Employing Reconnaissance in a Multinational Task Force

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Militaries from across the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance train on interoperability at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Germany in order to respond to regional threats as a common unified front, rather than a disparate collection of allies only able to operate independent of one another. Multinational task forces (TF) are frequently organized with battalions and brigades from across NATO serving as the TF headquarters. These task forces consist of companies, battalions, and assorted enablers from a wide range of NATO or Partnership for Peace armies. They typically have limited experience working together, are unfamiliar with each other's standard operating procedures, and are tenuously connected by a selected common language. A commander's biggest challenge in this situation is integrating unfamiliar subordinate units and quickly making the TF cohesive.

Based on JMRC observer-coach-trainer (OCT) observations from previous rotations, the successful integration and employment of reconnaissance units is particularly challenging for newly formed multinational TFs. This article will provide recommendations to a TF commander and staff for how they can optimally integrate a reconnaissance element from an allied nation at the battalion or brigade level. From the start, a commander should expect limited interoperability until several gaps in capacity and doctrine are filled. Essential to establishing interoperability with any reconnaissance (recce) element is determining materiel limitations, task organization, and differences in culture and doctrinal methods of employment.

Immediately upon integration, the brigade or battalion staff should determine the recce unit's materiel capacity. Not all armies employ recce units for the same purpose, and nations often equip them for a specific tactical task. Budgetary constraints might also cause limited reconnaissance-specific equipment fielding which can limit the scope of missions they are able to perform. If, at the start of integration, commanders and their staffs know the materiel limitations and strengths of the newly assigned recce element, they can employ them to rapidly and accurately answer the commander's critical information requirements (CCIR). They will also avoid committing them to a mission they're unable to accomplish due to limited or specialized capacity.

As an example, a recce platoon observed during JMRC Exercise Combined Resolve V was not equipped to operate effectively at night. The soldiers maneuvered in Soviet-era reconnaissance armored personnel carriers that lacked optics and only had night observation devices for their drivers. They also lacked other equipment and had a limited long-range communication capability. Despite these limitations, they were still ordered to conduct route reconnaissance and named area of interest (NAI) surveillance in limited visibility with full expectation of optimal information collection. In one instance, the platoon lost communications with battalion but maintained two observation posts (OPs)without reestablishing communications. A company from an adjacent U.S. battalion air assaulted into the area of operations (AO), and the recce platoon did not have the ability to conduct a reconnaissance handover. After receiving direct-fire contact from enemy counter-reconnaissance, the U.S. element called for fire danger close to the recce platoon. These types of risks can be mitigated if the TF staff takes subordinate-unit capacity into account as it generates combat power. If staff members conduct an analysis of the incoming unit's equipment capabilities, they can determine what type of equipment they should cross-load and assign with the recce.

The staff must also understand how the newly assigned recce element usually task organizes and how its chain of command is structured to successfully integrate it into the TF. In many militaries, recce units work directly for the intelligence officer (S2), and their effectiveness may hinge on how, or if, the S2 is involved in the planning process. An S2 observed during Combined Resolve V did not have a collaborative relationship with the battalion operations officer (S3) and was possessive of the battalion reconnaissance platoon. As a result, the S2 issued mission orders with no consideration of logistics, adjacent unit coordination, quick reaction force (QRF) support, engagement criteria, or a plan for rearward passage of lines (RPOL). Additionally, this platoon had historically trained to conduct split-section operations in order to cover more terrain and operated this way during the exercise. This resulted in an inability to provide mutual support, and as a second-order effect, the platoon incurred more risk than the TF commander would probably be comfortable with if he fully understood how they were operating. Unknown to the commander, in this platoon a section consisted of a single troop carrier vehicle and four personnel. If a section was compromised, destroyed, or if the vehicle broke down, the commander may have been forced to commit resources that he otherwise needed to accomplish the TF mission.

Also consider that some militaries are more officer-centric than others, and cultural barriers exist that may limit interoperability with a recce element. Breaking through that construct and empowering soldiers and leaders to use disciplined initiative is critical to interoperability. The nature of reconnaissance missions requires trust in the tactical decision-making abilities of Soldiers on the ground and their ability to make critical decisions in the absence of the commander's direct guidance while operating within his intent. OCTs asked one BN reconnaissance platoon why it didn't displace off an OP to resupply radio batteries after they ran out of power, and a section leader answered "because we weren't ordered to." A recce element's leaders should be personally involved in the planning process and attend the TF combined arms rehearsal or rehearsal of concept drills before any major operation, and the commander should demand a back brief in order to move beyond cultural barriers like this. That same platoon's leaders took no part in TF rehearsals prior to the force-on-force mission at Combined Resolve V, and as a result the commander missed an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the reconnaissance platoon's scheme of maneuver and to provide clear guidance.

In 2014, a long range surveillance (LRS) company was attached to a U.S.-led brigade task force during JMRC Exercise Combined Resolve III. In its home country, the LRS company was intended to be employed as a division-level asset for deep infiltration and information collection. During Combined Resolve III, the brigade tasked it to overwatch NAIs far beyond the forward line of own troops (FLOT) and disrupt using joint fires, and the commander expected it to provide real-time updates in order to help pull the brigade's main body to the path of least resistance. Instead, the company occupied hide sites and used its doctrinal methods of surveillance. They went "radio-silent" until a planned communications window opened every two hours, at which time they transmitted information to the company command post (CP). The information collected could only be filtered to brigade operations and intelligence by way of a runner from the LRS Company CP, located adjacent to the brigade tactical operations center (TOC), and because of the commo-window, the runner wasn't capable of rapidly answering follow-up questions. Because it was employed contrary to its doctrinal methodology, the company became ineffective and did not meet the commander's intent.

During the after action review (AAR), the staff realized that embedding a liaison officer from the LRS company in the TOC and cross-leveling HF radio batteries would have benefited the mission. Had brigade staff understood the LRS company's capabilities, limitations, and methodology when it was first task organized, the commander could have employed it more effectively. However, the onus cannot solely rest on the supported HQ to determine the capabilities of a supporting element. While the staff is ultimately responsible for doing so, the supporting enabler must be proactive in making its "sales pitch" — a detailed capabilities brief — to the supported commander. The best reconnaissance units observed are the ones that involve themselves in the planning process and aggressively ensure their commander understands what they can provide to the TF.

JMRC OCTs regularly observe two consequences of the unsuccessful integration of reconnaissance assets. The first, as described in this article, is a misuse of the asset, and the second is a non-use of the asset. If a TF can't figure out how to employ its reconnaissance element successfully, it tends to stop employing it altogether, violating one of the principles of reconnaissance — never leave recce in the reserve. The strength of the multinational TF is its diversity of assets and capabilities; a reconnaissance unit won't always look the same, but it will always have the potential to fulfill a critical capability that the TF commander must leverage through adequate preparation and aggressive, early integration of the unit into his task force.

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Romanian soldiers of Delta Company, 191st Infantry Battalion, 18th Infantry Brigade, maneuver toward their objective during exercise Combined Resolve V on 25 October 2015.

Photo by SSG Carol A. Lehman