Multinational TF Command — *Interoperability Lessons Learned*

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During the Saber Junction 18 exercise at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Germany in September 2018, I had the privilege to command a multinational opposing force (OPFOR) task force made up of 350 U.S. active Army, U.S. Army National Guard (ARNG), Ukrainian, and Bulgarian Soldiers with more than 40 combat vehicles. In a matter of five days, our formation — Task Force (TF) Blackfoot — faced the formidable task of forging four separate company-sized organizations from three different countries, with three different languages, into an effective fighting force. NATO doctrine defines interoperability as the ability to form an effective fighting force in a multinational environment. NATO doctrine also states that the effectiveness of allied forces in peace, crisis, or in conflict depends on the ability of those forces to operate together coherently, effectively, and efficiently.[1] TF Blackfoot successfully built an effective multinational team by leveraging three critical interoperability best practices:

1) Establish liaison teams with your attachments and be selective in whom you choose; they will directly impact the effectiveness of that organization, for better or worse.

2) Assess and evaluate the experience of the attached organizations, their capabilities and limitations, as well as their esprit de corps and professionalism — use that understanding to inform their employment.

3) Conduct combined arms rehearsals to ensure all subordinates understand the concept of the operation.

NATO doctrine further delineates interoperability as consisting of three dimensions: technical (e.g., hardware or systems); procedural (e.g., doctrines or procedures); and human (e.g., language, terminology and training).[2] At the battalion level and below, units cannot always solve the technical or procedural friction when integrating multinational partners. We mitigated some of the friction through an increased emphasis on activities influencing the human dimension, which these lessons learned emphasize.[3]

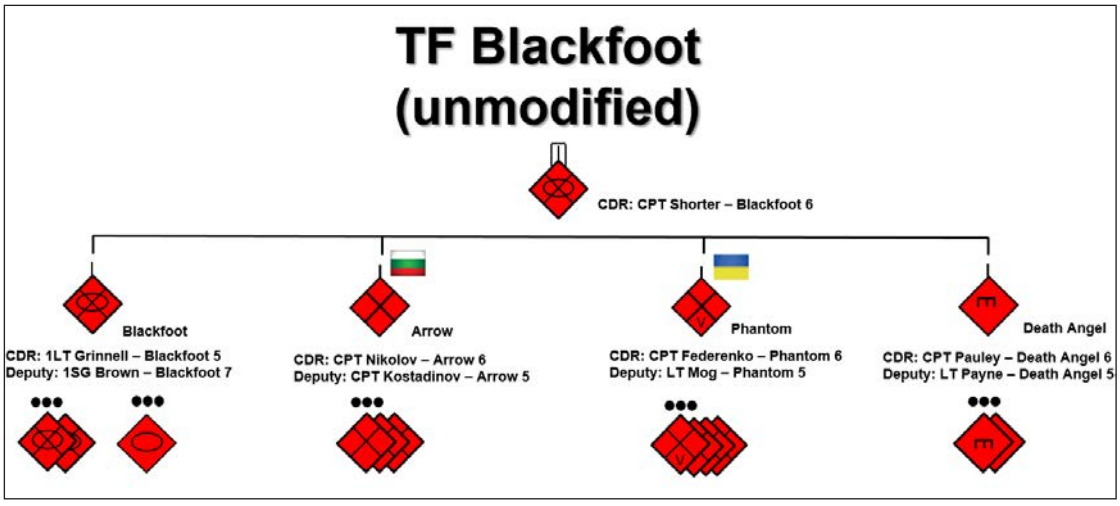
The scope of our interoperability challenge is immediately apparent given our task organization (see Figure 1). TF Blackfoot consisted of one U.S. OPFOR mechanized company with 17 BMPs and an attached tank platoon with three T72s and a ZSU 23-4 (all visually modified from U.S. vehicles). Our attachments included one U.S. ARNG sapper company with two sapper platoons possessing a total of three M1151s high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs), five light medium tactical vehicles (LMTVs) and one D7 dozer with prime mover; a Ukrainian air assault company with 13 M1151s and four LMTVs; and a Bulgarian light infantry company with two M1151s.

Several challenges immediately presented themselves given the forces available. How would we communicate as a TF given that the Ukrainian and Bulgarian companies are unable to utilize Type-1 radios with NATO communication security (COMSEC) keys? Further, how would we address the language barrier in light of the Ukrainian and Bulgarian company commanders' limited English language proficiency and our own lack of Ukrainian and Bulgarian skills? In addition, how would we move as a TF when half the formation did not possess transportation assets to facilitate mounted movement?

Liaison Teams

To address the biggest issue — communication — we established liaison teams to work with the Ukrainian and Bulgarian companies (which represented half of our TF strength). It was critical that we select the right individuals to fill the liaison role for they would significantly affect the employment of the multinational companies in the TF's

Figure 1 — Forces Available for Task Force Blackfoot



fight. First, we determined it was necessary to select U.S. Soldiers as liaisons, since they are able to operate U.S. radios with NATO COMSEC, our primary means of communication. From there we prioritized experience, maturity, personality, rank, and foreign language skills in selecting our liaisons. Additionally, we looked for individuals familiar with U.S. and OPFOR doctrine to ensure they were able to understand and communicate the TF commander's intent to the attached multinational company commanders during the operation as well as mentor the attached company in the procedural domain of operations. Finally, we assessed the capability and competency of the company commanders and their units to determine the best liaisons for each company. Redundancy was key in terms of personnel and equipment; thus, the liaison teams consisted of two Soldiers, each with their own radio. For the Ukrainian company, we selected an experienced and mature squad leader and paired him with one of our rifleman, a specialist, who happened to be fluent in Ukrainian. For the Bulgarian company, we assessed the need for a more experienced team. The ARNG sapper company had brought along an additional captain to assist our battalion for the exercise. This captain had previous assignments as a leader in both infantry and cavalry organizations. We determined his best role was in support of the TF as a liaison. We paired him with a capable and highly motivated team leader with more than two years of OPFOR experience. As a U.S. formation, familiar with U.S. doctrine and possessing the necessary equipment and capability to communicate with the TF headquarters, we did not assess the need for a liaison team to accompany the ARNG sapper company.

Photos courtesy of author

During Saber Junction 18, commanders discuss the effects of the terrain on the upcoming operation. Collaborative planning amongst the task force leadership is essential.

The liaison teams greatly benefited the entire planning, preparation, and execution process. They facilitated the completion of reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (RSOI) tasks; coordination with the TF headquarters for sustainment; and transportation to and from appointments. They also ensured the attachments met inspection times. The liaisons shared their experience with the multinational partner leadership when the TF commander was not present. Whether sharing information on U.S. and OPFOR doctrinal concepts and techniques, OPFOR conduct and exercise guidelines during execution, or familiarity of the terrain to guide the attachments in the right direction, the liaisons kept our attachments on track. Their actions helped maintain our shared understanding throughout the course of the operation, especially when the plan changed upon contact with the enemy.

Establishing and leveraging liaisons was the single biggest factor in setting the conditions for successful interoperability. The criticality of establishing and leveraging capable liaisons became clear over the course of the operation. What we lost internally at the squad and team level by assigning key people to liaison duty was more than made up for by setting the conditions to fight with our attached companies effectively. Remember to consider a third language linguist if Ukrainian or Bulgarian linguists are unavailable; German, French, or Italian-proficient Soldiers are not uncommon in most of Europe.

Assess & Evaluate

During preparation for force-on-force operations, we deliberately assessed each company's capabilities and limitations. It was important to understand in order to anticipate friction whilst employing them. Two events — mission planning collaboratively as a group and an inspection of each attached company's equipment — provided valuable insight for later.

The condensed timeline for preparation, planning, and team building necessitated a simple plan. Four days before execution, we met and discussed several ways to accomplish our mission, with each command team asking questions and providing input. We used this time to ask questions about each company to best understand their capabilities and equipment in order to gain the necessary information to command them in the fight, as well as make changes to the task organization, determine how we would

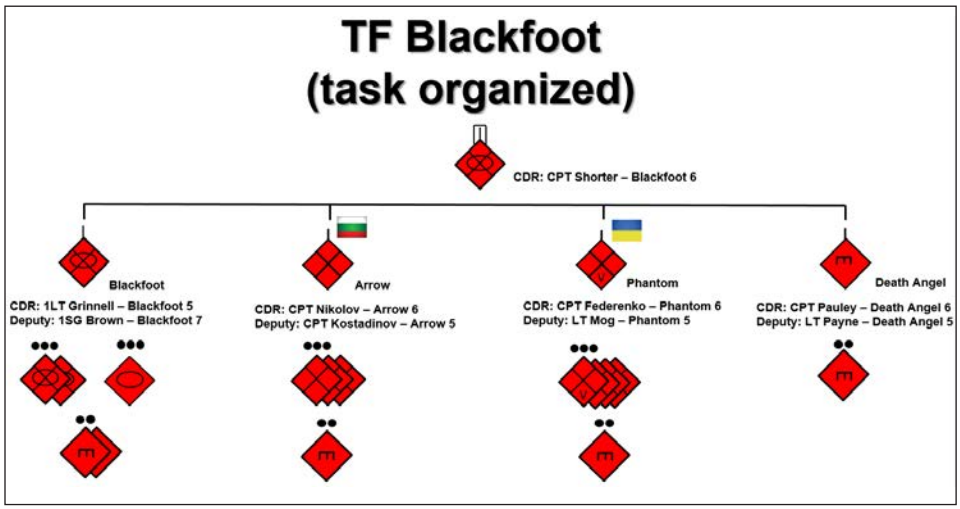


Figure 2 — Task Organization for Task Force Blackfoot

communicate, ensure transportation, and gather other important details. While it was cumbersome to have so many people in the same meeting, it was valuable in gaining a shared understanding of the plan and served as a team-building event. Additionally, it provided the TF commander an opportunity to assess the tactical acumen of the attached company commanders and formulate the tasks for each subordinate company.

During this meeting, we tackled the transportation challenges within the combined arms TF. We decided to task organize sapper sections into the three maneuver companies (see Figure 2). This added mobility to each company through the addition of the sapper's vehicles as well as their breaching capability. Further, the addition of the U.S. sapper elements within the multinational companies provided additional communication ability through the sapper's organic radios. By discussing and planning these changes collaboratively, the subordinate commanders were able to address friction points face-to-face and enhance shared understanding across the TF.

Following our planning session, we carved out time during our mission preparation to conduct a simple inspection of the subordinate company's equipment. The TF headquarters directed each company to provide one Soldier arrayed in full kit, with weapon and company leadership present, in each company's respective administrative areas. Two of the companies fulfilled the request to the letter. We inspected the individual equipment of each Soldier from those companies and asked questions of the leadership about weapon capabilities and the ability to sustain in the field. Without this inspection, we would not have realized that one of the attached companies had not brought sufficient field gear and would have required the TF to address that challenge after our departure, not an ideal time for that kind of friction. The third company went above and beyond; it had a whole platoon arrayed in full kit with full field pack and additional weapons. This small act by the commander further impressed upon us his unit's professionalism and esprit de corps, further boosting our confidence in that unit and its ability to carry out the task assigned.

Rehearsals

After our planning session we invested several hours in a combined arms rehearsal with the company command teams and their platoon leadership. As we began the rehearsal, it became clear that not everyone fully understood the plan. Further, one of the companies had only an outline of their plan, lacking the detail appropriate for a combined arms rehearsal. We used the opportunity to finalize the

The Bulgarian company commander and his platoon leaders brief their scheme of maneuver during the task force rehearsal. Standing over the Bulgarians is the liaison officer from the attached ARNG sapper company who oversaw the Bulgarian company operations.

plan as a group and then conduct a walk-through of the overall scheme of maneuver and discuss potential friction points. After our initial walk-through, we reset and discussed contingencies, such as an alternate breach location and an attack along a separate axis if the battalion recon pull efforts indicated it was warranted. Although the rehearsal ran longer than anticipated, we were all on the same page by the time it concluded.

Our rehearsals created a shared understanding of the plan across the TF. Discussion of several contingencies during the rehearsals built flexibility into the plan. During our attack, it became evident that the two hours we spent during the rehearsals set us up for success. Reconnaissance elements from our battalion determined several hours prior to our attack that our objective needed to shift 1.5 kilometers beyond our initial objective location. We had rehearsed a similar contingency and so were able to adjust our plan rapidly without losing the shared understanding we had developed. As a result, TF Blackfoot achieved its mission by breaching the enemy's main defensive line and passing the battalion's decisive operation through the breach with its full combat power intact.

After transitioning to the defense and occupying our area of operations (AO), we again held a collaborative planning meeting. Following the meeting, we walked each company's AO with the company commander and made small refinements to the plan. After each company had been able to conduct engagement area development and initiate preparations, we met to conduct a terrain model rehearsal. At the rehearsal, we discussed triggers for the commitment of the reserve, the synchronization and priorities of our fires, as well as concepts for reinforcing one position from another.

These efforts again proved their value and further reinforced the importance of rehearsals. Two events during the defense are notable and likely would not have occurred had we not conducted detailed rehearsals and taken the other previously described actions. First, a U.S. mechanized platoon was able to leave its strongpoint position, link-up with and reinforce the Bulgarian company and ARNG sapper company at their positions around the airfield, and inflict tremendous casualties on the now off-balanced attacker before they were finally overwhelmed and the airfield lost. Second, a Bulgarian platoon, cut off from its company and without communication with a higher HQ, demonstrated its understanding of the TF commander's intent. We had determined during the rehearsal that it was more important to retain the town than the airfield. The platoon, still undetected by our opponent, took disciplined initiative and made its way over a mile on foot to reinforce the Ukrainian company in the town.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the outcome of our operations, the efforts we made to address our interoperability challenges set the conditions for success. During the offense, we were able to exploit the opportunity created by our reconnaissance elements' seizure of our assigned objective. The TF commander was able to call an "audible" — in other words, quickly adjust the scheme of maneuver for the new objective location, communicate the adjustment through the liaisons just prior to departure from the assembly area, and maintain shared understanding due to the previously rehearsed contingency. As a result, we rapidly exploited an opportunity before our opponent could adjust to the new conditions. Without our preparatory efforts, this would not have been possible; we would have spent more time in the assembly area distributing a new plan and then commenced a hasty attack without the benefit of a rehearsal, risking the success of the operation.

Regarding the defense, we were able to maintain a common operating picture across the TF while under simultaneous attack by three opposing battalions from multiple directions. Our rehearsals set the conditions to effectively shift combat power within our AO to meet these attacks. As our formation was degraded and key leaders incapacitated, subordinate elements were able to exercise disciplined initiative and effectively continue the fight in line with the TF commander's intent.

Incorporating multinational attachments in a fast-paced decisive action training environment (DATE) scenario at JMRC is a challenging endeavor. It is further complicated by the language and cultural barrier, as well as by the limited amount of time available during the RSOI period to solve issues that arise in the technical, procedural, and human dimensions of interoperability. During Saber Junction 18, we focused on solving procedural and human challenges in order to posture ourselves for successful operations. These efforts took the form of carefully selected liaison teams; a deliberate assessment of the capabilities, limitations, personalities, and proficiency of our attachments; and thorough map and terrain model rehearsals to achieve shared understanding of the plan and contingencies. These activities are crucial to mission success for anyone operating in a similar environment under similar conditions.

Notes

[1] Allied Joint Publication (AJP)-01, Edition E, Version 1 dated February 2017. Refer to section 1.4.

[2] Ibid; see also the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) *Multinational Interoperability Reference Guide* (Handbook No. 16-18) published in July 2016.

[3] This article is intended as a vignette. Many of the lessons learned were a direct result of the experience and were not viewed through the interoperability dimensions as they occurred. Therefore, this article does not further discuss the dimensions of interoperability.

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