

# MISSION COMMAND IN OPERATION ATLANTIC RESOLVE: LEADERSHIP LAB

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*“No matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to anticipate precisely the character of future conflict. The key is to not be so far off the mark that it becomes impossible to adjust once that character is revealed.”*

— Sir Michael Howard<sup>1</sup>

While the science of armed conflict may change over time, the art of leadership is a constant that enables U.S. forces to win in complex operating environments (OEs). In order to develop the capacity to win the future fight, units below the brigade level need to seize every opportunity to develop leadership and unit competence. Training for future conflict is a challenging task that emphasizes the creation of lethal teams and competent leaders that can confidently operate in complex situations. While Combat Training Centers (CTCs) can replicate OE complexity with an unpredictable, thinking opposing force (OPFOR), operational missions provide the challenges of real-world problems.<sup>2</sup> During Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR), the complex and challenging OE provides the ideal opportunity to practice mission command and develop adaptive subordinate leaders. It is also a grass-roots application of the U.S. Army Operating Concept (AOC).

## Overview of the AOC

The AOC describes the challenges the U.S. Army faces in a modern OE characterized by a capable but elusive enemy, ubiquitous media, dense urban areas, technological proliferation, and increased momentum of human interaction.<sup>3</sup> As demonstrated by the unconventional tactics employed by Russia during the 2014 annexation of Crimea or subsequent intervention in eastern Ukraine, adversaries will seize opportunities generated by the modern OE.<sup>4</sup>

In order to win in the modern OE against a hybrid threat, the AOC envisions a joint task force (JTF) with interagency and multinational capabilities. This JTF integrates the efforts of multiple allies and partners while maintaining the capacity to deploy and operate globally.<sup>5</sup> Further, it must be able to understand the situation through action by integrating intelligence and operations while conducting combined arms operations at a high operational tempo. In support of the JTF, units below the brigade level must be able to operate in the same complex environment the JTF seeks to shape while conducting combined arms operations integrated into the campaign plan.



Soldiers with the 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment conduct a squad training exercise in Adazi, Latvia, on 28 January 2015. (Photo by PFC Jaccob Hearn)

Training to gain the skills to win in a complex OE requires an equally complex training environment. As GEN David Perkins, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) commander, stated, "...the environment of the future is going to be a very complex world. It's going to be multinational; change very quickly. You have to have multiple options in multiple domains with multiple partners. So, when you take a look at U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR), it's almost custom made to do that. It's in the middle of a very complex part of the world. Every day they're working with multiple partners; they're working in multiple domains..."<sup>6</sup>

### **Background on the OAR Mission**

OAR began in April 2014 in response to Russian intervention in Ukraine. Elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade executed a series of combined multinational airborne operations into Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. This established a U.S. company-sized ground force in each country with a battalion headquarters providing overall command. OAR would later expand from the original OAR-North (OAR-N) countries to include the OAR-South (OAR-S) countries of Romania and Bulgaria. Mission command was provided by the USAREUR regionally aligned force. In addition to the deployment of ground forces, the U.S. enhanced participation in several other land, sea, air, and Special Operations Forces (SOF) exercises.<sup>7</sup>

In line with the AOC's vision on regional engagement, the purpose of OAR is to assure regional NATO allies of U.S. commitment to collective security while deterring Russian aggression in the region.<sup>8</sup> At the operational level, the focus remains on multinational training intended to increase allied interoperability, enhance shared understanding, and demonstrate freedom of movement along interior lines of the NATO alliance. Further, success in OAR requires that operational units do more than just train. Participating units have to be part of winning beyond the tactical realm; as GEN Perkins argues, to realize the AOC, "When we say win, we say this occurs at the strategic level. If you want to win at the strategic level, you have to deliver all elements of national power, not just firepower."<sup>9</sup>

### **Setting the Conditions for OAR Mission Command (April-December 2014)**

For the 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment (3/2 CR), setting the conditions for OAR began upon redeployment from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in April 2014. Key tasks for the transition to a task-organized battalion capable of conducting OAR mission command included equipment reset, manning, and training as part of the Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) cycle.<sup>10</sup>

During the six months between redeployment from OEF to receipt of OAR mission in September 2014, 3/2 CR executed the reset portion of the ARFORGEN cycle to set the conditions for future missions. Common to most redeploying units, 3/2 CR experienced a high personnel turnover, which generated personnel replacement issues of retraining on individual and collective tasks. Further, key leaders throughout the squadron changed to include the squadron command team, troop command teams, and many primary staff members. The changeover of key leaders and other personnel challenged the organization's continuity of operational knowledge.

In response to these challenges, 3/2 CR executed training from August to December focused on re-mastering the basics. During this time, the squadron completed individual skills training and testing through events such as Expert Infantryman Badge, Excellence in Armor, and Expert Field Medical Badge. The squadron also conducted a skills-based selection and training program to reconstitute the squadron scout platoon. Troops then executed small arms and crewed weapons ranges culminating in Stryker gunnery. Recognizing that OAR would take place in the ARFORGEN window for collective training, a troop-level scenario with the Virtual Battlespace 2 (VBS2) was used to develop leaders' tactical proficiency for future training. While the squadron was unable to execute collective training above the team level prior to deployment, focus on individual proficiency and integration of troop teams enabled the squadron to train with NATO allies at the collective level once the squadron deployed.

After receiving the OAR mission in September, 3/2 CR executed the military decision-making process (MDMP) to deploy and subsequently train. The non-standard nature of the mission and the scope of mission command across five countries made simultaneous planning and shared understanding critical. Two iterations of pre-deployment site surveys (PDSS) helped facilitate a common operational understanding. The first PDSS, executed by squadron leadership and staff, allowed key leaders to begin to understand the OE while identifying the training focus for each NATO ally. This enabled the squadron to make deliberate decisions about how to task organize and dispose the squadron in the OE. For instance, the Latvian Land Force's (LLF's) training focus was on defensive tasks. As a result, in order to synchronize assets at the squadron level with the training objectives of our allies, Headquarters and



**Lithuanian soldiers alongside U.S. troops from 3/2 CR prepare to enter and clear a building during an exercise at Pabrade Training Area, Lithuania, on 26 February 2015. (Photo by SSG Megan Leuck)**

Headquarters Troop (HHT) was task organized with the scout platoon, mortar platoon, and a platoon of sappers from the regimental engineer squadron (RES). The second PDSS, executed by troop command teams, enabled troop leadership to begin to plan and resource training with allied forces. Throughout the planning process, engagement by both squadron staff and troop leadership enabled simultaneous planning and problem solving.

After the squadron operation order (OPORD) in November, 3/2 CR task organized into Task Force (TF) Wolfpack to meet the mission requirements identified during the planning process. As understood by our squadron, TF Wolfpack's mission was to deploy to train with allied militaries to assure them of U.S. resolve and improve NATO interoperability. Key tasks within this mission were to develop leaders who were confident in fighting with allies and understood the OE. Further, TF Wolfpack needed to maintain readiness while building relationship and interoperability with allies. In addition, communicating the strategic message while demonstrating freedom of movement throughout the AO was key.

### **Operations in OAR**

OAR mission requirements dictated that 3/2 CR operate and conduct mission command in a joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) environment. The squadron's operational approach was decentralization that resourced subordinate commanders with staff functions and empowered them to make decisions. To be successful, this operational approach relied on mission command in an environment of trust, utilization of JIIM capabilities, and the disciplined initiative of subordinates.

On 9 December 2014, 3/2 CR assumed mission command from the 2nd Squadron, 8th Cavalry Regiment with a task organization designed to enable mission success in a large and complex OE. The TF headquarters along with a task-organized HHT were established in Ādaži, Latvia. In each of the other countries, elements from the RES as well as the squadron's staff, field support team (FST), and military intelligence company (MICO) augmented troops to provide the capacity to conduct decentralized operations across all seven warfighting functions (WFFs). For example, in the mission command WFF, troops were assigned signal support from 2CR RES and 3/2 CR S-6 section to provide the capacity to independently establish and maintain tactical communication. Further, one staff officer from the squadron served at each of the U.S. Embassies in a liaison officer (LNO) capacity, which proved critical to enabling freedom of movement and coordination between interagency partners. Additionally, a junior officer was assigned as a troop operations officer to enhance planning at the troop level.



With a task organization that empowered small unit leadership, TF Wolfpack executed squad and platoon-level training in an environment that was enhanced with real-world challenges. In December, TF Wolfpack U.S. Embassy LNOs set the conditions for arrival with Department of State (DoS) and host nation authorities by building the initial relationships with JIIM partners. For the duration of OAR, LNOs would be a key component of TF Wolfpack's freedom of maneuver and would provide a valuable JIIM experience for several junior officers.

As training intensified in January, each country team commander had a unique opportunity to develop a training plan that supported the strategic purpose of OAR by building interoperability while enabling progression through the Combined Arms Training Strategy (CATS). While each team executed collective training from the squad to platoon level, the training progression often varied. This was a product of each commander's adaptive approach to working with allied forces and the unique circumstances in each country. For example, Team Estonia executed winter camp with Estonian Land Forces for team through squad situational training exercises (STXs) and live-fire exercises (LFXs). However, they then executed a troop STX with Dutch forces and the Estonian scouts battalion based on host nation availability and the opportunity to demonstrate allied interoperability. The sudden jump from squad to troop collective training was mitigated by table top exercises and leader professional development (LPD) events to prepare platoon leadership to execute platoon-level maneuver. Further, when Team Estonia's platoon LFX was executed in March, it was done with Estonian Carl Gustav teams attached to each platoon. In both cases, the team balanced its CATS progression with the opportunities provided by OAR.

Similarly, Team Lithuania developed a close relationship with its counterparts through combined winter warfare training, which resulted in the Lithuanian Agritis Battalion inviting the team to participate in their own battalion-level STX as well as contributing elements to Team Lithuania's platoon STX. On the other hand, Team Latvia's culminating event was participation in Exercise Summer Shield, a multinational fires coordination exercise which integrated the squadron scouts, mortars, aid station, and headquarters into a multinational brigade commanded by the LLF brigade. The variety of training opportunities developed TF Wolfpack's organizational capacity for interoperability by requiring



**Soldiers with Lightning Troop, 3/2 CR travel through Poland as part of Operation Dagoon Ride, on 25 March 2015. (Photo by Photo by MAJ Neil Penttila)**

leaders to develop collaborative training plans with allies.

In addition, the presence of TF Wolfpack in the AO was an opportunity to enhance the capacity to develop situational awareness through integration with allies of intelligence and operations. Although the AO is a permissive environment, ubiquitous media and a concerted collection effort by regional adversaries meant that TF Wolfpack had to think critically about engagement with the local populace and develop a willingness to accept prudent risk to achieve strategic messaging effects. The organization gained understanding of the OE through regular interactions with DoS, host nation security, and intelligence officials in each country. This understanding enabled troop commanders who were empowered to accept prudent risk to determine where, when, and how to engage with the local populace.

One of the main avenues for mission success was through the execution of cultural engagements. These events required deliberate operational planning with information from both host nation law enforcement and U.S. force protection teams. Often these events, such as Team Lithuania's visit to Auschwitz or Team Estonia's participation in the Estonian Independence Parade, were seized on by local and national media and became part of the narrative for U.S. presence in the region.

Another aspect of mission command that presented a complex challenge was that of communicating across five countries. Based on the distances between units and the risk in communication over civilian networks, TF Wolfpack gained a greater proficiency with tactical communication systems. Daily, TF Wolfpack relied on tactical satellite, high frequency, Joint Capabilities Release, and Warfighter Information Network-Tactical systems to maintain mission command. With use of these systems in a variety of weather conditions and latitudes, Soldiers gained proficiency in establishing communication under a variety of circumstances. Further, leaders gained an appreciation for the employment and limitations of these systems.

Throughout the duration of the mission, the sustainment requirement emphasized endurance across a wide area. While the task organization provided sustainment and maintenance support in each country, flow of materiel and personnel into the AO was a challenge that engaged multiple elements of the staff and command. For example, Class IX parts movement required coordination between the troops, TF Wolfpack's sustainment cell, Defense Logistics Agency, 19th Theater Sustainment Command, and U.S. Embassy LNOs to enable movement across both distance and political borders. Further, Class I support through Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements (ACSA) required supply personnel to closely work with host nation service providers and accurately forecast requirements. Personnel movement and replacement also required regular coordination with multiple JIIM stakeholders from the local host nation garrison security offices to U.S. Embassies to track personnel transiting and training in a sovereign ally's territory. Adding to the challenge was the fact that sustainment mistakes could damage operational relationships with allies and undermine the strategic purpose of the mission. Despite the challenging environment, sustainment across TF Wolfpack was achieved through the development of systems and the cooperation of multiple supporting organizations. Ultimately, the challenges TF Wolfpack overcame enhanced its capacity to endure in a complex environment.

### **Operation Dragoon Ride: Reassurance of Mission Success Through Redeployment**

Recognizing that the ultimate purpose of OAR was to provide assurance to regional allies and deterrence to adversaries, TF Wolfpack was tasked in March to execute Operation Dragoon Ride (ODR), a 2,200 kilometer road march which crossed all five allied borders between the Baltics, Poland, Czech Republic, and Germany. ODR reinforced the organizational knowledge gained in regional engagement, expeditionary operations, and capability.

The experience gained during OAR led TF Wolfpack to emphasize engagement with JIIM partners early in the planning stages of ODR. During mission analysis, the enduring relationships that TF Wolfpack U.S. Embassy LNOs had created enabled them to engage DoS decision makers early in the planning process and receive their support and input. This translated into early support and planning input from host nation allies who were vital in selecting specific routes, cultural engagement sites, and rest-over-night (RON) sites for the element. Further, as the plan was refined, host nation security along the route and local police escorts became critical risk mitigation factors to protect the force. When the route was modified to include movement through the Czech Republic, an LNO to the U.S. Embassy there was quickly dispatched to make the necessary coordination with JIIM partners. Further, as the plan developed, TF Wolfpack staff and key leaders made special effort to maintain JIIM involvement in the operation with updates to gain necessary feedback and resources to complete the plan.

Beyond planning, increased proficiency with expeditionary operations enabled TF Wolfpack to sustain the movement. Early engagement in the planning processes enabled host nation support of most food, fuel, and lodging along the route through ACSAs. Additionally, individual operator proficiency in maintenance and recovery operations was a key factor in avoiding vehicle accidents and breakdowns. When breakdowns did take place, organic assets along with support from the 21st Theater Sustainment Command and 12th Combat Aviation Brigade facilitated recovery and repair. This process worked so efficiently that most vehicle issues were repaired within 24 hours of the mobility fault, some with parts that were airlifted overnight. The capacity gained by overcoming sustainment challenges throughout OAR gave TF Wolfpack the endurance to sustain the organization over the length of the route.

The real-world complexity of OAR reinforced by ODR provided a training environment that developed leaders and small units into the team that can win in a complex world. Through decentralized command, trust from higher HQ, and understanding of the OE, the organization served as a laboratory to develop the kind of leaders and teams the Army needs to win in a complex world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Howard, "Military Science in An Age of Peace," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 119 (March 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Army Regulation (AR) 350-50, *Combat Training Center Program*, 3 April 2013.

<sup>3</sup> TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, 31 October 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Counter-Unconventional Warfare White Paper. USASOC. Retrieved from <http://www.soc.mil/Files/Counter-UnconventionalWarfareWP.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> TRADOC Pamphlet 252-8-5, U.S. Army Functional Concept for Engagement, 24 February 2014.

<sup>6</sup> GEN David Perkins, DoD News Program, 10 February 2015, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bah-f3B5VCc>.

<sup>7</sup> Operation Atlantic Resolve fact sheet, USEUCOM, Media Operations Division, 1 May 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Perkins.

<sup>10</sup> AR 525-29, *Army Force Generation*, 14 March 2011.

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