



In a near-future military fictional setting, Staff Sgt. Apollo, a geospatial intelligence NCO, monitors a holographic image of Objective Apollo inside a division intelligence tent, synchronizing autonomous sensors, drone feeds, and real-time analysis as U.S. forces maneuver to secure a contested nuclear facility in a large-scale combat environment. (AI generated image by NCO Journal)

Objective Apollo

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Prologue

Since 2030, tensions between the U.S. and near-peer adversaries gradually increased. Military advancements across the Eastern world caused civilian unrest across borders, with adversary posturing and influence spreading into allied countries.

This direct threat to allied nations led to the involvement of the U.S. military, including pressing into Eastern territory to neutralize imminent threats, both on the nuclear front and ground force advancement.

Over the last decade, the U.S. Army shifted from counterinsurgency to large-scale combat operations. The new fighting force was restructured to effectively operate at peak agility and lethality over large areas in austere conditions, contested logistics, and degraded communications environments.

Efforts to provide a dynamic common operating and intelligence picture to all units in the region were developed and implemented. The intelligence war-fighting function was reevaluated, and now provided more streamlined and direct support to kinetic and non-kinetic effects including cyber and jamming.

With artificial intelligence assistance, geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) imagery analysts could now successfully identify targets within seconds and communicate directly to the operations cell for action. Each intelligence element was issued systems to support their analysis which included collection capabilities unique to their demands.

It is a different battlefield than that of the early 2000s. This is not the time of air superiority and improvised explosive devices; this is a war across countries, cyberattacks, nuclear threats, propaganda, and political warfare.

It is 2037 and the 10th Infantry Division is forward deployed in the north. The unit is nearing its eighth month deployed in the region and, arguably, approaching one of its most important missions yet — to capture Objective Apollo, a nuclear power plant identified as a key target.

Objective Apollo was assessed as a potential critical power source for enemy forces in the area, with unknown nuclear deployment capabilities. Previous reporting suggested Objective Apollo was a nuclear munition storage area, but further intelligence is required to confirm analysis.

Due to the sensitive nature of the facility, it is necessary that the 10th Infantry Division avoid direct kinetic strikes and neutralize the potential threat to restore power to affected civilian areas.

It was frigid as the sun set behind the western mountains; white stars appeared one by one as the snow became rigid and crystallized. The main command post was eerily quiet, the only sounds were a low hum of generators and some muffled small talk between Soldiers in armored vehicles and hardened tents.

“Excuse me ... excuse me ...”

Staff Sgt. Atlas inched her way around a gaggle of Soldiers waiting before the Division Main Intelligence tent entrance. She dug in her trouser pocket for her badge and tossed the lanyard around her neck before pulling up the Velcro door with a harsh ripping tug and then refastening it.

The tent opened to rows of black desks evenly spaced along the walls, each one equipped with multiple screens that wrapped around the analysts. In stark contrast to the outside, it was bright with white horizontal lights tracing the curves of the tent ceiling.

Soldiers crowded each section, reaching over each other’s shoulders, urgently pointing at their respective screens, focused on their discipline. The room smelled familiarly of freshly brewed coffee and a heater that worked excessively to keep up with the relentlessly dropping temperatures.

Atlas leaned her rifle against her desk as she shook off her snow jacket and hung it on the back of her chair to dry. Most Soldiers who worked in the Division Main Intelligence Element (DMIE) would downgrade to their base uniform, or some variation of winter gear and plate carrier for comfort during long shifts. Nights had been increasingly cold over the last couple of weeks because of the change in season.

Atlas took a small orb about the size of her fist from her desk drawer and flipped it over to check the battery. Two little blue numbers lit up as she rolled the ball over in her hand. *97, that’s plenty.*

Recent models of the Portable Geospatial Intelligence Dimensional Projection, or PGIDP, held an impressive

charge. She put the orb into her pocket and checked in with her squad who were filing in sporadically with energy drinks and half-opened packaged meals in their hands, ready to peel off their extra layers of cold-weather gear.

The group previously loitering outside also began to flood into the center of the DMIE tent. Atlas recognized many of their names from the concept of operations she had reviewed earlier that evening.



Atlas took a small orb, a Portable Geospatial Intelligence Dimensional Projection, or PGIDP, about the size of her fist from her desk drawer and flipped it over to check the battery. Two little blue numbers lit up as she rolled the ball over in her hand. (AI generated image)

They were a combination of senior officers and NCOs from across the division. Many were support elements, since the division was dispersed at this point in the fight, relying primarily on advanced communication devices for situational awareness and secure comms. Mumbling small talk filled the tent as they found their spots and accepted coffee in small Styrofoam cups from an anxious private.

Atlas stepped away from her Soldiers, lightly tossed the PGIDP orb into the center of the circle, and watched as it hovered a couple of feet off the ground with a slight magnetic bounce. She removed a tablet from the stand and stood back from the orb.

“The brief will begin in a moment, good comms established, all forward units are on the line and will be able to see all effects,” Atlas announced to the group, scanning the crowd for the command sergeant major.

A weathered man stepped from the rear of the crowd to the front, adjusting his sling, and clearing his throat for their attention. “Good evening, my name is Command Sgt. Maj. Crown, the 10th Infantry Division command sergeant major, but of course, everyone should know that by now.”

He let out a raspy laugh and turned to the officer at his side.

“Ma’am,” he said, extending his hand toward the crowd and waving her forward.

“Yes, thank you all for attending, whether it’s in person or virtually. I know we have most of our units already forward deployed and dispersed. Tonight, will be an important night!”

The speaker stepped from the edge of the crowd to the center of the circle. She stood near a small waist-high table.

The crowd stilled instantly.

Maj. Gen. Mason, the division commander.

Her presence punctuated what she’d stated — this was an important night.

Mason’s voice rang clear, “Our mission is to press forward, secure Objective Apollo, and neutralize any enemy forces in the surrounding area. Our intelligence analysts have done extensive analysis in the area leading to this mission, so they’ll be the ones briefing you in detail today.”



Within the digital sweep of white grid squares, Atlas noted the Soldiers’ eyes quickly focused beyond the mountains, landing on a miniature facility placed in an open space to the east. Every couple of seconds the hologram twitched in a digital refresh. (AI generated image)

“Staff Sgt. Atlas.”

Atlas nodded and stepped forward, “Thank you, ma’am. Good evening, everyone, my name is Staff Sgt. Atlas. I am the GEOINT NCOIC here with the Division Main Intelligence Element.”

With a couple of routine taps on the tablet, a light shot straight up from the floating orb, then folded to either side, displaying a white, gridded hologram. It stretched out at approximately a four-foot radius, with a legend, north arrow, and scale hovering above the highest point.

Within the digital sweep of white grid squares, Atlas noted the Soldiers’ eyes quickly focused beyond the mountains, landing on a miniature facility placed in an open space to the east. Every couple of seconds the hologram twitched in a digital refresh.

“As the general stated, the mission is to obtain and secure Objective Apollo. There will be both geographic and enemy obstacles during the mission. Each intelligence section has done extensive analysis to provide you with the most accurate intelligence, and real-time changes will be fed to you via your personal PGIPD displays.”

As Atlas spoke, noted zones illuminated in contrasting colors within the display.

“In front of you, I have displayed all current friendly forces in blue, and enemy forces in red. Objective Apollo is indicated here in yellow.”

A slowly blinking yellow circle traced around the facility behind the mountain, the label *Objective Apollo* above it.

“The DMIE is located here.”

A blue icon blinked twice in the farthest west point on the hologram. It featured a miniature display of tents, concertina wire, and an organized group of armored vehicles.

Another array of icons appeared in a wave across the display.

“And this is the current position of all fires, infantry battalions, and support units. Approximately 48 hours ago, 15 DLOs or Dormant Launch Orbs were placed in the following locations. Physically, they appear similar to the PGIPD we have here but are equipped with surveillance tech that will be displayed momentarily.”

Atlas paused to pull up the next display.

Due to a possible air defense threat in the region, the DLOs were placed using Deployable Over-Ground Scouts, what we like to call DOGS ... for obvious reasons.”

There was quiet laughter throughout the tent.

With another tap, an animated formation of metal boxes appeared in the center of the hologram. As the animation played, a digital Soldier knelt beside the boxes, opening them one by one, then stepping back to reference a tablet similar to the one Atlas was using. After the Soldier scanned the boxes, he input further information into the tablet.

Small, four-legged tech rose from the boxes before launching forward. The animation zoomed back out to display the tech in reference to the battlefield. Small, dotted tracks appeared on the battlefield projection, dispersing beyond the DMIE in a curved pattern west of the mountain.

Atlas panned closer to one of the DOGS as it slowed down to emplace the DLO. A compartment on the back of the DOG opened to drop the DLO below the snow's surface before continuing its path forward.

"Once far enough from the DLO to limit detection, the DOGS will fold in their legs and submerge beneath the snow, leaving only their sensor above the surface to passively collect data. For this mission, we have fitted each one of the DOGS with a terrestrial signals intelligence (SIGINT) sensor for multi-intelligence collection in support of targeting."

Atlas shrunk the hologram with a pinch of her fingers on the tablet and pushed it to the side, replacing the DOGS animation with a rotating image of the DLO.

A spherical object the size of a bowling ball hovered in front of the crowd.

"Each DLO is equipped with four miniature unmanned aerial vehicles, each with a different sensor. One drone carries a full-motion video sensor with infrared capability, which can feed live video here to the DMIE as well as to each of your mobile systems. Another drone has a synthetic aperture radar sensor to provide imagery in degraded conditions; another has panchromatic imagery capability for a more literal image and tactical identification of potential targets. The fourth drone carries a moving target indicator sensor for identifying dynamic targets in an area."

The top of the DLO opened and four miniature, quadrotor drones flew out and hovered above the launcher. Every leader was engaged now. Even Atlas had to admit these devices were impressive — increasing the accuracy and analyst control over the collect had changed the battlefield.

"It's important for me to identify the current tech limitations. From launch, each drone has a flight time of eight hours." Atlas said. "We won't use a return command for this mission to optimize collection time and reduce the risk of enemy forces conducting pattern analysis."

Once flight and collect are complete, the drones will drop, damaging the hardware and triggering data card deletion. These intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets are directly tasked and controlled remotely by a GEOINT Soldier here in the DMIE," Atlas explained.

"As previously indicated, the collected information, data, and target identification are mostly automated and will display in real time on the PGIPD, both here in the main intelligence element and forward with all units. Any direct support for unit movements requesting live coverage, send a request to me and we will assign a Soldier to the closest DLO in that area," continued Atlas.

"All DLOs will remain dormant until activated; they don't emit any detectable signals and will remain just below the top layer of snow to avoid detection by enemy forces," she said. Once activated, the orb will launch the drones above the surface."

Atlas pulled the original diagram back up, which resumed a slow rotation in the middle of the huddle. Three red icons blinked to the east of the mountain.

"We have identified an enemy artillery battalion here, light infantry battalion here, and an air defense company here." Each red diamond icon was within a kilometer of the objective perimeter.



Due to a possible air defense threat in the region, the Dormant Launch Orbs were placed using Deployable Over-Ground Scouts. Called DOGS ... for obvious reasons. (AI generated image)

"Range rings haven't been included. Due to proximity, forward elements will be in range as soon as they cross the mountain pass," she explained.

As the hologram zoomed to Objective Apollo, information was displayed, detailing projected personnel locations, entrances, square footage, and observed security measures.

Atlas continued, "It's unknown whether the personnel guarding Objective Apollo are equipped with

night vision, so their line of sight with and without have been determined and displayed above, with weak points assessed to be here and here.”

Atlas zoomed in on the objective, pointing out the critical zones.

A detailed hologram rotated slowly clockwise. Four reactors were positioned in the center of the facility; animated smoke billowed from the tops and dissipated into the ceiling. Each hardstand building within the walled perimeter was color-coordinated by function, with transparent percentages hovering above them.

I might want to explain that quickly as well.



Dormant Launch Orbs are equipped with four miniature drones, each with a different sensor. One carries a full-motion video sensor with infrared capability. Another provides imagery in degraded conditions; the third provides more literal images that help with tactical target identification. The fourth carries a moving target indicator sensor for identifying dynamic targets. (AI generated image)

“Objective Apollo is a nuclear power plant. Each reactor is assessed to be fully operational, with an increase in nuclear productivity and development observed over the last two months,” she explained.” Further intelligence collection is required to determine if there’s a weaponized objective related to the uptake or if it is due to the increased power intake in civilian cities in the area because of weather changes.”

“Facility guards only have standard-issue AK-12s and primarily rely on protection from identified units in the surrounding area,” she continued.

She paused for a minute to steady her breath and to allow the Soldiers to look at the objective before pinching the tablet screen back to the common operating picture displaying all data.

“If there are no questions, I will be followed by Staff Sgt. Rain from the Fusion Cell,” Atlas said.

A captain raised his hand and said, “Will we have access to all of the data from this brief before we leave?”

Atlas took a moment to select files from the tablet, then there was a collective notification ping from every device in the room.

“Yes, Sir, everyone with a PGIPTD now has access to all the data, the map, and the analysis presented this evening,” she responded. “In addition to the current brief, all collected intelligence and relevant information will be displayed in real time.”

“This includes automated target tracking from the DLO sensors and information sent up from forward units,” she continued. “Targets and enemy locations with accurate geo-locations can be synched and toggled on or off from the infantry helmet visors as well as automated target engagement assessments.”

The captain thanked her with a nod while looking at the ruggedized tablet attached to his chest.

The brief continued, going through each section to provide their intelligence overview, intelligence gaps, and suggested avenues of approach. Leaders from each section provided their specialized input regarding the specifics of their sections and their roles in the mission until everyone had a shared understanding.

The division leadership provided their closing remarks, and the crowd cleared out of the DMIE.

Atlas returned to her desk where three large screens enclosed her view. She was already getting requests from forward units for DLO sensor support before they moved. She called her team over and they stood behind her chair, looking at her screens.

“Mendez, Spears, Anderson, you three will be assigned to direct DLO sensor support in these areas,” Atlas declared.

She pointed to the general area of the emplaced DLOs closest to the units that requested support.

“Only use semi-automated assistance; sometimes full artificial intelligence is finicky. I want them to have quick intel, but it needs to be accurate,” she said.

“Miller, you’ll be covering down as the GEOINT data analyst for this mission,” Atlas ordered. Ensure all imagery is processed and expedited, and all incoming intelligence is displayed correctly on the common operating picture since both forward and rear elements are relying on this.”

“And Sgt. Watson, you’re responsible for the remaining DLOs. Stay ahead of it, make sure you are scanning routes, keeping an eye on the objective, and taking pretty pictures when needed,” she concluded.

The team chuckled and acknowledged their assigned positions before returning to their desks. She was confident in her team and their competency; they were a good group of Soldiers.



As the hologram zoomed to Objective Apollo, information was displayed, detailing projected personnel locations, entrances, square footage, and observed security measures. (AI generated image by NCO Journal)

“Blue moving forward now,” someone yelled from across the DMIE. Atlas pulled the digital common operating picture up on one of her screens, DLO status on another, and left the last blank for a live feed.

“Activating DLO 13, staff sergeant,” Spears said.

Within seconds, white-hot full-motion video displayed on both of their screens. Another window opened with automated target tracking, the doppler scanning across a swath of the battlefield.

“DLO 9 is up, staff sergeant.”

“Same with 7, staff sergeant. Loitering right now.”

“Make sure you have the right chat rooms up.

Any requests should go through there for additional support,” Atlas said.

She stared at the synchronized feeds on her screen.

It’ll take them a while to cross the mountain pass.

And it did. It was nearly two hours of flight time before Sgt. Watson broke the silence.

“Staff sergeant, there’s unidentified movement according to target tracking to the northeast of the closest blue force. Redirecting full-motion video and synthetic aperture radar DLO sensors now,” Watson said, rapidly entering coordinates into the computer.

It only took a few minutes to move the sensors close enough to get eyes on the tipper, and sure enough, a huddle of individuals glowed in stark white contrast at the base of the mountain. In a seemingly random pattern, they moved up and down a path leading to the base and then disappeared.

“Likely an underground facility.”

A notification pinged throughout the DMIE as the intelligence displayed on the PGIPD. Each section turned to look. Before anyone could say much, another notification sounded.

A fusion analyst read it out aloud.

“Fires has it in the queue. Maintain eyes for BDA.”

That was quick, Atlas mused.

There wasn’t much hesitation anymore when it came to eliminating threats, for better or for worse. She remembered how different it was at the start of her career when brigades were considered a large fighting force. Back then, analysts had time to make highly detailed products for commanders and expansive ground stations were necessary. They were things of the past. Now it was all about timing, results, and staying one step ahead.

“Assessed as destroyed, shifting west to observe for a response force,” Watson announced with a sigh.

“Blue forces engaging to the east of the mountain.”

Mendez sat up in her seat, putting in an earpiece to listen for verbal communication

with the forward unit.

“They’re under heavy fire, staff sergeant,” she said.

“Hold on.”

Atlas activated the next closest DLO and input the coordinates to the small arms fire.

“Task remaining relevant sensors within your DLO to identify active targets. Give them a number and direction to focus on,” Atlas ordered.



The brief continued, going through each section to provide their intelligence overview, intelligence gaps, and suggested avenues of approach. Leaders from each section provided their specialized input regarding the specifics of their sections and their roles in the mission until everyone had a shared understanding. (AI generated image)

Mendez did as she was told, relaying all information through the earpiece.

Atlas kept an eye on the real-time common operating picture as the closest artillery battalion inched toward an actionable range to the air defense.

Watson hovered for a battle damage assessment as they engaged the air defense company. They pressed forward, each section providing intelligence support and overwatch as the sky lit up with return fire. Before the DLOs could reach the objective, their feeds went black.

“What was that?”

Atlas quickly ran through her display, troubleshooting any connection to the DLO she could think of. She activated and deployed the next closest DLO. She watched the feed carefully as they approached the previous location, then scanned. Hundreds of feet below, an array of miniature drones lay in the snow.

“We must be getting jammed —”

Before Atlas could finish, her screens went black again and dropped from the PGIPD.



It only took a few minutes to move the sensors close enough to get eyes on the tipper, and sure enough, a huddle of individuals glowed in stark white contrast at the base of the mountain. In a seemingly random pattern, they moved up and down a path leading to the base and then disappeared. (AI generated image)

“Lost eyes on the objective, we’re getting jammed. Requesting aerial or space tasking support right now. Until then we won’t have eyes on in real time,” Atlas announced to the DMIE. “Watson, activate another DLO, maintain a decent standoff range, and task a couple of imagery DLO sensors to get a better look since

we can get those from farther away. Identify the jammer inside Objective Apollo.”

“Acknowledged,” Watson responded.

Rain, Fusion NCOIC, stood to get a closer look at the PGIPD at the tent’s center.

The hologram was more clustered, blue and red forces colliding on the eastern side of the mountain, with DLO squads hovering overhead, artillery firing from the rear shooting blind except for drone collection support. The approximate jamming range created a translucent bubble around the objective.

“We continue to hold the advantage, Ma’am. Air defense has been neutralized, jamming is being identified, and enemy units are engaging,” said Rain, briefing the commander who was locked into the virtual common operating picture at her desk.

“I think I found it, staff sergeant, SIGINT tipper from one of the DOGS.”

Watson waved her over and Atlas leaned close to the screen. He had three different types of imagery

pulled up on one screen, all centered on a piece of equipment covered in camo netting inside the objective compound. He highlighted the coordinates and waited for her approval.

Atlas nodded, looking at the surrounding area.

“Nominate it for fires, but they need to rely on precision fires, aerial support, or ground forces. Can’t just blow up a nuclear plant,” she said.

They activated another DLO squad to maintain a safe standoff distance from the objective and zoomed the full-motion video feed in as far as it would go. In the hazy image, they watched the light infantry battalion push forward to the objective.

Most people in the DMIE were on their feet at this point, crowding around the pixelated feed and revolving hologram in the center of the tent. Tiny blue dots flooded the objective, red icons flashing and disappearing as they were eliminated.

After what felt like hours, a voice sounded over the radio.

“Objective Apollo, clear. Over,” the voice said.

Before anyone could say anything, Anderson motioned for Atlas to come over.

He pointed at his screen where a formation of enemy aircraft was several kilometers from the objective. They remained still, glowing hot on the feed.

“What do we do, staff sergeant?”

The formation of enemy aircraft appeared on the PGIPD high and far from the objective but in an

intimidating formation regardless. After a few moments, they turned in a fleeting motion and darted east until they disappeared from the hologram and the feed returned to black.

Atlas got a wave of chills and sighed before leaning back in her chair.

How long were they there? Where did they come from? What does this mean for the next phase? What were they able to see? How were they one step ahead?

She couldn't shake the image from Anderson's screen — the enemy aircraft in a precise formation, lingering just long enough to make their presence known.

"Why didn't we see them sooner?" Atlas spoke quietly, the question hanging in the air.

The room around them buzzed back to life as analysts dissected the data feeds, searching for patterns and more intel. Their latest tech was undeniably advanced, a force multiplier in conjunction with modern tactics, but not invincible.

Capability competition between adversaries had been relentless over the last decade and there was no sign of slowing down. The battlefield was evolving.

Atlas leaned forward, her gaze fixed on the faint glow of the holographic map.

"Watson," she said, her voice now steady, "Trace their point of origin. We need to predict what's next. Let's stay one step ahead."

"Yes, staff sergeant," Watson replied, pulling in analysts from different sections for collaborative analysis.

This was the battlefield of the future, one of innovation and uncertainty, where the integration between human and machine could determine the balance of power. And for the Soldiers of the 10th Infantry Division, the mission was far from over. ■



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