

# ‘Just Say Cobra’

## *Planning and Executing the First U.S. Training Event in Georgia*

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During the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division’s rotation as the Regionally Aligned Force deployed to the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) as part of Atlantic Resolve and the European Deterrence Initiative, much of my company (Cobra Company, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment) leadership and I were tasked to double-hat as advisers to the Georgia Defense Readiness Program-Training (GDRP-T). As part of GDRP-T, we were assisting the newly established Georgian Combat Training Center (CTC) as it trained light infantry battalions in a rotation loosely modeled after the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) or Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC). Being detached from our unit for the bulk of the deployment, we were unable to conduct any of our collective training, so Cobra Company deployed from Poland to Georgia to execute collective training up to a dismounted company partnered combined arms live-fire event (CALFEV) during the GDRP-T inter-rotational period. As an added benefit, the CTC’s observer-controllers (OCs) were able to externally evaluate us as we executed the CALFEV. While Georgia has hosted NATO events in the past (Agile Spirit and Noble Partner, for instance), this was the first time a U.S. unit deployed to Georgia to conduct bilateral training.

Although this CALFEV was conceived as a one-off training opportunity, this type of event may become more regular. The Georgian Minister and Chief of Defense were very pleased with the training and, as a result, are allocating additional defense spending to regularly host U.S. units to conduct Objective-T (OBJ-T) training in Georgia as part of their pro-NATO military reforms. For the rotational unit tasked with GDRP-T, this type of training event will allow the tasked company to maintain some level of OBJ-T readiness. Although there were enough lessons learned and



**Soldiers assigned to Cobra Company, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, and Georgian forces conduct a multinational company combined arms live-fire event at the Vaziani Training Area in Georgia on 5 December 2018. (Photos by SPC Hannah Tarkelly)**

cultural and bureaucratic obstacles (from both sides) to fill a book, I will highlight only the main points here to hopefully ease the path for future companies that are tasked to execute this partnered planning and training.

Conception of, and planning for, this event did not begin in earnest until approximately six weeks prior to deployment. My executive officer (XO) and first sergeant (1SG) executed the company's deployment with one strategic airlift (STRATAIR) flight with personnel and equipment and one flight with ammunition, personnel, and equipment. After several flight delays, Cobra Company arrived at Vaziani Training Area (VTA), and we moved into a zero and qualification range and team dry walkthroughs. We then conducted team live-fire exercises (LFX) and squad LFX. As a training opportunity for ourselves and an opportunity to help the CTC, we then role-played as the opposing force (OPFOR) for the CTC's battalion situational training exercise. We used the following week to conduct platoon-level training and participate in Soviet weapons familiarization training that the Georgians had planned for us.

Next, we jumped right into troop leading procedures (TLPs) and executed the platoon partnered LFX where each platoon worked with an attached Georgian element. The two-kilometer platoon lane stretched over two ranges and consisted of breaching a mined wire obstacle (MWO), assaulting a three-building objective, repelling a counterattack, identifying disengagement criteria, and conducting casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) and a tactical withdrawal.

After a short recovery period, we started TLPs and executed the company partnered CALFEV supported by Georgian mortars and artillery. Thanks to permissive and flexible range planning guidelines, the CALFEV consisted of an eight-kilometer movement en route to three company objectives on four ranges. The two intermediate objectives consisted of attacking a three-building outpost and conducting CASEVAC. The final objective included completing a night MWO breach, reacting to a mass casualty (MASCAL) situation, clearing four buildings, establishing hasty battle positions, and repelling an enemy counterattack. All in all, Cobra fired nearly 85,000 live rounds over 25 days of training at VTA.

After a quick recovery period, after action reviews (AARs), and police calls, Cobra Company packed up and redeployed back to meet up with the rest of the battalion, less than six weeks after arriving in Georgia.

### **Planning Conferences**

During the planning phase, the ODC (Office of Defense Cooperation — Army representatives closely tied in with our Embassy's Defense Attaché Office and Georgian J-Staff) hosted weekly planning conferences with various stakeholders, to include the J3, J4, J6, division-level representatives, etc. As the event got closer, members of the general staff were replaced by brigade and battalion-level action officers. Similar to AAR comments from the Noble Partner 18 planning process, I felt that these meetings were not very helpful in nailing down details; however, I found that they were imperative to building contacts and developing the necessary network to conduct and support training in Georgia.

**Recommendations:** Maintain regular meetings with shareholders to discuss plans and changes as they occur. Use these meetings to identify reliable key stakeholders and exchange contact information with these centers of gravity.

### **Higher Echelon Involvement**

The planning of this exercise fell entirely to the company level, as both battalion and brigade were decisively engaged in other major training events. Both higher echelons were responsive to specific requests for assistance (ammunition draw, STRATAIR flights, OC assistance, etc.), but they were largely absent from the day-to-day planning. The political visibility, complexity, and media coverage of this operation should have demanded staff support. Additionally, my triple-hatting as exercise planner effectively eliminated any GDRP-T advising I was able to execute. Finally, the training value was diminished because I was developing my own training and injects plan.

**Recommendations:** At a minimum, higher headquarters should assign an action/liasion officer to handle key aspects of this mission. The action officer should be forward deployed three to six weeks prior to deployment to set conditions for the unit's arrival. Planners should stay closely tied to the ODC, as they handled much of the EUCOM and Joint Chiefs of Staff coordination for our rotation.

### **Fires Planning**

Throughout the fires planning process, we constantly received directly contradicting guidance concerning authorized firing points, directions of fire, and impact areas from the artillery brigade commander and the navigation command (airspace controllers). Firing points and targets were submitted in writing very early in the planning process; however,



**A Soldier from Cobra Company, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, provides aid to a simulated casualty during a multinational company combined arms live-fire event in Georgia on 5 December 2018.**

they continued to change until the morning of execution due to disagreements and ongoing negotiations with the navigation command. Fortunately, the Georgian artillery company commander was very dedicated to ensuring this mission happened, and the navigation command ultimately adjusted airspace restrictions to allow the fires assets to support the mission.

**Recommendations:** Bring in all stakeholders (navigation command, fires command, 7th Army Training Command [ATC]/Training Support Activity Europe [TSAE], etc.) to conduct fires planning at least six weeks in advance. Come to the first meeting prepared with proposed firing points, TTLODAC (target description, trigger time or event, location of the target, observers, delivery system, attack guidance, and communications), risk estimate distances (to include U.S. estimates of foreign weapons systems), and schemes of maneuver.

### **Deployment**

Cobra deployed from Poland to VTA on separate flights due to our amount of ammunition, cargo, and personnel. The Georgian National Movement Coordination Center (NMCC) acted as a one-stop shop and was ready and prepared to support our arrival with buses, loadmaster, forklift, police escort, etc.

**Recommendations:** As soon as flight information is confirmed, send information to the NMCC along with required support assets. Keep them updated on any changes to flight schedule or load plans. Ensure the 302 customs forms are filled out and brought with cargo.

### **Host Nation Operation Order (OPORD) Issues**

During planning conferences, I requested a Georgian platoon to conduct range details and support (road guard, targetry guard, etc.). This was agreed to and the purpose was understood; however, when the exercise OPORD was published, the attached platoon was not authorized to conduct guard operations (a very strict legal definition in Georgia). As such, the platoon was unable to meet its purpose, and we had to strain to meet our own guard requirements, which resulted in both reduced training effectiveness and occasional lapses in range security.

Additionally, the partnered platoon had just received new weapons that soldiers were unable to zero before our training. Because they were not authorized to zero in the deployment OPORD, they would have been unable to participate in our training without intervention. Similarly, the mortars and the D30s were not authorized to conduct registration before they were set to support us.

**Recommendation:** Try to ensure all purposes and requirements are understood ahead of time, but be prepared to “just say Cobra” and use contacts from the planning conferences to get last-minute permission to conduct these essential tasks when the bureaucracy threatens mission accomplishment.



A U.S. Soldier assigned to Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, and a Georgian soldier move forward during an exercise at the Vaziani Training Area in Georgia on 25 November 2018.

### **Targetry Coordination**

We were able to work with the 7ATC TSAE representative to establish our targetry; however, our TSAE representative changed between the squad and platoon live fires. Both representatives were incredibly driven to fight the bureaucracy, odds, and weather to build our training lanes. The first representative needed more direct guidance in constructing the lane but was much more flexible in executing the lane. The second representative required much less guidance with construction but had very specific expectations of how the lane should be conducted, which did not always make tactical sense or meet the desired training objectives.

**Recommendation:** Bring TSAE representatives into the planning process as early as possible to ensure expectations and training objectives are clearly understood both ways.

### **Building Partnership**

During the planning conferences, I was adamant about having a live fire-qualified Georgian platoon available to create a partnered task organization. The J3 and division representatives were initially opposed to the idea but eventually consented and assigned a Georgian platoon to partner with us. My platoon leaders greatly benefited from working with partnered forces, and by partnering at the lowest level possible, our junior Soldiers finally got to feel like they were part of the bigger picture and built strong, positive relationships with their Georgian peers and counterparts. Additionally, the Deputy Chief of Defense offered to host a Soviet weapons familiarization range for us, along with

static displays of Soviet-era and current Georgian military vehicles and equipment. For most of our Soldiers, getting to fire the Soviet weapons was a highlight of the deployment.

**Recommendations:** Maintain partnered operations at the lowest level. Ensure partnered squads and platoons are included in the tactical TLPs. In addition to a cultural immersion day, request a “military immersion” day with host nation forces to build partnerships at the lowest level.

### **Georgian OCs**

During our CALFEV, the CTC OCs that we had been advising for the past few months served as our OCs. This was a unique opportunity for them to both take off the advising “training wheels” and to see an American infantry unit in action. This was mutually beneficial as it gave them a different look at how to execute training while giving us an outsider’s perspective from partners with real-world combat experience in both Afghanistan and the 2008 August War.

**Recommendation:** Plan any training to take place during the CTC’s inter-rotational period in order to benefit from being evaluated by the CTC’s OCs.

### **Expectation Management**

More than most partnered operations, everything is always in flux in Georgia. Planning feels — and often is — futile. There are mountains of bureaucracy that block anything from happening until one last-minute phone call changes everything.

**Recommendation:** Embrace Georgia’s “no problem” mindset. Even though the plan for a major event to occur is not solidified even 24 hours out, rest assured — the Georgians will move heaven and earth to make sure it happens.

While the planning process was, at times, one of my most frustrating and exasperating experiences in the Army, it was well worth it. Ultimately, planning and executing this training event was a highlight of my and most of my Soldiers’ Army careers. You will be lucky to draw this assignment in the future — and, best of all, you will get to work with some of the best partners around.

At the time this article was written, **CPT Micah Ables** served as commander of Cobra Company, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, and executive officer (XO) of Team Lynx. He currently commands Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment. His previous assignments include serving as the brigade plans chief and as an XO and heavy weapons platoon leader in Kandahar, Afghanistan, with the 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault).