Helen Sloan/HBO

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Warning: This article contains spoilers for the latest episode of Game of Thrones, *"A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms."*

Other authors have made much ado about the Army of the Living's (AoL) tactical blunders at Winterfell, including their failure to [effectively use](#) [obstacles](#), their [misuse of cavalry](#), and their [inability to effectively employ air support](#). However, none of them have addressed one of the key processes that allows conventional armies to fight and win in a complex world: shaping operations in the deep area, as planned and executed within the targeting cycle. Looking through that lens, this fictional battle offers a number of lessons for the modern military professional, and bears examination.

First, a few terms for the uninitiated. We will avoid doctrinal definitions, and try to communicate the concepts in easily understandable terms. The 'deep area' is an area that generally falls outside of the range of your maneuver forces, but within the range of your fire support and air assets, including reconnaissance. This is where you will find the bulk of the enemy forces before the engagement, and some of their support elements during it. 'Shaping' is simply a nice word for killing, specifically in the deep area. The idea is to use the long-range fires and air support at your disposal to whittle down the enemy's numbers

to the point that you can defeat them in direct combat. 'Targeting' is the process by which you shape enemy forces, which we will discuss in detail below.

The targeting process in tactical Army elements is known as 'D3A.' This stands for Decide, Detect, Deliver, and Assess. In this process, the commander Decides what enemy targets to strike, the reconnaissance and intelligence elements Detect (find) the targets, the fires or air support assets Deliver (strike) on the target, and the targeting team collectively Assesses the effectiveness of the process as regards the given target. This is a cycle because the assessment from the end of the iteration informs the commander's decision in the next targeting iteration whether to re-engage the same target again or to move on to a new target. There are other processes, generally used in the joint and special operations communities, but the simplicity and effectiveness of D3A make it an ideal framework for this discussion. So, how well did the AoL target and shape the Night King's army?

Decide

The targeting process begins during the military decision making process (MDMP), wherein the G2/S2 targeting team prioritizes a high value target list (HVTL). This list is a way of identifying what assets the enemy will need to win the coming fight, based on their understanding of enemy capabilities, tactics, and anticipated courses of action. The entire targeting team, including fire supporters, intelligence analysts, and tactical air control party representatives, refines this list into the high payoff target list (HPTL), which is a list of what friendly forces need to destroy in order to win the fight. In the simplest terms, this is an assessment, leading some to say that we really practice A-D3A.

There are many ways to determine what the high payoff targets (HPTs) are, but one of the best is a target system analysis (TSA). The TSA recognizes that most military capabilities rely on interconnected pieces of the whole, such that destroying one key piece of the system will disable it entirely. A TSA of the undead army is quite simple. At the Battle of Winterfell, the Night King possessed no fire support or logistics (an undead army, it turns out, does not march on its stomach). His maneuver element consists entirely of light infantry supported by one (giant) heavy infantryman. He personally represents the totality of his intelligence and mission command warfighting functions (WfFs), with his dragon providing air support. One key note is that his maneuver forces also rely on him for survival. This makes the Night King personally the lynchpin for every one of his WfFs, the key piece of each system, and an obvious choice for the number one high-payoff target. His dragon gets a nod as number two, with the horde of infantrymen a distant third. This is clearly the right order of priorities, and the living did well here. Having prioritized the targets, the living targeting team, with the commander's approval, must now assign assets to detect and deliver on the target.

Detect

Having determined what to attack, the army must find the targets. The AoL had limited intelligence collection assets, but they used even those poorly. Cavalry, as discussed in other articles, is a reconnaissance asset, and the Dothraki did absolutely no collection before being committed to wholesale slaughter without even the benefit of effective artillery support. Through the use of small-party raids, probing attacks, or observation from the high ground on the enemy's flanks, they could have determined much information about the enemy's composition, disposition, and strength, and possibly even the Night King's location, before maneuver forces were decisively engaged. This would have enabled the targeting team to deliver a strike against one or more HPTs. However, their waste in the battle's first engagement ensured that this would not happen.

The S2 Bran committed the cardinal sin of an intelligence officer when he found key information regarding the enemy, and did not communicate it to his commander or the operations team. He effectively utilized his Raven UASs to detect HPT #1, but made no effort to pass this information on to those who could use it. This is on top of any human intelligence (HUMINT) capability that Bran had to detect the Night King through his telepathic connection, which was not depicted in the battle, but the viewer can reasonably assume happened. Bran would likely argue that it was the S6's fault, as he did not have effective communications back to the commander, but he should have recognized this and resolved the issue during the planning process.

Air support can double as both a detection and delivery asset (more on air support delivery options later). In this case, it was the only effective detection asset on the battlefield. We won't get into the silliness of the two key commanders personally conducting this part of the fight, but in the end, the dragons were the only effective asset committed for reconnaissance in the entire battle. This effort hit a major obstacle though, due to another planning failure. The living did not conduct proper mission analysis, including intelligence preparation of the battlefield. The AoL did not understand their operational environment, specifically weather. A blinding snowstorm – easily predicted if they had incorporated a staff weather officer (SWO) into MDMP and the targeting process – rendered their air assets nearly incapable of carrying out the assigned function. Understanding that SWOs were not readily available in Winterfell, literally anyone who had lived there when snow was on the ground could have probably recognized the threat, if they had simply followed the proper planning procedures. Due to personal courage beyond reason, and a bit of luck, the dragons still detected HPT #1 in the deep area, but it is a failure of planning and command that it came to that.

Deliver

After detecting the target, it is time to deliver the commander's desired effect. In the real world, this includes both lethal (bombs and artillery) and non-lethal (humanitarian aid, radio broadcast) effects. In Winterfell, however, lethal is the only option. This being the case, the asset most likely to succeed against the Night King is a dragon, so the dragons are assigned as the delivery asset to strike the HPT. This is both convenient, as they were also the primary (and only) detection asset, and realistic, as an aircraft assigned to strike a target is also usually the asset best positioned to find it.

As previously mentioned, many authors have already addressed the AoL's use of air support, so we will not dwell on it. We will, however, indulge in one point. Air support operates in three primary roles: close air support (CAS), air interdiction (AI), and strike coordination and reconnaissance (SCAR). In CAS, the aircraft is generally striking the enemy in close proximity to friendly forces, and generally controlled by the ground element. In AI, the aircraft conducts strikes on pre-planned targets, generally in the deep area, without direct control from the ground element. In SCAR, the aircraft is given a more 'hunter-killer' role, also in the deep area, wherein it operates in a specified area working off of a prioritized list of targets. Had they used their detection assets more effectively, the AoL targeting team might have been able to use the dragons in an AI role prior to the engagement, dealing serious damage against the enemy. There were no effective communications (S6 again?), ruling out most types of CAS, with the exception of the lit trench clearly demarcating the forward line of troops (FLOT), which allowed the dragons to provide some close air support later in the battle. However, the dragons were mostly limited to a SCAR role, which can be extremely effective, but due to limited communication with the ground element, prevents them from re-prioritizing targets quickly as conditions on the ground evolve.

Despite these challenges, Daenerys and her dragon fought through the planning and command failures, and managed to not only find the Night King in whiteout conditions, but to directly engage him with the dragon's most effective weapon system, its dragon fire. The AoL was able to successfully execute the delivery phase of the targeting cycle. With the capability to melt stone, one would think that a man who seems to be made primarily of ice would not stand a chance against dragon fire. One could argue that it was another intelligence failure that no one knew the enemy could sustain such a strike without damage, but it is hard to know how the S2 would have found this information. As it stands, however, the Night King laughs off the attack, which leads us to the final step of the cycle.

Assess

In the assessment phase, there are a number of things to assess. First are measures of performance (MOPs) – did we execute the plan as intended? (*e.g.* Did the bombs hit the target?) Next are measures of effectiveness (MOEs) – did the plan achieve the desired effect? (*e.g.* Was the tank destroyed?) Finally, a battle damage assessment, which is closely linked to the first two, allows the G2/S2 to update the current understanding of the enemy, thus enabling the commander to make effective, well-informed decisions – assuming, that is, that he hears the assessment.

As MOPs go, this one is fairly straightforward. Despite all of the planning and command failures, the dragon did, in fact place 'fire on target,' directly striking the Night King and successfully completing its measure of performance. The MOE, however, does not look as good. The dragon fire was completely ineffective against the HPT. The battle damage assessment of the strike, then, is that the enemy strength remains unchanged. This assessment should lead the commander, with histargeting team, to determine that a re-attack is required, and the dragon's failure should push his decision to engage with another asset. However, the air support asset was unable to communicate with the command element (where is the S6, anyway?), so while they knew the Night King was not dead because his hordes fought on, the commander and the rest of the army could not know that their plan had been ineffective and they needed to try something else. At this point, the targeting process should have begun again, but because of a failure in the ever-critical assess phase, it did not.

Conclusion

Had the targeting team completed the cycle effectively, and initiated a new cycle upon failure of the first, they could have provided much-needed information about the enemy, determined that the plan would not work, communicated this to the right people, and allowed for a dynamic decision to adjust the plan and re-attack. As it was, failures ranging from inept collection planning all the way to failed assessments led to a complete inability to effectively shape the deep fight. Thus, at the end of the day, the brunt of the fighting fell to the maneuver forces. If it were not for one audacious commander exercising prudent risk to achieve the commander's intent, the entire battle would have ended in disaster for the AoL. One can only hope that the Army, and the targeting team specifically, has learned its lessons and will be more effective in the battles to come.

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This article represents his own opinions, which are not necessarily those of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the federal government.

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