

A STRATEGY FOR FUTURE VICTORY: *INSTITUTIONALIZING SOF-CF INTERDEPENDENCE*

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Sun Tzu suggested that although it was easy to see the tactics by which he conquered armies, it was substantially more difficult to see the strategy from which his victories evolved. The tactical success of our special operations forces (SOF) and conventional forces (CF) are chronicled by Green Berets and conventional Soldiers alike through well over a decade of continuous conflict from Iraq to Afghanistan. An honest appraisal of where the most significant progress in warfare was made during this unprecedented period in our military history would mark the close interaction between our two warrior communities as one of the largest leaps forward. We conclude that achieving success in future conflicts will demand an interdependent strategy. Yet despite the clear need to move in this direction, there is a growing institutional tendency to return to our “tribes” and train together infrequently as the current wars come to an end. The tactics that are individually applied in combat by both communities must give way to an institutionalized strategy to leverage the other’s inherent strengths and promote SOF-CF interdependence beyond the requirements of our current fight. Continuing this evolution of collaboration demands a more concerted and structured effort.

In late summer of 2013, an opportunity to forge that variety of cooperation was presented to the Army with a rotation to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, La. The 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division (3/82 BCT) from Fort Bragg, N.C., and the 4th Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group (Special Operations Task Force [SOTF] 54) deployed to JRTC from 29 July to 2 September 2013 to execute JRTC Rotation 13-09. This rotation was a Chief of Staff of the Army-directed exercise designed to test “SOF/CF Interdependence in a complex Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) scenario” against an adversary that possessed near-peer capabilities, including weaponized WMD, robust air defense systems, rotary wing aviation, significant artillery assets, organic ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance), mechanized/armor units, and employed a complex array of asymmetric threats. In short, a scenario that made it next to impossible to address effectively without SOF and CF heavily depending upon one another.

COL Michael R. Fenzel, commander of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, and then LTC Joseph Lock, commander of the 4th Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, greet one another prior to a meeting during Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 13-09 at Fort Polk, La., in August 2013.

Photo by MAJ Loren Bymer



The 3/82 BCT and SOTF 54 achieved measurable success during this JRTC rotation and defeated the well-trained opposition force in every phase of the rotation. Reflecting upon the lessons learned during this time together revealed just how much our own collective approach and commitment to interdependence contributed to this success. Our experience during this rotation highlights three imperatives we feel are necessary to institutionalize interdependence between our communities:

- Habitual relationships between SOF and CF units must be established to make opportunities to train together routine.
- Interdependent training opportunities at the Combined Arms Maneuver Centers (JRTC, National Training Center [NTC], Joint Multinational Readiness Center [JMRC]) must be expanded to further test interdependence concepts.
- Broader and more sweeping commitment must be made to change SOF and CF cultures and create institutional expectations for close and functional cooperation.

The Inescapable Importance of Relationships

The story of JRTC Rotation 13-09 is one where the key personalities meshed well in advance of execution. Three months before the rotation began the SOTF 54 and 3/82 BCT commanders were strangers. Before completing the initial staff estimate, 3/82 BCT contacted SOTF 54 leadership requesting an in-person coordination meeting at the SOTF headquarters at Fort Campbell, Ky. The initial meeting between the commanders of SOTF 54 and 3/82 was several hours long and began with a verbal commitment to cultivate the relationship. As it happened, the trust developed through this process would become a powerful weapon throughout the training rotation at JRTC. The initial investment of time and lengthy discussion laid the ground work for all the collective success that would be enjoyed three months later. Investing in the relationship from the start is a step that cannot be skipped on the road to functional cooperation.

During the few months that preceded the start of the JRTC rotation, 3/82 BCT and SOTF 54 continued the process of integration and collaboration at increasingly lower staff levels. Relationships developed between SOTF 54 and the multiple other battalion formations organic to 3/82 BCT for the combat training center rotation. Planners were cross-leveled during staff exercises, there was joint participation in the JRTC-led Leader's Training Program (LTP), and there were numerous joint planning conferences that built relationships at the operator level. The end result was what should be identified as a key characteristic of true interdependence: a deep and common understanding of counterpart missions and the attending plans to accomplish those missions.

By the start of the rotation, both units had moved well beyond just being acquainted with one another. There

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was a shared vision of a solution to the challenges ahead, there was a common understanding of counterpart priorities and, most importantly, there was a trust and respect for one another that had grown. This early commitment, developed in advance of experiencing our "fog of war," established a foundation of confidence and created a culture of interdependence throughout both units. The momentum that was carried into the start of the JRTC rotation grew through each phase of the subsequent training operation. This momentum facilitated our ability to translate this intangible interdependence into tactical action.

Within the construct of our JRTC scenario, SOTF 54 was already forward deployed on the ground within a friendly partner nation. This scenario was very realistic in that SOF are currently forward deployed throughout the world conducting theater security cooperation and building the capability of host-nation forces in dozens of countries at any given time. Special Forces elements are often on the ground in many places long before a conflict erupts and frequently have developed relationships with the U.S. Embassy country team, host nation, and other friendly actors. Special Forces elements may also have a firsthand, nuanced understanding of both the enemy and friendly tactical situation. JRTC replicated this type of scenario extremely well by providing an embassy staff that consisted of role players who had previously served as ambassadors, defense attaches, and chiefs of station. Host-nation role players, partner force military, and well-manned guerilla units were well resourced and accurately represented the dynamic personalities and stressors present in a multinational/multicultural environment.

As a result of the deliberate and shared effort to build a strong SOF/CF relationship prior to arriving at JRTC, once the JRTC rotation began there was a clear picture of how 3/82 BCT and SOTF 54F hoped integration with one another would proceed. There was an exchange of liaison officers (LNOs) that embedded in each other's operations and targeting directorates. A detailed and redundant system of communications was developed that included cross-leveling a number of SOF-specific secure communications devices. While not perfect, these mechanisms provided a secure and dependable voice method of communication in the event that our primary systems failed. Indeed, it was the concerted effort to develop such a system that was as important as the system that was chosen. It was a tacit demonstration of organizational commitment. We agreed upon supported and supporting roles during the different phases of the operation, created a battle rhythm of regular communication, jointly developed a deception plan, engineered a nuanced non-lethal targeting matrix and then divided the responsibilities for engaging host-nation leadership.

The establishment of these staff systems coupled with a commitment to achieve interdependence enabled both units



U.S. Army paratroopers assigned to the 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C, conduct a foot patrol near the training village of Dar Alam during JRTC Rotation 13-09 on 21 August 2013.

Photo by TSgt Parker Gyokeres, USAF

to leverage our counterpart's inherent strengths. The 3/82 BCT's ability to quickly mass ground forces, hold terrain, employ devastating indirect fire, control the airspace, and move an impressive amount of troops and equipment across the battlespace was complemented by SOTF 54's ability to operate undetected behind enemy lines, disrupt enemy forces, provide real-time intelligence on enemy disposition, and conduct foreign internal defense by advising partner-nation forces.

This commitment to enable interdependence largely succeeded throughout the rotation. However, the complexity of the scenario also exposed some shortcomings. Much of the pre-rotational training focused on integrating staff functions, developing joint plans, and designing a communications plan that would enable a common operating and intelligence picture. As the rotational scenario morphed beyond our initial plans, the ability of our tactical elements to synchronize actions became more limited due to a mutual unfamiliarity with the other's tactical battle drills.

When two tactically offensive-focused elements are maneuvering in the same battlespace, the opportunity for fratricide is always high. Our lack of prior on-the-ground training together did not enable "on-the-fly" integration and forced us to institute restrictive control measures that effectively divided up the battlespace but prevented our ability to truly reinforce one another. While our pre-rotational plans largely succeeded in a deliberate defense, the complex battlefield geometry in the offense outpaced our ability to integrate and exposed our mutual unfamiliarity with counterpart systems. Real success in combat operations and achieving ingrained trust between our organizations would have required much more than 90 days of staff and command collaboration.

Aligning Conventional Divisions and Special Forces Groups

One strategy that would create greater opportunity to rehearse tactically and to enable the development of long-term relationships would be through the establishment of formal partnerships between specific conventional force divisions and Special Forces Groups. As the Army experiments with the establishment of regionally-aligned BCTs, the opportunity also exists to select and focus conventional BCTs that are geographically co-located with already regionally aligned Special Forces Groups. Special Forces Groups have long enjoyed the benefit that comes from near continuous presence in and focus on specific regions. Advanced foreign language capability, deep cultural understanding, and years of building relationships all result from the ability to remain focused on a specific region. Special Forces officers and NCOs often spend most of their careers deploying to the same region and remaining focused on the same area of operations. Committing specific conventional divisions and the BCTs that comprise them in the same manner and codifying established partnerships between BCTs and the battalions that comprise Special Forces Groups would help create unit-level relationships that would endure well beyond specific commanders or JRTC rotations and create efficiencies in areas where ramp-up for BCTs

would otherwise be cost prohibitive.

If there is one lesson learned from our experience together at JRTC, it is that interdependence between two such different professional cultures must always begin well in advance of the fight, whether that is a training fight or a combat deployment. If a habitual relationship is already established, then coordination is made easier because trust already exists between the organizations and there is already foundation for the mutual support necessary to succeed in a hybrid threat environment. When the expectation of cooperation is inculcated in both communities, the major obstacles to operational synthesis are removed.

Making the time in busy schedules to cultivate a strong relationship is the first step to breaking through the stasis of inaction and moving beyond the inherent limitations associated with being unfamiliar with our counterpart's operating systems. Establishing an identity for the partnership and forecasting the opportunities to work together at the subordinate level have the potential to break down the natural barriers that exist in both the SOF and CF communities. The forcing function for SOTF 54 and 3rd BCT was a JRTC rotation between two commanders who both wanted to win. The rotation facilitated a formal commitment to further collaboration through numerous face-to-face coordination meetings and precursor training events, all in advance of the focal event at Fort Polk. Both teams felt the desire to win at JRTC and so there was common ground built into our coordinated efforts. By creating long-term partnerships between conventional force divisions/BCTs and Special Forces Groups/battalions, we can formalize, codify, and expand the opportunities for increased partnerships.

Testing Interdependence at the Combined Arms Maneuver Centers

Regardless of how we develop habitual relationships upstream of the next fight, the way to test these concepts is undoubtedly best done at combined armed maneuver centers like JRTC in the uneven terrain of Louisiana; NTC in the desert of southern California; and JMRC in the forests of Bavaria. There is simply no other equally effective way to create a training environment with the scale and complexity necessary to truly stress interdependent systems. Beginning in 2012, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command created a training program with focus on what they called the decisive action training environment (DATE). This program completely revamped the approach the training centers took toward testing rotational units. Rather than focusing on pre-mission training for deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, the DATE incorporated a much broader hybrid threat consisting of regular, irregular, terrorist, and criminal challenges.

No longer focused on previously known deployment locations, the DATE rotations represent a much more realistic environment that is applicable in equal parts for the SOF and CF communities. Best of all, it forces the rotational units to leverage one another's strengths in order to succeed. The free-play environment evolves in cadence with the decisions made by the participating communities. Flexibility and agility are rewarded, and overly rigid and micromanaged plans are quickly exposed. It is a training environment with a well-

resourced complement of role players and opposing forces that creates a high degree of realism, which enables truly interdependent units to excel.

Within the context of this DATE, JRTC continues to evolve the training scenario to include greater joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) involvement, better reflecting the operating environment that exists outside of current fights. JRTC has also begun the process of codifying lessons learned in this interdependent environment and formalizing these into more formal interdependence doctrine. Pairing Special Forces battalions with BCTs during decisive action combat training center rotations will help to define the systems, nodes, and functions that must complement strong relationships in order to succeed.

Changing Institutional Cultures and Creating Collaborative Expectations

There is little question that interdependence is maximized when the right personalities are in place. The objective of our efforts must be to transcend the vagaries of personal relationships to ensure interdependence is achieved as a military imperative in all future operations. Command climates that foster initiative, reward humility, and discourage parochialism are the best insurance policies to ensure interdependence is consistently achieved at all levels and in both cultures. Even through JRTC Rotation 13-09 and despite the close relationship of the two lead commanders, the fragility of the link between SOF/CF forces was on display. Cultural differences exist that must be bridged on an institutional level in order to achieve real and enduring interdependence.

Regardless of one's personal feelings toward institutionalizing SOF/CF interdependence, future conflicts will require a cooperative approach to defeat those as yet undefined adversaries. There are core competencies within both enterprises that cannot be effectively replicated by the other. Now back in garrison, we have begun to return to our "tribes" in a quiet but apparent effort to work alone until we are thrust together again in exigent circumstances. This seems a terrible way to proceed since there will be so much at stake when the call does come to work together. If action is not taken now to bridge this growing divide, the risk to both the mission and to the Soldiers in both communities will continue to grow. We must resolve to increase our interaction before that call to fight comes so that our relationships are well established, roles and responsibilities are clearly delineated, and the full power of that cooperation is unleashed.

Ironically, there are corners of the Army that are concerned that we leave too much of the success of interdependence to relationships. These doctrinaires believe that we need more structure so that very little is left to the cooperative spirit. From the perspective of this rotation, both 3/82 BCT and SOTF 54 determined that effective interdependence was most facilitated by command influence and command culture: leadership that continually sought opportunities to amplify mission success of the other unit based upon the inherently unique capabilities possessed by each partner.

The capacity within both communities to pursue closer relationships should be left to promotion and command

boards that will select leaders who inherently understand their importance. Indeed, the foundation of interdependence is, at its root, about trust. Relationships are what make interdependence work, and leaders from both worlds must cultivate these relationships whenever they are afforded the opportunity. Effecting a position of familiarity in advance of conducting combat operations is what we must work toward in both warfighting communities. Formalizing the emphasis on structure is admirable and necessary, but if relationships are bad then structure will not ever salvage the situation.

Interdependence between 3/82 and SOTF 54 began with an initial afternoon-long brainstorming session with both commanders where the mission and intent of each unit was shared. This effort culminated three months later with a highly successful JRTC rotation that demonstrated the synergy that is achievable when true interdependence is pursued. This type of success can be replicated with a commitment from both the SOF and CF communities to prioritize these training opportunities (particularly at the combined arms maneuver centers), develop habitual relationships between SF Groups and BCTs, and continue to seek opportunities to practice this approach outside a theater of war. As operations in Afghanistan draw to a close, the opportunities for SOF/CF integration will invariably be reduced without a strong commitment from senior leaders on both sides of the operational coin. We cannot afford to return to the days where deep cultural divides exist in our formations and attitudes of distrust prevail.

If there is one thing the last 13 years of continuous combat operations has achieved, it is to break down the barriers between SOF/CF communities, unite our tactical and operational efforts, and create a healthy environment of interdependence on the battlefield. This commitment from both communities is what must be sustained in the future. In an era of diminishing resources, we simply cannot afford to endure a roll back in the progress we have achieved through the last decade of counterinsurgency operations. All of these lessons learned were on full display through JRTC Rotation 13-09. This example is one piece of tangible evidence that pursuing true interdependence is a strategy that will lay the ground work for both greater combat readiness and lead to success on the battlefields of the future. We must move beyond all parochial opinions about tactics that we think will lead to future success inside our own narrow warfighting communities to develop a sustainable strategy from which those future victories will evolve — a strategy that routinely brings us together on the training field before we step onto the next battlefield.

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