



Beyond the Schoolhouse: A Military Intelligence Officer's Lessons from Security Assistance Group-Ukraine

by First Lieutenant Daniel Vrablic

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Introduction

Achieving success in large-scale combat operations depends on the entire defense apparatus supporting the conflict—maneuver units, support units, and intelligence agencies, among others. I saw this first-hand during my three-month stint as an augmentee at Security Assistance Group-Ukraine (SAG-U) from July to October 2025. Seven months removed from the Military Intelligence Basic Officer Leaders Course (MIBOLC), I entered SAG-U as a joint staff intelligence operations (J-23) analyst charged with monitoring the Russo-Ukrainian conflict overnight, creating products that captured critical events and trends during each day's reporting period and providing assessments and forecasts 24 to 48 hours into the future.

Though the work seemed overwhelming at first, the skills and techniques I learned at MIBOLC laid a solid foundation for success. As a junior military intelligence officer (military occupational specialty/area of concentration 35A), I believe there is no better place to learn and develop in the Army than at SAG-U, and I know I will leverage the lessons I learned there to be a more lethal intelligence officer in any future combat operations.

The Five Lessons

I learned that effective intelligence officers must brief exceptionally, know their role within the larger formation, avoid overreliance on analytical lines, conduct disciplined pattern

analysis, and adapt rapidly to shifting conditions. I will discuss each of these in more detail.

Brief exceptionally. The old military maxim “be brief, be brilliant, be gone” should be a junior intelligence officer's credo. Simply put, being brief requires speaking your piece concisely without boring your target audience. Being brilliant means knowing your subject inside and out—not only the content, but also your area of responsibility (AOR). In my experience at SAG-U, I found that the fastest way to lose credibility and trust was to demonstrate insufficient knowledge of the AOR. For example, one morning, while briefing a portion of the AOR, I noted a minor change to troop movements I considered insignificant relative to the rest of my briefing. As I briefed it, I mischaracterized the location of a major city on the map. Unbeknownst to me, the change I thought was insignificant turned out to be one that senior leaders were watching closely, and I was admonished in front of the entire Joint Operations Center. One small mischaracterization damaged my credibility, and it took nearly two weeks to regain. During large-scale combat operations, where change is constant, you cannot afford to lose even two weeks' worth of trust. Mistakes will happen, but know your AOR.

Being brilliant also means reconciling the content of your brief with your audience's priorities. Understanding their priorities is just as important as knowing your material and how to present it. Determine what is important to your audience and prepare “back pocket” information for any follow-up questions. Providing granular details up front is probably unnecessary and will almost always invite more questions

for which you might not have an immediate answer. If you *don't* know the answer to a question, do not be afraid to say “I don't know”—but be sure to follow up later. Then, be gone!

Know your role. If you do not know where you fit within your organization, you will be ineffective. Large-scale combat operations encompass many people, resources, organizations, and domains of conflict. You will be a small yet significant part of that company, and you need to know your place in the fight. You may be tempted to overstretch yourself and dip into other people's work—but proceed with caution. Focus intently on providing top-notch intelligence preparation of the operational environment (IPOE) analysis—that is your foundation. If you are spread too thin and cannot provide IPOE subject matter expertise, you cannot do your job: an overstretched analyst is an ineffective one. If you feel you have sufficiently mastered your role and can assist the larger organization in other ways, however, you should. Aggressive learning sharpens your iron, expands your toolkit, and allows you to bring your newly acquired tools back to your original role to be even more lethal. In summary, you should understand where you fit in the picture, aggressively learn and improve to become a subject matter expert (SME), and then look outward to expand your toolkit.

Avoid overreliance on analytic lines. Overreliance on prior intelligence assessments degrades the analytic rigor your commander depends on to make decisions in large-scale combat operations. An *analytic line* is an individual or organization's process of fusing different sources of intelligence to create a comprehensive intelligence assessment, with any divergence from previously published assessments clearly identified and explained.¹ You may be reluctant to challenge intelligence assessments that have been passed to your echelon; this is an understandable sentiment, but it is important to understand the basis for those assessments. If you have questions, ask them. By following your own analytic line and creating your own intelligence assessments, you will provide instant value to your team. Think about where you believe the enemy will be, what the enemy will do, and with what purpose. Remember TPME: task, purpose, mission, and end state. If you or your organization are overly reliant on the analytic lines of other analysts, organizations, or agencies, remember that you are working with intelligence assessments based on assumptions with which you may not agree. You may possess intelligence that other analysts lack, and your final product may differ significantly from theirs.

Conduct pattern analysis. Junior intelligence officers must arm themselves with prior analysis of enemy actions to make accurate assessments that paint the operational picture moving forward. Pattern analysis is an analytical technique that helps intelligence personnel predict possible enemy future actions when little or no information is available about the

enemy. MIBOLC training includes pattern analysis techniques such as heat mapping, time event charts, and pattern of life analysis, among others, that might seem obsolete at first but will prove surprisingly valuable later. As a junior intelligence officer, your superiors *will* ask you for the latest trends and moving averages. This is where those “obsolete” techniques will prove their value. Should you choose not to use them, however, you can create a team “significant actions log” as a reliable reference. This log should include:

- ◆ Concise annotation of each significant action.
- ◆ Location where it occurred.
- ◆ Date time group.

As the J-23 night shift deputy, I served under a J-2 whom I briefed every morning before we briefed the Joint Operations Center. He emphasized time and space analysis of the products produced, which allowed us to better discern, from initial observations, whether the adversary deliberately targeted specific locations or facilities. This time-and-space analysis visually aided senior leaders in understanding where, specifically during the reporting period, the events occurred. Adding visual time and space analysis to your products during pattern analysis will increase situational understanding for your team, which is also crucial for arming your commander with the information they need to make critical decisions.

Adapt rapidly. During large-scale combat operations, be prepared to cover down and adapt. You may find yourself placed in roles that do not match your skill identifier or even your branch. For example, although I am a 35A Intelligence Officer, I had to quickly become knowledgeable about Russian long-range aviation and its posture to be successful at SAG-U. An assignment that aligns with your background and interests is certainly preferable, but in large-scale combat operations, that is a luxury. At the end of the day, products need to be made and distributed to senior leaders, and if they receive quality analysis, leaders are generally ambivalent about who produces them. Learn to learn on the fly and adapt to your assigned role as quickly as possible. In short, become a SME as soon as you can.

Change is constant, whether in day-to-day operations or in large-scale combat operations, and no one can say with certainty how long an assignment will last. Force structures, manning documents, and positions can change in the blink of an eye. At a minimum, as an intelligence officer, you should understand your role and responsibilities and be an IPOE SME—but you should also be prepared to assume the duties and responsibilities of other positions that may be unlike anything you ever expected.

Conclusion

I could not have asked for a more developmentally rich experience than my SAG-U rotation. I was able to work alongside

talented teammates in a joint and multinational environment within the only combatant command actively engaged in gathering lessons from intra-theater large-scale combat operations. At SAG-U, I learned the importance of briefing exceptionally, knowing my role, avoiding overreliance on analytic lines, conducting pattern analysis, and adapting quickly. Your unit commander and fellow officers are counting on you. Learn fast, adapt faster, and make yourself indispensable! 

Endnote

1. Robert W. Schmor and James S. Kwoun, "Analytic Tradecraft Standards: An Opportunity to Provide Decision Advantage for Army Commanders," *Military Review* 101, no. 2 (March-April 2021): 88, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MA-21/Kwoun-Tradecraft-Standards.pdf>.

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