

Ostensibly, Black Knights are experts at the marketing and branding skills used to change images and behaviors. Branding is something with which we should be intimately familiar, yet we have seemed unconcerned with our own, time and time again. Whenever any organization makes sweeping



01 Soldiers prepare for an early morning challenge as part of the Psychological Operations Assessment and Selection course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The course assesses Candidates through psychological, intellectual, physical and problem-solving (dilemma-based) team events. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT 1ST CLASS JACOB BRAMAN

02 Psychological Operations Qualification Course Students review messaging products with indigenous role players during exercise Black Knight. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT 1ST CLASS JACOB BRAMAN

03 Students work through a PSYOP planning exercise during the PSYOP Support to Interagency phase of the Qualification Course. This phase immerses students in the military information support operations mission of interagency-intergovernmental support efforts to shape and influence foreign decision-making and behaviors in support of U.S. regional objectives and interests. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

changes, if they fail to change the semantics of that organization or product offering, the changes will be unsustainable. They fall flat and flaccid, because consumers cannot see the hallmarks of changes in the offering. Said organizations are also unable to be as selective within their ranks without a necessarily larger pool of recruits required to sustain the changes in their value offering. We need to differentiate ourselves among SOF capabilities with a visible and easily recognizable representation of our capability, especially once we begin making changes in the knowledge and skills Black Knights possess.

This, for good or ill, means a change in the accoutrements of our daily uniform. The regiment goes back over the span of a century of warfare and includes such storied units as the 23rd HQ Special Troops *Ghost Army* among its legacy. Give us some kind of hat or tab or heck, make us the only capability that requires no hat, at all! It does not matter. But potential recruits for selection should all be able to see Black Knights apart from other Quiet Professionals at a glance, or why would the highest quality recruits choose to become one of us over the prestige of the Green Beret. Why would supported units put us to good use if they cannot understand us and we demonstrate no mystique to make them want to? Surely, there is something in our history we can hang our metaphorical and literal hat upon.

In conclusion, we must do a better job educating all our Black Knights, but



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in order for us to reach a level of quality and sophistication within those ranks required to organically maintain and perpetuate that education and training, we need to become more selective. Selection is a first step, but we need a robust pool of candidates with breadth of experience and depth of sheer numbers to close the equation. That requires us to showcase our brand in ways we have failed thus far to do. We need to more appropriately structure our force for the flexible nature of a very complex world, but in order to do that, we need to specialize that force in such a way as to modularize it, equipped with the vast number of tools with which we might influence variable TA sets in mind. Changing any one of these pillars will result in a negligible improvement at best and more likely no sustainable improvement over the long haul. If we truly care about the future of the regiment, each one of these problems must be considered, regardless of how we address them. **SW**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lt. Col. Trent Hickman has a master's in human behavioral psychology specializing in deception psychology, and is currently the Chief of SOF and CF PSYOP for USASOC at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Ft. Polk, LA. He has numerous combat deployments running various special access programs, and nearly 15 years of experience in the community. Additionally, he was an advanced PSYOP skills instructor and doctrine writer at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.