Spc. Eric Cox *(left)* and Sgt. Harrison Lewis, both of 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division (4ID), and members of the 4ID Intelligence Readiness Operations Capability (IROC), collaborate on a fused intelligence product on 29 April 2025 at Fort Carson, Colorado. (Photo by Sean Ordorica)

"IROC" and Roll

How to Make Intelligence Training for Large-Scale Combat Operations Cool Again

Maj. Hannah M. Smith, U.S. Army

The next fight will be hard. Success or failure is in our hands and depends on our ability to prepare. The enemy will give us no grace if we fail to learn or adapt quickly.

—Michael R. Weimer, Sergeant Major of the Army

The threat environment of large-scale combat operations (LSCO) today moves with a "scope, scale, sophistication, and speed" previously unmatched in warfare.[1] Our adversaries use high- and low-tech weapon systems across multiple domains, powered through human creativity and artificial intelligence/machine learning, to create a complex and sometimes chaotic environment difficult for our intelligence analysts to manage and make sense of. The U.S. Army must do better to train its intelligence soldiers to get in front of the adversary's pace. Through an intelligence readiness operations capability (IROC) established at the corps or division level, the Army can best train its intelligence soldiers in a way that creates lethality from their intelligence systems while breeding the mental flexibility and adaptability, confidence, and competence required to win in a LSCO environment.

Training intelligence soldiers is an inherently difficult task. Various laws, regulations, and policies (e.g., Executive Order No. 12333, *U.S. Intelligence Activities,* and DOD Manual 5240.01, *Procedures Governing the Conduct of DoD Intelligence Activities*) prohibit compromising a U.S. citizen's privacy, which prevents soldiers from using their systems and equipment to their fully capacity at their home stations.[2] Intelligence soldiers must therefore rely on simulated data to learn their craft. Simulations have their own limitations; however, with simulation scripting, it is only as good as the human scripter inputting the data and their knowledge of the adversary's capabilities. These simulations also depend on a sufficient information technology architecture that can pump data across multiple intelligence and mission command systems swiftly and in large volume. Thus, a soldier's intelligence training relies on the effectiveness of the content, speed, and volume of simulated data.

To further complicate this problem, military intelligence elements can no longer rely on robust scenarios developed by the Intelligence Center of Excellence to execute various levels of training known as the Military Intelligence Training Standards: the recent Army Structure reshaped the size and echelon of military intelligence units across the force, leaving the Military Intelligence Training Standards insufficient as a training device and creating a gap in training requirements and support.[3] The U.S. military will continue to profess operational readiness after a unit attends a combat training center rotation or completes a Warfighter exercise at the corps or division level, but this is not enough for intelligence training. These exercises prioritize training staff functions over true intelligence analytic capability and do not allow for soldiers to learn and advance their mental comprehension of the enemy over time.

If inherent training challenges were not enough, shortages across the Army due to recruiting challenges place stress on intelligence soldiers. Therefore, of the intelligence soldiers we do have, it is imperative that they operate on the edge of their capabilities. Make no mistake: our adversaries will not slow down to make up for U.S. military intelligence training deficits.

This presents a dismal picture for the military intelligence enterprise to win in a LSCO environment. Fortunately, there is a solution that mitigates these inherent intelligence training challenges while simultaneously providing real-world support to ongoing operations: the establishment of a foundry IROC at Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) installations. *Foundry* is an intelligence training and operations platform found across FORSCOM installations geared toward preparing intelligence soldiers for deployments through technical training and operational readiness tasks.

What Is an IROC?

In November 2022, 4th Infantry Division (4th ID) returned home following a deployment to the European theater. While no longer in direct crisis or conflict, 4th ID chose not to divorce themselves from the problem set.

Working with the local foundry site, 4th ID

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intelligence soldiers set to work in a small classroom, determined to provide reach back to support to the units still overseas. On a daily basis, soldiers from multiple specialties—signals, geospatial, and all-source intelligence—continued to remotely participate in meetings overseas, following the fight and taking on additional requests for information (RFI) that the still-deployed elements could not handle themselves. Their intelligence became critical to units in the European theater.

Fast forward to October 2024, and 4th ID has a robust IROC. Manned five days a week with the capability to surge to twenty-four-hour operations if necessary, the team of ten to sixteen soldiers from across the division cycle in and out in ninety-day rotations. They participate in three weekly syncs with units in the European theater, answering RFIs and developing points of interest, even initiating their own products and findings based on expertise developed of the mission set. The IROC has been able to provide intelligence products that identify new threat tactics, techniques, and procedures and develop battle space awareness for allied and partnered forces—supporting real-world operations—while developing true proficiency in critical skills for soldiers who participate.

The IROC is not a new concept—over a decade ago at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, the foundry site director described the IROC as an entity that supports a "forward element or a member of the intelligence community from a sanctuary location."[4] Uniquely, the IROC uses U.S. Army FORSCOM soldiers and their mission, coupled with Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM) resources and training, to turn the real-time intelligence support to operations into a collective training event, or vice versa. The FORSCOM-INSCOM relationship through a foundry IROC was natural and commonplace during repeated deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan during the Global War on Terrorism; however, given the transition to strategic competition and new multidomain operations doctrine, few foundry sites and FORSCOM units have continued to support IROC efforts. The U.S. Army cannot wait to be directly involved in a great power conflict to reenergize its intelligence operations and training efforts. If wanting to win the LSCO fight is not enough reason to seek greater federation of IROCs across the Army, consider the following benefits:

Job satisfaction. The reenlistment rate of soldiers who participate in an IROC is significant, a bright spot in an era of dwindling recruits, high suicide rates, and retention problems in the Army.[5] From the 4th ID IROC, twenty-six soldiers reenlisted in an eighteen-month period. From the 1st Infantry Division (1st ID) IROC at Fort Riley, Kansas, although a much smaller enterprise, eight soldiers reenlisted, representing 100 percent of eligible soldiers from the 1st ID IROC team.

Expertise, competence, deep thinking, problem-solving. Soldiers in an IROC with consistent exposure to a problem set consistently build on their knowledge of the threat and become proficient with their systems in a way that enables higher cognitive processes, or deep thinking. In fall 2024, soldiers from the 4th ID IROC briefed Russian doctrine writers Dr. Les Grau and Dr. Charles Bartles, who have a combined six decades of knowledge on Russian fighting, on new Russian tactics, techniques, and procedures and battle space formations that were previously unknown in doctrine.[6] 4th ID IROC soldiers have also been able to advise deployed units with their expertise, identifying when RFIs have been previously answered and recommending new areas or topics to address instead. This sanctuary support to the European theater is an intelligence-support-to-operations force multiplier.

In addition to expertise on the threat developed over time through the IROC, soldiers also develop expertise on their tool sets, enabling them to become problem-solvers. Soldiers are often consumed in the "mouse clicks," or the "buttonology," of a tool set at the beginning of their rotation. Over time, the mouse clicks

of an intelligence tool set become second nature, and the analyst can begin to think deeper about what they see, work to solve problems, and advance their knowledge of the adversary. Just as combat arms soldiers need repetition on their weapon systems, intelligence soldiers need repetition on their systems and tool sets.

Leadership development. The IROC is a textbook example of an Army training model because it uses NCOs to lead and develop junior soldiers. This model is successful in an IROC because the mission and support to real-world operations help provide purpose and motivation for soldiers. For example, holding soldiers accountable to a thorough standard operating procedure develops soldiers and the quality of intelligence products simultaneously. There is a rigorous quality assurance/quality control process for products in the 4th ID IROC, with junior soldiers required to submit work to NCOs for validation prior to the publication of reports. This process includes minutiae requirements like the color and width of border lines on a slide—a seemingly silly requirement—but one that demonstrates the discipline, cohesion, and professionalism of intelligence operations and products from the IROC. Being a member of the 4th ID IROC has become a point of pride, and those who cannot grow to meet its standards are removed from the rotation.

The daily intelligence support to operations also gives NCOs iteration after iteration to lead, train, and develop junior analysts. NCOs provide well-earned praise but also candid feedback to junior soldiers, often working one-on-one with junior soldiers until products and assessments add value to the intelligence production chain. The developmental process is so significant that junior soldiers from the 4th ID IROC can often train others at an expert level on their tool sets, and they can represent the intelligence community confidently and competently in analytical exchanges with outside entities.

This NCO-led training model in the IROC develops leaders and builds trust within an organization, which are fundamental to forming a cohesive team for the LSCO fight.

Troubleshooting. Everyday use of systems and equipment makes soldiers experts who do not have to reach out to an information technology system administrator or senior leader for advice when a workstation or tool set goes down. Similar to tanks running smoother when run every day, intelligence systems and their operators run smoother when used every day, reducing additional resources and time throughout the process. There will be no time to waste in the LSCO fight.

Collective training. The IROC provides a collective training opportunity for intelligence soldiers, integrating multiple intelligence specialties into the overall intelligence support to operations process. Rather than having signals and geospatial intelligence analysts work independently and in a silo on various products, the learned proficiency over time in an IROC allows for these intelligence sources to tip and cue off one another, allowing them to understand the adversary swiftly, in more detail, and with more confidence, providing a timely and accurate intelligence assessment to commanders and staff.

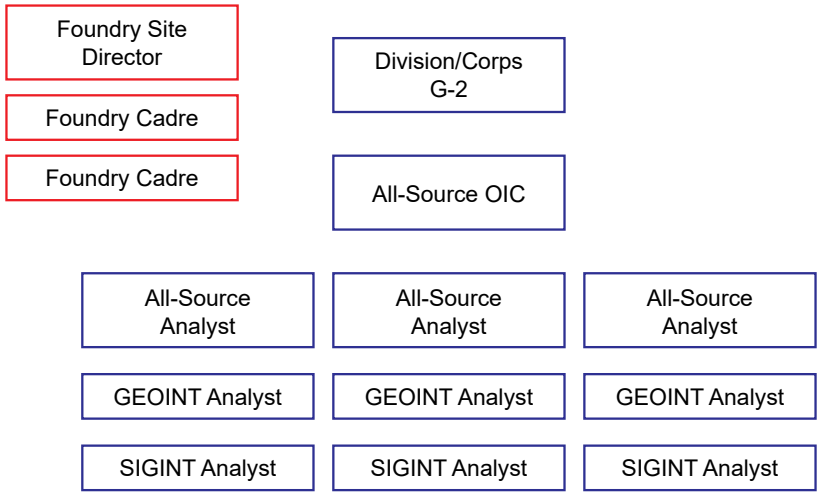
A fully functioning and robust IROC is the future of intelligence training and winning the LSCO fight. Soldiers working on the problem set daily learn mental flexibility as they observe the adversary's changes over time, they learn to solve problems with their tool sets given their developed expertise, and they gain confidence and competence to work together and take the initiative on intelligence efforts. When the threat moves faster than a simulation, these skills of mental flexibility, problem-solving, confidence, and competence are essential to keeping ahead of the enemy.

Requirements for an IROC

The establishment of an IROC is not always an easy process, however. FORSCOM units must consistently provide soldiers to the INSCOM foundry site with the resources (workstations, space, network connectivity) to host the IROC, and these soldiers must stay actively engaged with operational units overseas. Here are the basic requirements for a successful IROC:

Maintain connectivity to the supported units. A foundry IROC is meant to provide direct support to an Army Service component command. Soldiers must therefore understand the priority intelligence requirements of the units they support and must interact with them daily. Without this connection, work done by the IROC is often lost or misguided and therefore fails to provide value to the forward element. If supporting an element in Europe or Asia, for example, units must communicate with those elements daily.

Continuity of operations. IROCs should conduct operations a minimum of five days a week, with the



(Figure by author)

Figure. Example of an IROC Task Organization

ability to surge to twenty-four-hour operations if necessary. Minimum manning of the IROC should be two signals, two geospatial, and two all-source intelligence soldiers conducting duty-day operations throughout the week (see the figure). The IROC should be prepared to surge in the event of operational needs. Soldiers should remain flexible to high-priority RFIs and be able to turn products within a seventy-two-hour window to demonstrate reliability and active reach back support. At its most robust, the 4th ID IROC sits at sixteen soldiers advised by a team of foundry cadre. An unreliable IROC with spotty support will easily be written off by the supported unit.

Integration into the orders process. The IROC is only successful when consistently manned and actively responding to units down range. For this to happen, among all the other requirements of any given unit, it should be written into a corps or division order or in annual training guidance. The order can specify number of intelligence soldiers, period of duty, and primary responsibility. This is not a red-cycle tasking—with the job satisfaction and ability to impact real-world operations, getting assigned a ninety-day rotation to an IROC can become a point of pride and unit cohesion.

Participation in the IROC requires intelligence soldiers to meet certain training requirements beforehand. For example, a signals intelligence soldier must attend a two-week foundry class on operational electronic intelligence to qualify for the IROC. Incorporating IROC requirements into an orders process will ensure that soldier training is in line with operational needs (and synonymous with theater entry requirements when a unit deploys). A common challenge for intelligence soldiers operating technical systems and tool sets is activating and maintaining their accounts, logins, and online prerequisites. This is only a difficult problem when soldiers are not connected daily. Through the orders process and utilization of foundry spaces, which openly welcome soldiers from all intelligence disciplines, intelligence soldiers will always be ready and able to provide continuity of operations.

Commander and senior intelligence officer buy-in. On any given day, there is a multitude of competing demands on soldier's time. The IROC is not the only focus of a brigade, division, or corps preparing for a combat training center (CTC) rotation or Warfighter exercise (WFX). Rather than finding support to a CTC or WFX as mutually exclusive of the IROC, commanders should recognize that intelligence soldiers with IROC experience will contribute and be more fully prepared for any CTC or WFX. In fact, IROC soldiers will likely receive subpar training from a simulation compared with a real-world mission.

Integrate all-source, geospatial, and signals intelligence at a minimum. The IROC functions best as a scaled-down analysis-and-control element in which all intelligence components contribute collectively to products rather than single-source reporting. High-confidence intelligence analysis comes only through the integration of multiple intelligence sources.

Foundry leadership. At the crux of an IROC is the coach, teach, and mentor efforts of foundry cadre. This is not a mundane "just show up" job—a successful IROC requires engaged foundry cadre who work with commanders and senior intelligence officers to support the IROC and engaged foundry cadre who continuously help improve the quality and operational readiness of intelligence soldiers. For example, "Tools Tuesday" at the 4th ID IROC is a creative way for foundry cadre to take a few minutes of time each Tuesday to teach a new tool set to soldiers in the IROC. Their regular rotation and participation in the intelligence process allows junior soldiers to benefit from decades of intelligence experience in foundry cadre. Further, foundry cadre frequently host distinguished visitors in the IROC, allowing junior soldiers to practice briefing skills while simultaneously informing leaders of the intelligence support to operations efforts.

There Is No "One-Size-Fits-All"

The 4th ID IROC is a success story, but other Army installations also have IROCs established, and there is not a "one-size-fits-all" model. The Fort Riley, Kansas, foundry IROC mimics the 4th ID IROC but to a smaller degree. Foundry sites at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Joint Base Lewis McChord, Washington, have unique opportunities to develop IROCs with a joint flavor given the customer base at each installation. The foundry site at Fort Cavazos, Texas, may have an opportunity to integrate soldiers from its expeditionary military intelligence brigade along with soldiers from the corps. This is not a bad thing—installations can tailor their foundry IROC to what best supports the units stationed there and their mission requirements. Not every IROC can or will look like the 4th ID IROC, but all IROCs can provide real-world intelligence support in conjunction with collective training by following the steps to success presented above.

Conclusion

In a world of scarce resources, the IROC requires only the intangibles: trust between INSCOM and FORSCOM leaders and a revised understanding of time well spent. It does not require more money. It does not require more weapons. The foundry IROC does exactly what chief of staff of the Army Gen. Randy George calls on to counter the "axis of upheaval" in China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea: it builds lethal and cohesive teams at a pace faster than any training exercise.[7] It is worth the investment. ■

Notes

Epigraph. Michael R. Weimer, letter from the sergeant major of the Army, *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (September 2024): 2, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/Professional-Military-Writing/forewords/.

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2. Exec. Order No. 12333, 3 C.F.R. 200 (1981); DOD Manual 5240.01, *Procedures Governing the Conduct of DOD Intelligence Activities* (Department of Defense, August 2016).

3. Andrew Feickert, *The 2024 Army Force Structure Transformation Initiative*, CRS No. R47985 (Congressional Research Service, 5 February 2025), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47985. Military Intelligence Training Standards (MITS) was designed as a training program for brigade combat team military intelligence companies (MICOs), which no longer exist. MICOs have been restructured to the division level as a general support unit or as part of an intelligence and electronic warfare battalion. MITS needs to adapt to support those units.

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