

THE STRATEGIC LIEUTENANT

1LT MARIBEL R. BROWN

On my first day as the Operation Atlantic Resolve liaison officer to the U.S. Embassy in Riga, Latvia, representing the 173rd Airborne Brigade, I put on a fresh uniform, cleaned my boots, and ensured my hair was within regulation. When I met the outgoing chief of the Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC), I confidently shook his hand and looked him the eye. He looked at my uniform, grinned, and exclaimed, “They sent me a second lieutenant?! Is that all they had?!” My heart sunk. I knew the importance of first impressions and I thought I had ruined mine based on something I could not change — my rank as a junior officer operating amongst more senior grades. This encounter ensured I felt the true gravity of the fact that I represented my entire organization. The next five months would reinforce this lesson and teach me that, rank immaterial, professional relationships are the cornerstone of liaison operations.

The other LNOs from my unit in Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Germany were all lieutenants as well. In our discussions following our redeployment from Atlantic Resolve, we all kept coming back to the same after actions review (AAR) comment: it was impossible to get anything done without an extensive point-of-contact roster. 1LT Sergio Rolon, a heavy weapons platoon leader who served as the LNO in Poland, stated that “success as an LNO is primarily based on how many people you know that are willing to engage more important people on your behalf.”

While planning a 9/11 Remembrance ceremony, the bureaucratic red-tape procedure for getting the U.S. Ambassador to Latvia, Nancy Bikoff Pettit, to ride on a Black Hawk helicopter was hindering progress. When I kept running into roadblocks, I engaged the new ODC chief. While he likely had his own perceptions about my level of experience early on, our working relationship had shown him that I was a reliable problem solver. If I was going to him for help, it would signal to him that I had exhausted my resources. After discussing the issue with him, I presented him a course of action that would quickly solve the problem. He agreed and called a general officer whom he knew personally. By the next day, I had received signed memorandums approving the ambassador to ride in the aircraft, which was a first-time experience for her that she told me she would never forget. Ambassador Pettit noted that the military base had “come to symbolize one of our greatest bilateral successes in the region and being on base...was a perfect way to showcase this superb cooperation.”

The ceremony itself was also a success. It took place at a Latvian military base and involved not only the American paratroopers from the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, but also Latvian, German, and Danish soldiers. The strategic message sent by this ceremony was one of unity amongst allies who have fought and died together in past wars.

Representing the heavy weapons company at Tapa Training Area, 1LT Connor Arbiter served as the LNO in Estonia. Like the other LNOs, his largest stressor was movement of personnel, weapons, and equipment. While operating in Eastern Europe, the 173rd Airborne Brigade built interior lines of communication and displayed our freedom of



maneuver by transporting paratroopers, weapons, and equipment through multiple borders. The battalion logistics section and the 21st Theater Support Command Movement Control Team worked tirelessly to make movements as smooth as possible.

Differing timelines in the many countries along with mission-dictated changes left the unit scrambling at times to make small miracles happen. In some cases, the only thing that ensured these movements happened in Estonia was Arbiter asking a personal favor from his contacts at the National Movement Control Center.

The LNO to the U.S. 4th Infantry Division Mission Command Element in Germany, 1LT Christopher Bolin, identified the following as a friction point. “When we do not respect their timelines, we may damage our relationship with the host nation agencies over time, which may limit our freedom of maneuver along interior lines in the future.” As a junior officer, he understood the strategic implications and elevated his concerns to the command team in order to improve our planning processes and identify requirements earlier. This, in turn, will preserve the relationships we have been working so hard to build.

Currently a company executive officer, 1LT Devin Hamilton recently completed his time as the LNO to Lithuania. His involvement in Baltic Push, a multinational logistical movement, is proof of the strategic impact a lieutenant can have. The intent of Baltic Push was to assess the concept of a Joint Baltic Movement Control Cell coordinating freedom of movement within Atlantic Resolve North and to assess the interoperability of allied logistical doctrine and equipment.

As a result, the 1st Battalion’s Forward Support Company was able to do something historical: conduct a border-crossing convoy using a single permit to deploy. No stranger to assisting in historical firsts, Hamilton was also instrumental in securing the use of the Lithuanian presidential C-27 Spartan aircraft for the scout platoon to conduct an airborne operation into Exercise Iron Sword, leveraging the professional relationship he had cultivated with the Lithuanian Land Forces commander, who then worked on our behalf to coordinate for use of the aircraft.

In addition to transportation, one of the other main tasks LNOs undertake is escorting visitors who would come to the country in order to engage Atlantic Resolve Soldiers specifically. Some were visiting the countries for other political or economic reasons. In these cases, the visiting Congressional delegation or flag officer would only interact with a small fraction of Atlantic Resolve: the lieutenant serving as LNO.

This was the visitor’s only glimpse into the operation on the ground and, for some, was their first time hearing about the specifics. Each LNO clearly represented the brigade and Atlantic Resolve very well — each report that came back to the unit was positive. People from all walks of life were thoroughly impressed with the lieutenants who showed up to work at an American embassy, a foreign ministry of defense, or an allied land forces headquarters, and embodied the ideals of professionalism and dedication. Some of the civilians the LNOs worked with had very little experience working with the military. Often, they were off put by past negative experiences. The competency my peers showed prevailed in single-handedly changing these people’s perception of what the military can and should be.

The LNO Smart Card created by the Training Analysis Feedback Team out of Fort Leavenworth, Kan., lists the following as traits one should possess when serving as LNO:

- Innate ability to solve problems
- Excellent communication skills, both verbal and written
- Professional and confident approach
- Proactive and self-motivated
- Team building skills
- Genuine willingness to help
- Desire to build a mutually cooperative relationship with mission partners
- Organizational skills
- Ability to synchronize and focus on critical needs
- Awareness of limitations with an ability to learn quickly
- Politically astute with the ability to grasp difficult leadership roles of civilian organizations

All of these characteristics should come together in order to help build professional relationships with our NATO allies and partners. While many of these traits may not seem inherently present in young officers, the enthusiastic

will to win we do possess, can often be enough to overcome other shortcomings. An infectious positive attitude wins friends to your side, making it easier to influence them into helping you when you need it. That being said, serving in this position requires a higher level of maturity as is laid out in the earlier examples.

Prior to deployment, my counterparts and I had a much narrower view for what to expect as LNOs. We could not have predicted that our successes — or failures — as lieutenants would have strategic implications. From their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, our command team understood the importance of choosing the right people for the job. Choosing someone to serve as LNO is empowering them to operate autonomously in order to challenge their potential. I cannot imagine a more unique role in which to challenge myself while operating to accomplish the larger mission of demonstrating continued U.S. commitment to the collective security of NATO and to enduring peace and stability in the region.

1LT Maribel R. Brown is a Military Intelligence officer currently assigned to the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, in Vicenza, Italy. During the unit's recent deployment as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve, 1LT Brown served as the liaison officer to the U.S. Embassy in Riga, Latvia. A prior enlisted Soldier, she originally enlisted in the Army in 2003 as a healthcare specialist and attained the rank of SSG prior to receiving her commission through ROTC in May 2014.