

---

# STRONGER TOGETHER:

## *EXPERIENCING INTEROPERABILITY AT JRTC*

SSG CHRISTOPHER J. WHEATLEY  
CPT DANIEL T. HARRISON

U.S. Army operations are conducted with multinational partners in every theater, and the need to develop and maintain interoperability expertise is only increasing at all echelons across the force. Tactical maneuver formations in particular need to focus on identifying and neutralizing friction points that will inevitably arise when working with partners from outside our Army. A recent rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, LA, saw units from the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division grapple with the challenges of interoperability. Based on its experiences, the brigade identified some issues that formations are likely to face in the future as well as some potential solutions. Topics of interest included integration of multinational partners, mission command systems and communications security (COMSEC) requirements, sustainment, and potential future training opportunities.

As part of JRTC Rotation 16-04, an airborne infantry platoon from the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (3 PPCLI) traveled to Fort Polk and exchanged places with a U.S. platoon from the 3rd Battalion, 509th Parachute Infantry Regiment which then participated in a

near simultaneous Canadian Army training event. While the experience was an overwhelming success in terms of growth and achievement for all rotational unit participants, some key lessons were learned that can enable other U.S. units to be successful in similar situations.

### **Integration of Multinational Partners**

Though some limited email and phone coordination had occurred prior to arrival, leaders in both the Canadian platoon and the U.S. company it operated under identified the lack of prior in-depth coordination as a key gap in their preparation. The Canadian soldiers traveled to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, AK, for familiarization with the T11 parachute prior to the rotation, but neither element shared their standard operating procedures (SOPs) or discussed tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) before conducting planning and rehearsals in Louisiana. The leaders of both organizations directed rehearsals and capability briefs upon arrival to create understanding prior to conducting operations. Ideally, the

*Leaders conduct final equipment checks before executing a counterattack following a brigade defense during Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 16-04.*

Photo by CPT Daniel T. Harrison



Canadian platoon would have trained with the U.S. company prior to arrival at a crucible training event like a Combat Training Center (CTC) rotation; foregoing such an opportunity, deliberate communication between two such organizations could preclude discovery learning during execution. Unit SOPs and service doctrine should be exchanged at a minimum so that key leaders can start communicating from a common knowledge base. This must be a deliberate and formalized exchange of information that enables unity of effort and shared understanding.

### **Common Language, Different Doctrine**

One particularly surprising challenge for both the rotational training units and for JRTC observer-coach-trainers (OCTs) was the actual sharing of doctrine. Information security (INFOSEC) practices are appropriately stringent, and acquiring access to the Canadian equivalent manuals required some very deliberate effort by the platoon OCTs while preparing to support the 3 PPCLI platoon. The Canadian leadership expressed their own frustrations in attempting to gain access to U.S. manuals since the latest versions are not readily available to anyone without Common Access Card (CAC) access. Though similar in nature and generally producing the same outputs, the eight American troop leading procedures and the 16 Canadian battle procedures are different enough that significant discussion was generated when exposed to the previously unseen systems. Being able to communicate with like terms enabled OCTs to more effectively coach the Canadian soldiers as well as provide doctrinal feedback to both organizations. A Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) analyst who observed significant portions of the training recommended that training centers maintain a library of appropriate and relevant doctrine from multinational partners that meets INFOSEC requirements to assist units and OCTs preparing to conduct or coach multinational training. Additionally, the library could share U.S. doctrine with approved leaders from multinational organizations during the preparation phase.

### **Mission Command Systems and Communications Security (COMSEC)**

Clear and efficient communication systems and procedures are the hallmarks of effective interoperability and partnership. Meeting COMSEC requirements and maintaining communication were serious challenges during this training event and are easy mistakes in a multinational training environment. When brigades conduct the Leader Training Program at Fort Polk approximately 65 days prior to starting a rotation, the requirements to request bandwidth and technical steps to allocate COMSEC for multinational partners are laid out in the division operation order that the unit crafts into a brigade order. The appropriate actions for the brigade to take, starting with notification during the initial planning conference approximately 180 days prior to the rotation, include requesting coalition COMSEC for multinational partners. The unit also advises partner units to bring their internal COMSEC and the critical voice-bridging systems that allow cross-talk with U.S. units while maintaining their internal security. Additionally, planning and utilizing a full primary, alternate, contingency, emergency (PACE) plan for cross-talk

***Clear and efficient communication systems and procedures are the hallmarks of effective interoperability and partnership. Meeting COMSEC requirements and maintaining communication were serious challenges during this training event and are easy mistakes in a multinational training environment.***

ensures uninterrupted mission command. The primary form of FM communications should be via coalition COMSEC and the alternate through the voice-bridging systems. The contingency plan should be through an attached U.S. radio operator, and emergency should be through single-channel plain text FM. This ensures that multinational partners can continue to talk with appropriate COMSEC measures in place.

During JRTC 16-04, the Canadian platoon had six radios capable of accepting coalition COMSEC fills in addition to each Soldier carrying a squad radio capable of handling internal COMSEC. Coalition COMSEC was not available, and voice-bridging systems were not brought, resulting in significant strain on the company's ability to conduct mission command with that platoon. The eventual solution was to provide a U.S. radio operator and forward observer to the Canadian platoon to maintain uninterrupted communications. Though clearly a sound solution given the problem set and assets available, robust planning would have enabled more efficient communications.

### **Sustainment: The Devil is in the Details**

While supplying Soldiers with the most basic of needs, Class I (food and water) and Class V (ammunition) were quite simple in part due to NATO standardization of supply systems; the specifics of other classes of supply can be more challenging when significant analysis of requirements is not conducted prior to arrival at an austere or limited access location. The Canadian platoon brought an armorer with significant weapons parts to repair or maintain weapons systems. This proved to be an extremely sound decision as the Colt Canada C7 Assault Rifle's upper receiver has a hammer-forged heavy barrel that is significantly different from the standard U.S. M4. U.S. maintenance personnel in a brigade combat team would not be able to maintain that weapon. The C6 General Purpose Machine Gun (GPMG), the basic machine gun supporting the Canadian infantry platoon, is functionally the same weapon as the M240 but lacks Picatinny rail systems. These differences were identified early enough during the reception, staging, and onward integration (RSOI) phase of the operation that they did not cause any disruption. Because of the no rail issue, the multiple integrated laser engagement system (MILES) contractors at JRTC attached a bracket to the barrel to enable mounting. These brackets are not normally used and are in short supply, and this could become a larger issue depending on the size of the coalition formation.





Photo by SSG Brian Ragin

***U.S. and Canadian Soldiers conduct joint medical evacuation training during RSOI at Alexandria International Airport in Louisiana in preparation for a rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center on 13 February 2016.***

Counter-improvised explosive device (C-IED) equipment is a mainstay of operational issue items, though the differences in power sources can cause consternation. The mine detector systems that the Canadian platoon brought required batteries which the unit was not able to acquire through usual supply requests. This required the issuance of U.S. C-IED equipment and additional training to enable that capability during operations. Additionally, casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) equipment requirements were not identified adequately, and the Canadian platoon arrived without their standard litters due to issues with international shipping; the platoon was also unable to carry this equipment with them while flying commercially due to weight and size restrictions. The company cross-loaded pole-less and SKEDCO litters to augment capabilities in response. Contingency planning for availability of evacuation equipment for multinational partners must be conducted to ensure systems are on hand to cover gaps resulting from customs or carrier restrictions. The Canadian Army does not issue the Individual First Aid Kit (IFAK) for use during standard training events. While the gap was identified during the pre-rotational coordination meetings, the platoon still found itself deploying with around half of the needed kits. When requiring multinational partners to bring equipment considered mission essential, such as the IFAK, U.S. units may need to assist in requisitioning such equipment and most certainly should identify these requirements as early as possible. One tactic that the Canadian platoon's leadership identified during their post-rotation analysis was to

place a "catch team" of Canadian soldiers within the medical support system to provide administrative oversight of evacuated Soldiers. This would enable better care and support to partner soldiers evacuated through U.S. systems during treatment, recovery, and repatriation.

Most of these friction points should be identified at two events prior to arrival: the sustainment conference or Pre-Deployment Site Survey (PDSS)-1 at approximately 90 days prior to execution and at a task-organization internal planning event that identifies support requirements between the U.S. and multinational partner. Although many of the supply issues identified were easily fixed during RSOI, not all Soldiers were comfortable with and capable of operating the new systems, such as U.S. mine detectors, SKEDCOs, and radio systems. This hadn't been planned for and required significant organizational energy to solve during a compressed planning timeline.

Finally, the Canadian platoon brought an M3 Carl Gustaf recoilless rifle as its sole anti-tank system. The company and supporting logistical elements struggled with requesting and allocating ammunition for that system, driven mostly by the fact that the BCT did not have the "Goose" in its organic units. The system couldn't be employed during the rotation because ammunition wasn't available. The company commander highlighted this as a key lesson learned since employment of such a capable anti-tank system would have assisted greatly during conduct of the defense. (The Army

has since announced that the Multi-Role Anti-Armor Anti-Personnel Weapon System [MAAWS, M3 Carl Gustaf] will be carried by every Infantry platoon.)<sup>1</sup> Familiarity with the system will undoubtedly increase across formations, but the need to identify and coordinate support for unique weapons in partner formations will remain critical to employing all available combat power.

### Future Training Opportunities

Leaders, Soldiers, and OCTs need broader exposure to multinational partners' operations processes and leader planning to enable future success in planning and execution. If fiscally feasible, exchange opportunities should be explored and expanded between JRTC and the Canadian Manoeuvre Training Centre (CMTC) in Alberta as well as other key partner training centers. This would greatly enhance partnership and understanding of doctrinal differences for senior NCOs and officers (captains and majors) who continue to be the primary mentors to rotational units at the battalion and below level. The Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Hohenfels, Germany, explores interoperability during essentially every rotation. A former senior interagency training advisor to JMRC suggests the best way forward is not to force multinational partners to adopt U.S. doctrine but rather to focus on functional interoperability and allow partners to operate within the familiar realms of their doctrine while still meeting the overall commander's intent.<sup>2</sup> In particular, conducting mission command exercises such as operational simulations with

multinational partner headquarters prior to attendance of a CTC rotation could greatly enhance the effectiveness of the coalition during execution. Giving U.S. rotational units the opportunity to integrate into a Canadian battalion and conduct large full spectrum operations at the CMTC would also be highly beneficial to increasing the U.S./Canadian partnership and interoperability understanding.

### Summary

As formations begin to focus training as regionally aligned forces or regionally focused mission sets, training with partners will only continue to increase as demands for coalition operations increase in the complex and unstable global environment. These experiences and insights between U.S. and Canadian forces highlight common focus areas that can and will arise between coalition members, regardless of which region or theater operations are conducted in. By establishing communication early and identifying doctrinal differences and capability gaps, formations can better prepare themselves to conduct partnered operations within any operating environment with minimal loss of efficiency.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Cox, "U.S. Army Adds 84mm Recoilless Rifle to Platoon Arsenal," *Military.com*, 20 May 2016, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/05/20/us-army-adds-84mm-recoilless-rifle-to-platoon-arsenal.html>.

<sup>2</sup> James Derleth, "Enhancing Interoperability: The Foundation for Effective NATO Operations," *NATO Review*, n.d., <http://www.nato.int/docu/Review/2015/Also-in-2015/enhancing-interoperability-the-foundation-for-effective-nato-operations/EN/index.htm>.



Photo by CPT Daniel T. Harrison

**U.S. and Canadian jumpmasters conduct Sustained Airborne Training on 16 February 2016 prior to executing an airborne insertion.**

**SSG Christopher J. Wheatley** is a platoon sergeant observer-coach-trainer (OCT) with Task Force 2, Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, LA. His previous assignments include serving as a weapons squad leader and platoon sergeant in 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 82nd Airborne Division; rifle squad leader in 1st Battalion, 503rd PIR, 173rd Airborne Brigade; and a team leader in both the 1st Battalion, 509th PIR (OPFOR) and 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment. His operational experience includes three deployments to RC-East, Afghanistan, and one deployment to Iraq; he has worked with Iraqi, Afghan, Polish, Italian, German, Slovenian, Canadian, and Australian forces in both training and operating environments. SSG Wheatley earned an associate's degree from American Military University.

**CPT Daniel T. Harrison** is a maneuver rotational planner at JRTC. His previous assignments include serving as an infantry company senior OCT at JRTC; Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC) and rifle company commander in the 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment; the chief of plans for the 4th IBCT, 1st Infantry Division; and as a troop executive officer and platoon leader in the 4th Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment, 4th BCT, 82nd Airborne Division. His operational experience includes three deployments: western Afghanistan, eastern Afghanistan, and East Africa; he has worked with Afghan, Italian, Polish, Djiboutian, French, German, Japanese, Burundian, British, and Australian forces in both training and operating environments. CPT Harrison is a 2007 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY, and a 2015 University of North Carolina-Institute for Defense and Business Strategic Studies Fellow.