

# ODIN'S RAVENS

From SITUATIONAL AWARENESS  
to UNDERSTANDING

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"Just like Odin's ravens, the requirement to have a wider and more effective understanding of the Contemporary Operating Environment is dependent upon good intelligence and ensuring that the commander gets the right information, to make decisions, at the right time."

**ONE OF THE CHIEF** gods in Norse mythology is Odin, a name which has links to violence and fury as well as to wisdom, sense and mindfulness.

Odin was a mighty warrior and leader whose exploits were captured in the earliest written sources across pre-Christian Nordic countries. A number of mythical artifacts were associated with him, including his spear (Gungir), which never missed its target; a pair of wolves (Geri and Freki) which sat by his side, reflecting his warrior status, and the twin ravens, Hugin and Munin (Norse, "thought" and "memory"), which brought Odin daily reports of enemies and, significantly, of wider affairs across the world. He was considered a wise king of the gods, a great and confident leader to his mythical war band, and a guarantor of victory in battle.

But, what has this to do with the JWC today? Odin's victories may seem irrelevant, but good leadership and military capabilities of precise targeting, effective intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance are all attributes as highly valued by the modern commander as they were in the darkest Norse myths. JWC may only be a few miles from the mythology and symbolism captured in the Stavanger Viking Museum (and centuries apart), but the relevance of wisdom, intelligence and foresight in battle endures and are as critical for NATO Joint Headquarters today, as it was for the Vikings a thousand years before. Doctrines such as AJP-02 (Allied Joint Publication — Intelligence), planning processes, like the Comprehensive Preparation of the Operational Environment (CPOE), and concepts, such as Knowledge Development (KD), are all key foundations in the search for "understanding".





«THE RELEVANCE OF WISDOM, INTELLIGENCE AND FORESIGHT IN BATTLE ENDURES, AS CRITICAL FOR NATO TODAY, AS IT WAS FOR THE VIKINGS A THOUSAND YEARS BEFORE.»

**Above, clockwise:** Prior to his assignment at JWC, the author (first photograph, second row) was Head of Intelligence for OP ATALANTA, countering Somali piracy off the Horn of Africa. His book "Amphibious Assault: Manoeuvre from the Sea" was published and issued to all serving Royal Marines Officers' in 2007. (Cont.) German forces operating a ground-based mobile surveillance system, here, a TPz Fuchs vehicle as part of NATO's UNIFIED VISION 2014 trial; a Mobile Reconnaissance Jamming System; Italian troops operating an Integrated Multisensor Exploitation Cell (I2MEC). Photographs by NATO.

The requirement to provide wider Situational Awareness (SA) to both the commander and the operational HQ staff has proved to be as mission critical in the foothills of the Hindu Kush as it was on the streets of Baghdad. How to ensure that *understanding* is sufficiently robust and well-informed, however, has been a matter of considerable doctrinal reflection in recent years. The debate was shaped by events in Afghanistan and Iraq, focusing predominantly on counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns, while seeking to reflect a wider appreciation of cultural, societal, religious, economic and political dynamics in those operational theatres. The pendulum swung from a predominant Cold War focus on *what* the threat was to a comprehensive appreciation of the situation (*who, where, why and how*), evolving more broadly.

Commanders at all levels have to take responsibility for intelligence. Whether the mission is COIN or fighting the Somali pirates or NATO Article 5, all intelligence-led operations are dependent upon timely, accurate and detailed information. The way to achieve this is not solely through the exploitation of a variety of sources and agencies, but in devising

and prioritizing smart, relevant questions — information requirements — about the environment as well as the enemy. Just like Odin's ravens, the requirement to have a wider and more effective understanding of the Contemporary Operating Environment (COE) is dependent upon good intelligence, and ensuring that the commander gets the right information, to make decisions, at the right time.

As Major General Michael T. Flynn's article "Fixing Intel: A Blueprint of Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan" (published in 2010) highlighted, exploiting knowledge about the localized contexts of an operation was key, and could only be achieved if changes were made, stating: "Analysts must absorb information with the thoroughness of historians, organize it with the skill of librarians, and disseminate it with the zeal of journalists. They must embrace open-source, population-centric information as the lifeblood of their analytical work. They must open their doors to anyone who is willing to exchange information."

It is insufficient just to have the platforms and technical capability, but NATO also needs suitably qualified and trained staff who

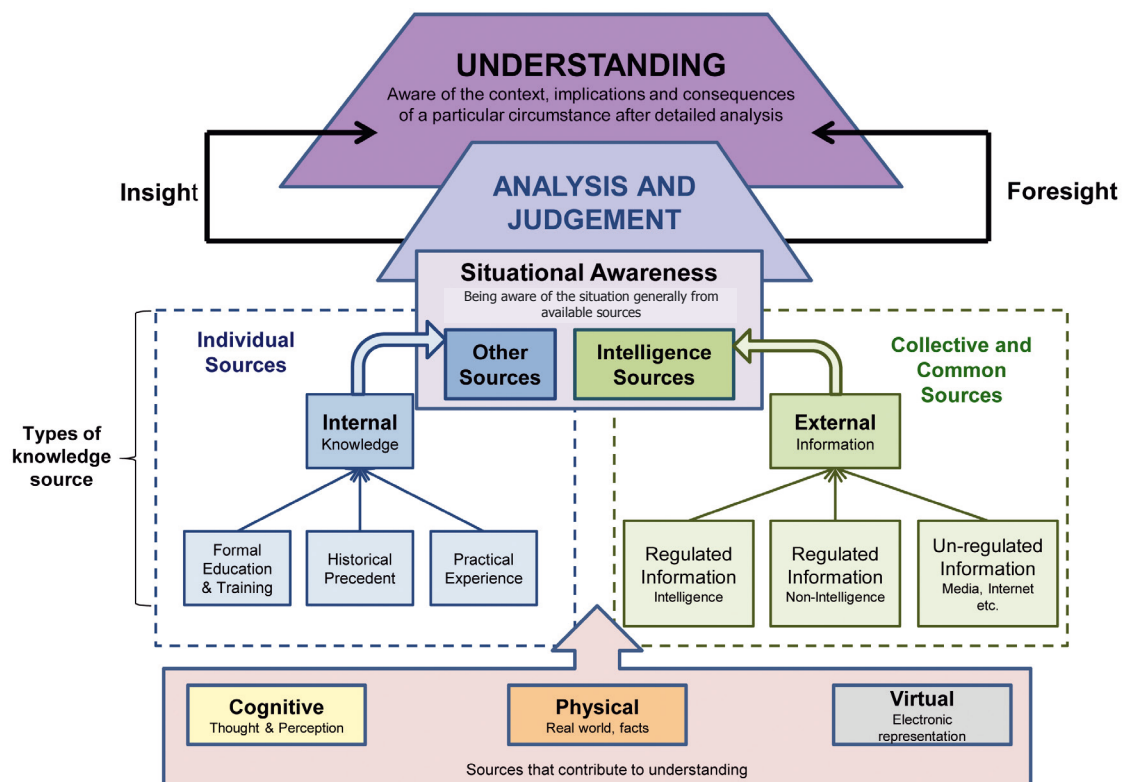
can then scrutinize that information. Analysis is the capstone. They need to ask the "*so what?*" question, and keep asking it until there are no more deductions to be made or conclusions to be drawn. Of critical importance to their effort is how a commander orders that intelligence apparatus to undertake collection, processing, dissemination and direction.

In an article reflecting the key part *understanding* has to play, Brigadier General Ian Thomas OBE, writing in the British Army Review (BAR, Winter 2013) said: "The principal military utility of *understanding* is to equip the commander to make the best possible decision in the circumstances he faces, with the resources at his disposal. Predictive foresight is at the heart of *understanding*; this maximizes the odds of taking the most appropriate action to address the operational problem we face."

Understanding and intelligence support to joint operations continue to evolve, not only in light of those experiences from operations during the last decade, but also of those that are being shaped by the open-source information. As Major General Flynn reflects, the notion that this type of information is "second-



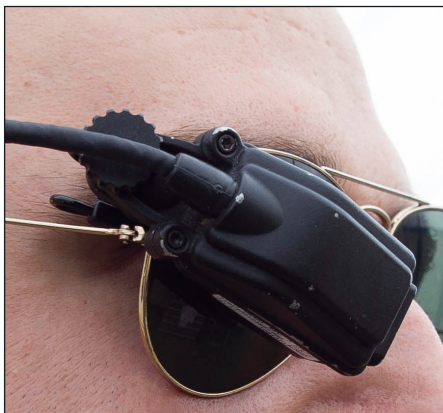




class" is a "dangerous and outmoded cliché...the real intelligence hero is Sherlock Holmes, not James Bond". What is critical is that whatever the type and nature of intelligence (in terms of confidence in information and reliability of the source), the understanding of the commander and his or her staff is key.

In summary, *understanding*, within a military context, has been defined as the perception and interpretation of a particular situation in order to provide context, insight and foresight required for effective decision making. Analysis of this information, Situational Awareness,

NATO forces operating a tethered aerostat, providing persistent ground surveillance. Video can be transmitted to ground forces via small eye monitor. Photograph by NATO.



ness, provides greater comprehension (insight) of the problem. Situational Awareness is the appreciation of *what* is happening, but not necessarily *why* it is happening. Judgments based on this comprehension provide understanding of the problem (foresight). This is also summarized in the above diagram from the UK's Joint Concepts and Doctrine Centre (JCDC) Joint Doctrine Publication on Understanding (JDP-04). The distinction between *Situational Awareness* and *understanding* is the level of analysis and depth of comprehension that allows judgment to be applied effectively. Good judgment, as Odin knew, is everything. There are areas, however, which require continued effort and focus. This requires a shift in ethos in terms of a duty to share proactively, a greater requirement to understand not only adversaries, but allies, neutral actors and ourselves, and it requires staff who can operate in complex, ambiguous and rapidly shifting operational environments.

It is no longer sufficient to know about adversaries and their capabilities, there is a need to understand the context within which adversaries operate, their institutions within which they live and detailed information about their cultures, fears, perceptions, motivations and history. *Understanding* is not only dependent upon insight and foresight, but also on taking *the appropriate action*. The implications of *understanding* for commanders and joint HQ

staff is as much an attitude of mind as it is also the beginning of a process or activity. However, as Brigadier General Ian Thomas reflects, it is easier to explain than actually "do". The complexity of modern operations produces a greater need for contextual intelligence, which uses a wide range of sources to develop understanding of the operating environment. It is not about a process per se, but *a way of thinking and analyzing*; appreciating that the Cold War-style binary comparison of Red/Blue force numbers and capabilities is no longer sufficiently sophisticated for the myriad of threats in the current operating environment.

The myth of Odin and the information gathered by his ravens reflect a metaphor upon which modern military comprehension — leading to greater *understanding* — has parallels today. It is not solely about reporting the picture, but also about analyzing all of that information, making the appropriate judgment once received, and then acting on it. Developing knowledge and enhancing Situational Awareness are the first steps, but optimizing that *understanding* is as critical today as it was for Odin. The ability to imagine future scenarios and plan for them is not just an attribute that the ravens and Odin possessed, but one which we should continually endeavour to exploit in order for us to adequately prepare to meet future challenges. ✦