



# Navigating the Human Terrain Using Face to Face Research and Analysis (F2RA)

**Presented below are extracts of a lecture presented by Glevum Associates Founder Andrew Garfield at the 2011 Special Forces Summit held in Tampa in December 2011.**

### **All Communications like All Politics is Local**

We used to describe the civilian population as being “on the battlefield”. The reality is that in most of the conflicts we will fight over the next 20 years, the civilian population “is the battlefield”. We are engaged in a war of ideas and our goal is to take and hold the key terrain – the Human Terrain. Given this reality, this briefing will examine some of the challenges still impeding our ability to fully understand the civilian population or Human Terrain – the consequences of which the SOF Warrior will typically encounter first and most often. These perspectives are based on the insights and experience that Glevum Associates has derived from executing one of the largest human terrain research efforts ever conducted.

This effort has involved over 700,000 face-to-face interviews undertaken in Afghanistan since 2007, in Iraq since 2008 and more recently in Yemen and Libya. These interviews have been collected using a unique multidisciplinary research approach developed by Glevum called Face to Face Research and Analysis or F2RA and known in the Army as Social Science Research and Analysis or SSRA. This approach combines focus groups, and depth interviews, with local media monitoring, extensive indigenous subject matter expert networks, deployable behavioral observations teams, deployed indigenous ethnographers, local archival research, social media exploitation, and polling, underpinned and orchestrated using the Intelligence Community’s proven all-source research collection management approach (CCIRM).

## **Background – A War of Ideas**

In order to effectively engage with and positively influence key leaders and influencers, the general population and even enemy supporters and fighters, it is vital that all deployed personnel intimately understand the complex human terrain or geography in each Area of Responsibility (AOR). Of course this is necessary to ensure that our own operations are properly planned and successfully implemented. However, intimate knowledge of the human terrain is even more vital in the COIN and Peace Support operations because our enemy in this fight invariably understands each contested population far better than we do.

We regularly forget that our insurgent or terrorist adversary typically shares a similar ideological, cultural and/or ethnic background with the population in which they hide and operate. This does not guarantee that they will not fall foul of religious, cultural and social norms, as Al Qaeda eventually did in Iraq. However cultural, religious and ethnic similarities are still a significant advantage for groups like the Afghan Taliban. At a minimum, these similarities provide insurgents with message authority for some audiences. They can also, instinctively and by design, tap into shared narratives and a common faith or political idea, albeit one that they have often significantly distorted. They understand, often share and can easily manipulate preexisting grievances, enmities and hatreds and use these issues and emotions to maintain a sizable community support base. They can also exploit ethnic and clan loyalties, traditional and religious leadership, and formal and informal legal systems to exert and maintain their control of a population who fear and often resent outside intrusions and the impact of modernity.

The Taliban for example deploys compelling arguments that appeal to key segments of the Afghan population. They argue that support for them will lead to the redress of individual and community grievances; restoration of honor and respect; protection of traditions, community and faith; revenge for real and perceived

injustices and casualties; purification of Islam: and/or the return of Muslim and/or ethnic power and prosperity, compelling arguments to disenfranchised and angry Afghans. Most other insurgents have deployed and exploited similar arguments.

Insurgent groups like the Taliban also expertly manipulate and exploit both traditional communications means and modern media, combined with deadly attacks; in order to extend their influence, export their ideology, publicize their actions, undermine the morale of opponents and reduce confidence in the supported Government and US forces, thereby enhancing their own image, reputation and credibility.

### **Better Target Audience Understanding**

It is therefore vital that all operations and especially SOF actions and supporting information activities are underpinned by an ongoing and extensive effort to establish and maintain a very detailed understanding of all relevant population segments or local interest groups and the multiplicity of identifies these persons and communities have. This understanding must then be significantly enhanced once specific audience segments have been identified and before they are targeted. Such an effort will enable us to identify how best to engage, interdict or communicate with each segment of the population; determine who they are; who their key influencers are; how they view their Government, the enemy, each other and us; and what they need and want. If kill capture operations are planned such knowledge is also vital in order to help determine who to target, how such operations will be perceived and how locals may respond.

Armed with this level of deep socio-cultural understanding, our messaging and other actions can address each community's perceptions, concerns, issues, grievances, fears, needs and wants, while respecting their culture, traditions and beliefs. Our direct actions can be targeted to achieve desired effects without further

undermining local support for the supported government and US interests. Without this knowledge we risk failure.

Unfortunately, our operations and information campaigns are still, all too often, based on a simplistic and generalized understanding of the audience being selected and targeted. Alexander Dumas said, “All generalizations are dangerous not least this one”. Yet it seems that our target audience understanding is typically superficial and generalized at best. This is a very disappointing conclusion given how much energy and funding has been devoted to this effort over the last five to ten years. The next section of this briefing will outline some of the specific shortfalls and challenges inhibiting our current effort to better understand the Human Terrain followed by a recommended new approach that is ideally suited to the needs of the SOF Warrior.

### **Polls Are Not the Answer to Every Question**

It is disappointing that even after ten years there is still an overreliance on polling as a primary tool for human terrain research. While the results often look great at the BOA or in briefings to the press, it is often the wrong tool or a useful but excessively costly tool with a long lead-time that is simply not cost effective. Even when needed, polling is often flawed because those developing the instruments do not understand the community they are questioning and develop instruments that are culturally flawed or too long and overly complicated. There are many better quicker and cheaper ways to get the answers the SOF Warrior needs.

### **To Little Too Late**

It is of course a statement of the obvious that its too late to develop a common understanding of the human terrain in a given area – say East Africa – after the first SOF teams have deployed. Of course, it is possible to build up an overview of a country like Kenya or Uganda fairly quickly using experts and open source

reporting. However rarely does this reporting provide sufficient breadth to develop a broad understanding of all of the relevant population segments that must be engaged or targeted, nor does one normally find sufficient depth of information to fully understand these complex and divergent communities. Almost always we are forced to rely on “off the shelf” information that is not current, especially where conflict has already begun to disrupt the dynamics within key communities. Nor can up to date information be obtained quickly once SOF teams have deployed, because it takes time to establish, test, task and receive information from reliable indigenous field research teams and trustworthy local Subject Matter Experts. This process must begin well in advance of deployment and must be maintained to ensure that a robust research and analysis capability is available when needed. This does not have to be a costly undertaking and is a significant force enabler fully justifying the investment.

### **Overreliance on Technology**

The physical terrain can be effectively mapped and observed by technology, the human terrain cannot. Certainly not without a comprehensive F2RA/SSRA type collection effort combined with the effective calibration of the soldier sensor. Some technology can help the SOF Warrior to understand the human terrain but without reliable and timely data, this technology is of very limited utility. And yet hundreds of millions of dollars is being invested in technology including geographical information systems and social network modeling programs and only a fraction of that amount on F2RA/SSRA type data collection. In an age of limited defense dollars a little less spent on technology could help fund a comprehensive countrywide district and village focused face-to-face collection effort in every country of interest to the United States.

### **No Common Operating Picture.**

Another significant problem is the fact that multiple organizations and headquarters conduct similar overlapping and duplicative research on the same population segments, often using widely differing methodologies, sample plans, instruments, and contractors, resulting in substantially different conclusions being drawn. This is extremely wasteful, especially at a time of greatly reduced budgets, and can often present commanders with conflicting and confusing insights. What is needed is a process similar to the Intel Community's CCIRM process for all source collection. It is certainly progress that there is now forum for cooperation in ISAF that links all of the varied HT efforts undertaken there. But cooperation is not coordination and does not result in the development of a COP. The CCIRM process would ensure that all information requirements are collected, understood and prioritized and that would further ensure that F2RA type research is conducted in a coordinated, timely, and cost effective manner. This will lead to the development of a single agreed common understanding of the population in each AOR, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of our operations.

### **Sweeping Generalizations**

Going back to Dumas and his statement that all generalizations are dangerous including this one, it is disquieting that all too often the media and some officials and staff officers make sweeping assessments about the situation in countries like Afghanistan based on national samples of typically less than 2,000 respondents. In Afghanistan with its ethnic diversity and sectarianism and with an ongoing, and complex insurgency being fought to varying levels of intensity in multiple areas, it is essential that F2RA is conducted from the district level down to the village level and not the provincial level and above, as is so often the case now. For example, in Khost Province, in 2009, a provincial level survey suggested that the overwhelming majority of the population was supportive of the Government. However, by conducting district level research, the F2RA team discovered that some districts

were overwhelming supportive of the Afghan Government, while in others, the majority of the population openly admitted to supporting the Taliban. And even within some of these districts there were enclaves of either Government or Taliban support further complication assessments. A provincial survey could not hope to capture this diversity, even less so a national survey. It is therefore vital that assessments are based on district level research designed to ensure that areas of significant tension or dissatisfaction are not missed or community needs and wants ignored.

### **F2RA – An Immediate Solution**

It is of course easy to criticize current efforts and far harder to execute a comprehensive solution. However a proven alternative does exist - the Glevum F2RA process. This is a longitudinally proven process can aid the SOF Warrior to fully understand and navigate the human terrain in any country they deploy too. It will ensure that they can identify Population Leverage Points to aid mission success. It can also be used identify human obstacles in advance, which can then be circumvented or eliminated. And it can assist the warrior to seize and hold the key Human Terrain.

The F2RA capability is based on a combination of the Intel Community's successful CCIRM process and multidisciplinary social science, market and political research techniques and is executed in Five Phases:

Direction

Development

Collection

Analysis

Dissemination



## Team Glevum Proprietary Information

During the initial direction phase of the F2RA process, a dedicated and experienced Research Manager develops a prioritized Research Collection Plan or RCP based on our clients specific information requirements. This process ideally begins in advance with the development of an intimate understanding of the mission and typical information requirements. Basically, what do you want to know and why do you want to know it. Armed with this knowledge, when the first operational Information Requirements are received, the F2RA team already understands the context of such requirements and how the information is going to be used. This ensures that the right capabilities are selected to obtain timely and accurate answers. Each RCP will recommend to the end user how the F2RA team intends to answer each IR using which research method or combination of methods. Often the F2RA team will suggest an alternative approach based on their experience that is more likely to secure the answers needed. This can create some tension with end users but those who see the value of this approach soon overcome their concerns.

The F2RA team would use a combination of the following research methods:

- Depth Interviews & Focus Groups
- Indigenous Subject Matter Experts
- District Observation Team (DOTs conduct direct observations of patterns of activity and behavior and conduct informal interviews)
- Media Monitoring
- Indigenous Deployed Ethnographers
- Local Archival Research
- Polling of all types including standing panels which can significantly speed up the collection effort while at the same time reducing costs

This combination of methods enables the team to undertake research on every topic of importance to the SOF Warrior including the following:

- Basic socio-cultural factors and key demographics
- Ethnic/Tribal identity and key influencers/leaders
- Attitudes & Opinions

## Team Glevum Proprietary Information

- Governance (including elections)
- Security (including military and justice sector)
- Sources of instability and adversary support
- Religion
- Economy, Industry & Markets
- Services & Infrastructure
- Rule of Law
- Means/methods of communication and expression
- Quality of life & community needs and wants
- Perceptions of performance/effectiveness/behavior of U.S., Coalition, supported government and anti-government elements.

Once the RCP has been approved, the F2RA team will then execute an accelerated research development phase, that has been refined to ensure that even highly complex and lengthy survey instruments and sample plans can be developed, tested, approved, translated, printed, and field in a matter of days. On occasions, end users have provided all of the questions they want answered, which are then tested and validated by the F2RA team. However, most often the team receives an overarching IR and then develops the relevant instrument, guide or questionnaire. This is the most cost effective method because particularly for polls, end users typically lack either survey methodology skills or an understanding of what questions can or cannot be asked within selected communities.

For entirely new subject areas, ideally the collection effort would begin with qualitative research to ensure that the F2RA team fully understands the subject matter and subject audience before we move to more costly and slower quantitative research. Often qualitative is all that is needed to provide reliable actionable answers, which the SOF warrior can utilize quickly. Only if statistical evidence is needed or survey-specific IRs are received, does the team recommend using a follow-up survey, which is costly and time consuming. Experience has shown that using a combination of focus groups or depth interviews along with local SMEs

## Team Glevum Proprietary Information

DOTs and Media Monitoring can provide commanders with reliable actionable answers in a matter of days and no more than a few weeks, rather than the months that a survey will take.

Once instruments, questionnaires and guides are developed and approved by the end user, they are delivered to the F2RA indigenous Field Research Teams (FRT) who execute the collection phase of our process. FRTs are another critical element of the F2RA process. These are local vendors who employ locally recruited, vetted, trained and tested pollsters, interviewers, moderators, SMEs and investigators. They are prepared and deployed under the supervision of the F2RA research team. This supervision ensures that field research effort is conducted reliably, safely and expeditiously and the end user is immediately alerted to delays. While in the field, the F2RA team will confirm with the end user how the analysis is to be conducted and how the findings are to be reported.

Once data has been returned it is processed as quickly as possible and the analytical phase begins immediately. This phase has also been refined to ensure that reports are delivered in less than 20 working days from receipt of processed data, even for highly complex reports with over 200 tables and slides.

The F2RA process concludes with the Dissemination Phase during which interim and final reports are delivered and briefings provided as requested. In three years, two very small F2RA research teams, one in Iraq, the other Afghanistan, comprising just 4-6 analysts in each, delivered over 500 major reports on more than 50 topics covering all aspects of governance, security and quality of life.

Bottom line – the F2RA process works. It has been refined in Iraq and Afghanistan over a period of more than three years. In Iraq by late 2009, an F2RA team comprising only six analysts and managers was developing and fielding five major surveys per month involving over 34,000 respondents, covering all eighteen provinces, producing five survey reports per month each typically containing over

## Team Glevum Proprietary Information

150 charts and slides. Additionally, this team developed and fielded five major qualitative projects per month involving of hundreds of depth interviews, and dozens of focus groups and SME projects. So far, in Iraq, this team has conducted over 500,000 survey interviews, 5,500 depth interviews and 600 focus groups and continues to support State Department Monitoring and Evaluation efforts.

In Afghanistan, in October this year alone the F2RA team developed and fielded 15 major research projects including seven surveys covering all 34 provinces and multiple districts involving more than 18,000 interviews. The data from these surveys has been delivered in less than two months from receipt of the IRs. In contrast, and by way of comparison a major polling company took five months to complete a survey of only 16 districts. In total, the Afghan F2RA team has executed over 300 research projects in Afghanistan, and executed more than 250,000 survey interviews and thousands of depth interviews, focus groups, SME interviews and district level observation projects.

An F2RA team will use multiple FRTs using hundreds of tested and trusted field workers. This proven process of identifying, selecting and supporting multiple local FRTs ensures that a deployed F2RA team can reach any location and almost all population segments of interest. For example over the last year the Afghan team has conducted a series of depth interviews with more than 70 Taliban fighters, the results of which will be publish in February 2012, once the last interviews are completed. F2RA teams have also conducted similar research in Yemen and Libya demonstrating that the F2RA process is replicable in any theater or country.

### **Summary**

In summary, in order for the SOF Warrior to have all of the human terrain data they need when they need it, the following approach is advocated:

## Team Glevum Proprietary Information

- Implement the F2RA process early and in all countries/provinces/districts of interest. It is a low cost and rapidly scalable capability that can provide a detailed baseline and constantly updated common understanding of all key elements of the human terrain in any AOR.
- Develop a single common operating picture for each AOR by ensuring that all IRs from multiple commands are properly coordinated, prioritized and addressed through a single unified process. This will eliminate duplication, save money and avoid confusion.
- Resist the temptation to see polling as the answer to every question and to rely on national polling to determine the attitudes of countries as complex and diverse as Afghanistan. Most questions can be answered more quickly and cheaply using other methods and when polling is needed its best done at the lowest level – usually the district level.