



By: Jeff Meinders

One of the few documents a unit uses to help describe how they fight is their tactical standard operating procedure (TACSOP) book. The Army's manual on how to write an SOP, ATP 3-90.90, lists 32 questions to help guide the production of an SOP. This information is somewhat helpful, and answers the what, but what about the how of writing an SOP?

Most unit SOPs look like my neighbor's old fence; some new boards, some old boards, a few sagging sections and some small patches of scrap wood. My unit's previous SOP was a conglomeration of doctrine, TTPs, and borrowed information. This resulted in a unit that had an SOP, but no one used, and its relevance was minimal to tactical operations. Version control was a problem; before I arrived, there were 3 different SOPs on digits and no one knew which one to use. If your unit isn't using a hard copy to reference, it's a good indication of its neglected state.

Any time a unit receives a change of mission, the SOP is almost automatically outdated.

When 1<sup>st</sup> Stryker Brigade Combat team of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division changed to a reconnaissance and security brigade, the brigade transformed the way it would fight. This change of mission was drastic and our outdated COIN SOP went into the trash. Luckily, our commander's focus on a quality SOP was clear from the start of the process. We catapulted from an outdated document to a quality printed version in less than 90 days.

We started with a clear vision from the commander, his thoughts drawn on a white board. The ideas started small, but quickly the group of primary staff officers knew they needed more formalized processes to gather information. We started with about 35 topics, but after two months, we were up to 100 cards in the pocket sized document. To support the commander's focus, he afforded me considerable time on his calendar to receive refined guidance; this proved to be key in our SOP development success and a real time saver over the three months.

As the action officer for this document, here are some ideas for any commander or staff officer looking to change a unit SOP.

**Do not 'update' your SOP.** The mere usage of the word 'update' leads to compliance and infers a slight change will be sufficient. If your commander has realized that the SOP is outdated, you will spend less time re-writing the document in full. Yes, it sounds like a lot of time, but just like the neighbor's fence, the poor quality will show if you apply a Band-Aid fix to the old document. Starting from scratch and using only the necessary previous content will help you save time creating the SOP.

Halfway through our re-write, we changed the format of the document by making it fit in your cargo pocket. This forced us to start most documents from scratch, because the tables and pictures weren't small enough to fit and still able to read. Using words to describe as much as you can, and photos or PowerPoint on only the rare occasion helped us think through what we really wanted to present, and helped us avoid copy and paste.

**A unit SOP requires a decentralized approach.** No staff officer has the time to start from scratch as I recommended above, so each specialty must own his or her part of the SOP. There must be a small group who formats and collects the data, but they should share the workload. Our commander's heavy involvement in the process made this easy for our new SOP; his clear guidance and attention to detail ensured staff officers took the time and effort to complete their section. Unless your XO leads the SOP working groups, it is difficult for the staff to refocus the priorities of the other staff members. The staff also took the time to come together for working groups; this bi-weekly process with the commander kept the group on task. We also used a shared portal for simultaneous access. This helped the

dreaded version control problems that plague a unit operating off of a single word document.

**The SOP should feel like the unit.** The words that senior NCO's and officers use to accomplish the mission should radiate from the document. When building our SOP, we took products we were currently using and put them in the document. For example we added the current CP layout, and how we camouflage vehicles. It is more about capturing what, and how, our unit operates into an SOP, than writing a document that outlines how we want to operate.

**It should shorten and expedite your planning process.** If there are sections of the plan that remain relatively constant (reports, timelines, packing lists), incorporate them into the SOP and make it a 'how we fight' book. After using the SOP for the last exercise, we referenced the SOP in our rehearsals, our OPORDs, and our commanders update brief.

**Add the specificity required.** We didn't just include a BLUE 1 report in our SOP, we answered the questions associated with it. We outlined when it must be sent, who sends it, what JCR chat room to send it in, who will be in each chat room, described how each line is interpreted, and most importantly, the purpose of the report. This kind of specificity led to intellectual conversations about the capabilities of our unit to perform the tasks we ask of it, and opened our eyes to the shortfalls in the execution of our command post duties.

After we finished the SOP, we put it through three collective training events before revision number two. This allowed the use of almost every card, and forced the subordinate units to evaluate the quality of the SOP. Getting the subordinate units to look at the product beforehand was difficult, but after forcing them to use it, the recommendations were more thought out.

Writing an SOP can take a lot of time, the last thing you want is to spend that time with very little to show for it, or worse, an SOP the unit doesn't use. Getting the commanders vision early, getting the shareholders on board, and using your brain instead of copy and paste all make your re-write worth the time and effort you put into your new SOP.

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