# The Map in Field Reporting



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*Use and misuse of an old, felicitous device for the communication of intelligence.*

**Louis Thomas**

Maps have long been essential tools in intelligence reporting because, in locating features of intelligence interest with respect to one another and with respect to geographic coordinates or other reference systems, they do a basic job that cannot be done as quickly or as satisfactorily by verbal description. Not infrequently a map constitutes the heart of a field report, conveying the whole message with little need for support in the accompanying text. More commonly, however, the text tells *What* and the map tells *Where*. Maps accompanying reports also serve to some extent as graphic abstracts to help end users confronted with a multitude of source documents decide quickly whether a given report offers anything pertinent to a problem at hand. In this role the map often has much to do with determining whether the detailed textual body of the report is read and used. Clear maps invite follow-up reading; cryptic or confusing ones discourage it.

With some risk of oversimplification it can be said that the maps commonly used in reporting intelligence data from the field are of three basic types: (1) pre-existing printed maps or charts on which the newly acquired intelligence data are plotted, (2) field-prepared sketch maps based in part (especially as regards background information) on pre-existing maps or charts, and (3) sketch maps based solely on field observation, no data of any kind being taken from pre-existing . maps. All three of these types of map have been and are being used,

successfully and otherwise, as integral parts of field reports. Which one is most suitable for a given purpose depends, *inter alia*, on the nature and importance of the data being reported, the map and intelligence know-how of the reporting officer, what maps and other facilities are available to him, and the anticipated end use of the reported data.

# Advantages and Hazards

The first type, data plottings on a pre-existing printed map, since it generally gives good orientation in relation to known features, facilitates rapid interpretation by those who receive and exploit the report. It is particularly suitable for areas of continuing intelligence interest, those often reported on. An obstacle to its use is that expendable copies of suitable up-to-date maps, or facilities for reproducing them, are not always available where the reports are assembled. An example of this type is shown in Figure 1, a hydrographic chart on which circled letters referring to the body of the report are used to identify features reported on. If a brief legend naming the features designated by these letters had been superimposed on the face of the chart its value as a reporting tool would have been enhanced.

The second type, the sketch based in part on one or more pre-existing maps, is the one most commonly used in field reports. It has many advantages and disadvantages. Important among the former are the freedom it gives to select and adapt features of existing maps, the fairly good orientation it generally provides in relation to known features, and the ease with which it can be interpreted if it is well compiled. One disadvantage is that maps of this type can give false confirmation of information from other sources unless they sharply distinguish the data taken from pre-existing maps from the data being reported as current observation. Another is that this method invites preparation of cryptic, incomplete maps. Reporting officers sometimes assume that the base maps to which they orient their observational data will be readily available at all places where their reports are exploited. They then limit their sketches to the bare outlines of features on which they are presenting new information. This causes much waste and gnashing of teeth in offices where the reports could and should be used but can't because the large-scale maps needed to interpret them are not

available. Figures 2 and 3 are good and bad examples, respectively, of this type of report map.

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The third type of map, the sketch based on field observation only, is one of man's oldest intelligence vehicles. When well prepared and clearly identified as to origin, the field sketch has a great advantage in that it causes little confusion between data reflecting current observation and prior information repeated from other sources. Field sketches are virtually worthless, however, when they are so poorly prepared that their message cannot readily and reliably be linked to known features.

Figure 4 is an example of this type.

Ultimately, the greatest weakness of sketches based solely on observation may be the latitude they allow for individual expression.[1] People see the same things in different ways and often, despite training and briefing, with entirely different conceptions of what is important. Observation sketches of an industrial plant prepared independently by two observers at about the same time may be so different that the reader can hardly believe they both saw the same plant.

# Same Precepts

The many different purposes field report maps serve make it difficult to lay down universally applicable rules for preparing them. Exceptions, special cases, and unique problems inevitably arise to becloud the guideposts. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that observation of the principles set forth below would contribute significantly toward making such maps as useful as possible.

1. The map should be such as to convey quickly at least the gist of its message on the single page, without requiring reference to the

body of the report, large-scale maps, grid systems, or other aids. This means, for one thing, that it should invariably carry a legend on its face, if only a brief version of one given in detail in the body of the report.

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2. If some special purpose to be served by a map requires that it be oriented to a particular base map or grid, a second identification or orientation should be included in order to permit more general exploitation also. If the observations being reported must be oriented, for example, in relation to the Universal Transverse Mercator grid or to the sheets of an Army Map Service 1:25,000 series in order to fill a technical requirement, they should also be oriented to geographic coordinates,[2] place names, or prominent landmark features to make the report's message clear to all readers, including those who do not have quick and easy access to large-scale maps or explanations of the UTM or other military grid systems.

3. Reporting officers should tell, insofar as possible, how their report maps got that way, i.e., who observed what, when, from where, and under what circumstances. A sharp distinction should be maintained between data based on observation and information drawn from other sources such as pre-existing maps.

4. Officers preparing or revising report maps should be generous in including orientation aids-place names, landmark features physical and cultural, distance and direction to well-known features, etc. Better too many of these than too few.

Reports from the field and maps that accompany them are often processed by middleman reviewers and editors before being distributed to the intelligence community at large. In the opinion of this writer, the principles outlined above should in general be applied by the middlemen

as well as by the field reporters, provided, first, that any doubts indicated by the original sources be left in unless they can be resolved, and second, that the middleman's corrections, additions, and comments be set unmistakably apart from the data that came from the field.

More prior planning between field personnel and headquarters may alleviate some of the problems that report maps present. It is important, however, that in the course of such planning the field or field-bound personnel be given a cross-section of the needs, interests, and requirements of all those likely to use the prospective reports. Prior planning oriented sharply to the interests and preferences of a few small segments of the intelligence community may work against the interests of the whole. For example, a field man being briefed in Washington may be sold by component Z on the desirability of using a particular foreign map as a base in preparing sketch maps on a certain subject. From the special viewpoint of component Z the foreign map is ideal, but from the viewpoint of the whole intelligence community, which will also try to use the reports, an Army Map Service sheet would be more satisfactory.

It has become conventional in preparing field report maps not to rely on symbols but to use words or legend-oriented letters and numbers to identify important features, as illustrated below.

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Symbols alone are as a rule used only to indicate relatively unimportant background data. This conventional procedure has been developed empirically, and the present writer, for one, believes that no overall good would come from attempting to replace it in the foreseeable future with a system of symbols.

*intelligence import*, in relation to each other and in relation to known features or fixed points, clearly and in a way that any reader can interpret quickly, it is a good map even if it is not particularly neat or pleasing to the eye; if it does not accomplish these objectives it is a poor one, regardless of aesthetic excellence.

The field report map has been a basic intelligence tool since time immemorial. The foreseeable crowding of man and his works on the surface of the earth augurs greater rather than less use of such maps in the future. The general application of simple principles to improve their

quality and clarity can contribute significantly to the accurate communication of locational relationships and thus to the ultimate effectiveness of many intelligence operations.

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1 An attempt has been made to ease this problem by distributing to the field a pre-printed sketch grid accompanied by simple instructions (Sketch Map Grid GR 1384, 6-53). This plotting aid is intended to encourage sketch map compilers-interrogating officers or others-to take note of direction and distance and, most important of all, to try to bring into their sketches the element of scale. To date, it has been helpful in some cases, but whether it can be regarded as a complete success is still uncertain.

2 The special purposes of some members of the intelligence community are best served by locational data expressed in terms of military grid references, whereas others prefer geographic coordinates (latitude and longitude), which permit working out locations on almost any map without recourse to large-scale coverage, detailed explanations of grid systems, conversion formulae, etc. Giving key locations (or at least one locational fix on each report map) both by geographic coordinates and by military grid reference seems to be the only certain way of serving both needs. If giving both is impractical, it seems to the present writer that geographic coordinates should be chosen: locations so expressed can be interpreted quickly and easily at most points in the intelligence community with materials on hand, as not all military grid references can be.

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