Editor's Note: The critical strength of F3EAD is the fusion of operations and intelligence: a step toward more holistic thinking and flatter command and decision-making structures.

The views are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Army or Department of Defense.

Abstract: Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate (F3EAD), pronounced “F-three-e-a-d” or “feed,” is a version of the targeting methodology utilized by the special operations forces (SOF) responsible for some of the most widely-publicized missions in support of overseas contingency operations. F3EAD is a system that allows SOF to anticipate and predict enemy operations, identify, locate, and target enemy forces, and to perform intelligence exploitation and analysis of captured enemy personnel and materiel. Central to the F3EAD process is the functional fusion of operations and intelligence functions throughout the SOF organization. In F3EAD, commanders establish targeting priorities, the intelligence system provides the direction to the target, and the operations system performs the decisive operations necessary to accomplish the SOF mission. This paper explains the F3EAD process, examines how it is used by SOF and general purpose forces, and provides recommendations for its further implementation and inclusion into formal doctrine.

"Information and Intelligence" is the “Fire and Maneuver” of the 21st Century.

-Major General Michael Flynn, March 2011.
battlefield the two functions are becoming fused; indeed, **some may now say** that “intelligence is operations.” The goal of the operations/intelligence fusion and rapid pace of the F3EAD process is to enable commanders at all levels to plan and execute operations against the enemy faster than the enemy can react. When utilized successfully, the process allows SOF to get into the enemy’s **decision cycle** and simultaneously direct operations against several parts of the network. This results in the ability of friendly forces to dictate the operational tempo, and sets the conditions for the friendly operations.

F3EAD is a natural evolution of targeting, combining aspects of the conventional intelligence cycle and doctrinal operational planning with best practices and emerging tactics, techniques, and procedures forged in worldwide overseas contingency operations.

Although SOF is best positioned to utilize F3EAD due to their inherent organizational adaptability, specialized training, and unique resourcing, F3EAD is neither new nor unique to SOF. Indeed, conventional targeting doctrine now supports F3EAD as a part of the **targeting process**, and F3EAD has become part of the institutional training programs at places such as the Military Intelligence Officers Basic Course.

**F3EAD in Conventional and SOF Doctrine**

Some SOF units diverge from conventional doctrine in that a version of F3EAD is the exclusive targeting methodology in those units while conventional targeting doctrine as reflected in **Field Manual 3-60** shows F3EAD subordinate to the legacy “decide-detect-deliver-assess” (D3A) process. The same manual also describes “Find, Track Target, Engage and Assess” (FT2EA). Looking at the doctrinal overlay of F3EAD into D3A (Figure 1, below), D3A looks almost superfluous because F3EAD can accomplish the exact same thing as D3A, while improving the overall targeting process by increasing the input of intelligence. If that is so, then it may make sense to replace D3A and FT2EA with F3EAD. Additionally, conventional doctrine also seems to focus almost exclusively on the manhunting or “High Payoff Target” (HPT) aspect of F3EAD. While F3EAD is indeed very well suited for manhunting and operations against HPTs, it is equally effective in other types of targeting, including those seeking non-lethal effects. Finally, while doctrine views F3EAD as a hasty decision process, many units utilize F3EAD in deliberate planning as well.
There are some other important distinctions between the ways SOF and conventional forces implement F3EAD: 1) the degree to which the process is understood and implemented within the SOF community; 2) the emphasis placed on the process by SOF commanders, and 3) the degree success the process achieves for the SOF units who utilize it. In SOF units effectively utilizing F3EAD, operational leaders at all levels took responsibility for the intelligence effort, developing lines of communication and direct contact with the intelligence personnel supporting them at all levels throughout the intelligence community. This interaction allowed intelligence enablers to better understand and anticipate operational needs, and facilitated the development of useful, long-term professional relationships between intelligence and operations personnel. Additionally, units which successfully utilize F3EAD often possess organizational adaptability that facilitates the conscious incorporation of personnel, assets and capabilities that are not always considered as part of the warfighting enterprise. Specifically, the inclusion of law enforcement personnel and their investigative, forensic, and information-sharing capabilities were critical in the process of turning intelligence into evidence, which became more and more important in the non-lethal capabilities of F3EAD as the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan evolved.

The F3EAD Process

Figure 1: F3EAD as a Function of D3A. Source: FM 3-60.
The legacy models of “find-fix-finish” and “decide-detect-deliver-assess” were some of the earliest precursors to F3EAD. These lethal-targeting, operations-centric methodologies, when combined with a culture of adaptability, lessons learned from overseas contingency operations, and best practices from around the world, generated the next evolution in targeting methodology: F3EAD. Unlike other traditional targeting models and processes that focus on the operational or “finish” aspect, the main effort of F3EAD is the intelligence effort, specifically the “exploit-analyze-disseminate” portion. This allows F3EAD to be equally effective in lethal and non-lethal targeting, and is key to understanding the F3EAD process. It is useful to visualize the F3EAD process as a web, with the different elements of the process on the periphery, connected both directly to each other and to the fusion of the operations and intelligence systems, in the manner shown below. The cycle is continuous, but not necessarily congruous; steps can be and often are skipped or shortened in order for the process to keep up with the “speed of war.”
Find

The “find” function of the process takes place at all levels of both the intelligence and operations systems, with both operations and intelligence personnel intimately involved in the effort. In simplest terms, the find component of F3EAD is the process of establishing a start point for intelligence collection. These start points often take the form of target nominations, which can be generated internally by individual units or can be directed from external headquarters. After receiving planning guidance from the commander and operations planners, F3EAD practitioners employ the full range of intelligence capabilities from organic, to national, and sometimes even to international assets to get a starting point for the rest of the process. The targeting start point can be deliberate or opportunity-based, and can focus on a known personality, a facility, an organization, or some other type of signature.

Fix

Once a target is identified, the full gamut of intelligence collection capability is applied against the target in order to develop operational triggers to “fix” the target in space and time. Fixing a target simply means that the intelligence effort has progressed enough that the operations function has sufficient information to execute the mission, whether that mission be kinetic or non-kinetic. When possible, SOF utilizes a practice of “federating” or spreading the intelligence effort out amongst multiple agencies in order to maximize effects while minimizing costs, effort, and time. This is often done as far forward as possible in order to increase the speed of the process, but much of the effort can be accomplished via reachback. Federated intelligence processes enable the organization practicing F3EAD to spread the collection effort across the IC, calling on specific organizations and in some cases specific personnel to provide the expertise and capability to bring the process into the “finish” phase. Redundant, persistent, and centralized intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability allows commanders to mass ISR against a specific target for the period of time necessary to support F3EAD. The goal of an ISR is to provide an “unblinking eye” squarely focused on the target, to bring the targeting process into the decisive next phase.

Finish

The first two steps of F3EAD lead to decisive operations against the enemy. Lethal combat operations in which SOF or their surrogates close with and destroy or seize enemy facilities, equipment, or personnel are one type of operation associated with the finish phase. However, the finish phase can just as easily be non-kinetic in nature. Neutralization of an enemy communications node, disrupting a courier network, legal prosecution of key terrorist personalities, or achieving a desired psychological, political, or social effect are just as much a part of “finish” as missile strikes or combat assaults. Therefore, in F3EAD, finish refers more to finishing a particular mission, than finishing enemy forces.

Under legacy targeting methodologies, the finish phase was considered the main effort. This made sense in prior wars which were focused more on physical destruction of enemy forces and infrastructure as a means to end his will to resist. However, in an information-age era of protracted conflicts, risk aversion, non-state actors and networked warfare, the main effort cannot be on “finishing” enemy forces in a traditional sense, in large part because the nature of warfare has changed. Therefore, F3EAD does not end in the finish phase; indeed, with “finish,” the main effort of F3EAD is just beginning.

Exploit
The “exploit” phase, as the main effort of F3EAD, is the most critical single step in the process as it leads to the finding, fixing, and finishing of the next target and the perpetuation of the cycle. Exploitation also best fulfills the main purpose of intelligence, which is to enable “decision advantage” for decision-makers at all levels. In the F3EAD model, exploitation is the process of examining, analyzing, interrogating, and processing captured enemy personnel, equipment, and materiel for intelligence purposes.

The overall aim of the exploitation effort is to produce enough actionable intelligence and/or prosecutorial evidence to perpetuate the F3EAD process as rapidly as possible. In support of this aim, exploitation has four broad goals: force protection, targeting, component and material sourcing, and prosecution. (McIntyre, Russell, “Criteria for a Successful Theater Exploitation Effort,” 19 September 2009)

Exploiting captured enemy personnel and materiel for force protection purposes allows operations and intelligence to function together in order to prevent enemy attacks on friendly forces, installations, and capabilities. Targeting allows friendly forces to engage enemy forces, installations, and capabilities in order to achieve lethal or non-lethal effects. Component and materiel sourcing allows intelligence personnel to backtrack sources of enemy personnel and materiel, thereby enabling friendly forces to engage the enemy across his network. Finally, exploitation enables prosecution of enemy forces after they and their materiel have been fully exploited for intelligence purposes. This represents another fundamental evolution in warfare, since prior to the current Overseas Contingency Operations, prosecution was most often associated with events that occurred after a conflict was resolved, not during hostilities. By including prosecution as a part of the overall exploitation process, practitioners of the F3EAD process allow friendly forces to then turn intelligence into evidence, enabling successful legal prosecution of enemy forces, and ensuring that both the population and friendly forces are protected. This is particularly useful in the kind of adaptive, security-conscious networks frequently encountered in irregular warfare.

Exploitation occurs at three levels. Level 1 exploitation is tactical exploitation at the point of capture, Level 2 is unit organic or theater-level exploitation, and Level 3 is national-level exploitation as part of the
federated intelligence community effort. Exploitation can be accomplished by operations or intelligence personnel on the objective through a variety of means, such as battlefield interrogation or on-site document and media exploitation (DOMEX). As personnel and materiel are moved up the exploitation chain, the process becomes more deliberate and detailed, culminating at a centralized in-theater facility staffed by military, civilian, and law enforcement professionals. When appropriate, SOF federates analysis of DOMEX and electronic media to outside agencies for faster exploitation and dissemination. This allows SOF to minimize their forward footprint and count on “reachback” to CONUS sanctuary locations.

Figure 5: Levels of Exploitation. Source: Authors.

Analyze

The “analyze” phase is where the information gained in the find, fix, finish, and exploit phases turns into intelligence which can be used to drive operations. Analysis can be performed by SOF in theater, or information and materiel can be sent back to CONUS for further in-depth analysis. As in the fix phase of F3EAD, SOF lessons learned reinforce the value of a federated approach to intelligence support to intelligence analysis, since very rarely does SOF have the organic intelligence infrastructure necessary to maximize the value of F3EAD.

Disseminate

The last step in the F3EAD process is the “disseminate” phase. One of the keys to success of F3EAD is the creation of a wider dissemination network than what has traditionally been practiced inside the US intelligence community. Dissemination is a key aspect of the SOF targeting process and warrants inclusion as an independent phase of the SOF targeting cycle. Dissemination of intelligence information gleaned through the SOF targeting process helps to create “a network to defeat a network” throughout the intelligence enterprise and helps eliminate intelligence stovepipes. SOF experience shows that in the risk versus gain analysis more information sharing is better when it comes to defeating our nation’s enemies. Wider dissemination to conventional, Coalition, and even host-nation military forces, interagency partners, and civilian leadership contributes enormously to the success of F3EAD by expanding the intelligence and operations networks in support of SOF missions.
F3EAD vs. F3EA

Some organizations utilize the acronym “F3EA” instead of “F3EAD.” While the processes are essentially the same except for the last letter of the acronym, the difference between the two involves more than mere semantics. The argument for F3EA is that the “D,” dissemination, is an “understood” part of the process and does not need to be specifically designated as an individual component. This thinking is in error. “Exploit” and “analyze” were added to the legacy find-fix-finish (F3) process because those functions required specific emphasis in order for the process to realize its maximum potential. The same holds true with dissemination; without emphasizing it as a specific and essential part of the of the targeting process, SOF runs the risk of creating “stovepipes of excellence” that deliberately or inadvertently compartmentalize information, thereby inhibiting the effective fusion of operation and intelligence functions and bogging down the targeting process. Emphasizing “dissemination” as a formal part of the process ensures that practitioners keep the dissemination element in mind as a continuous part of the process.

The Way Ahead for F3EAD

It might be tempting for some to look at the F3EAD process through the lens of legacy targeting techniques and their own limited experiences and say, “nothing new here.” That view is extraordinarily shortsighted. While it is true that F3EA and F3EAD have been in existence for years, and that F3EAD incorporates familiar components of legacy doctrinal targeting methodology, F3EAD represents nothing less than a revolution in the way SOF conduct lethal and non-lethal targeting. More than a conceptual model, F3EAD reflects a fundamental change in thinking and makes the concept of “operations/intelligence fusion” a reality. Through F3EAD, commanders ensure that “operations/intelligence fusion,” “operations directs intelligence,” and “intelligence drives operations” are more than trite buzzwords. Additionally, F3EAD creates the kind of unity of effort and generates the potential for an operational tempo that has arguably never been seen in modern combat. The success of the SOF units utilizing F3EA/F3EAD serves as validation of the efficacy of the process.

Recognizing the potential of exploitation and analysis phases of F3EAD, institutional training has arisen within the SOF community in order to capitalize the lessons learned from the field in terms of the utility of F3EAD. The 6th Battalion at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (SWCS), for example, now boasts 11 courses which stress ops/intel fusion and the F3EAD process as part of the curriculum. Several of these courses were begun as partnerships between SWCS and the Joint Special Operations Command’s Intelligence Brigade (JIB), ensuring the dissemination of SOF ops/intel best practices throughout the joint and combined SOF communities. 6th Battalion, officially activated on 27 June 2011, already trains both operations and intelligence personnel in a variety of exploitation tactics, techniques, and procedures. For its part, the JIB ensures joint SOF operability and provides joint doctrine for SOF personnel employing F3EAD in Overseas Contingency Operations and other locations throughout the world.

Conclusion

The F3EAD targeting methodology can be successfully utilized by any organizational echelon, with any level of resourcing. As previously mentioned, SOF are not the only forces who are capable of
utilizing the F3EAD process. Indeed, F3EAD has been effectively utilized by general purpose forces and U.S. allies, and is incorporated into doctrine. But more still can, and should, be done. F3EAD should become standard practice not only for SOF but for joint and combined doctrine, which is currently characterized in some cases by poor operations/intelligence fusion and joint/interagency cooperation, and encumbered by multiple and often conflicting tactics, terms, and procedures. The utility of the methodology and the efficacy of the process are clear; F3EAD is successful for SOF and with proper execution, it can be successful for the entire force.

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