

Interoperability at JMRC:

Mission Command and the LNO Team

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“Alliances are force multipliers: through multinational cooperation and coordination, the sum of our actions is always greater than if we act alone. We will continue to maintain the capacity to defend our allies against old and new threats. We will also continue to closely consult with our allies as well as newly emerging partners and organizations so that we revitalize and expand our cooperation to achieve common objectives. And we will continue to mutually benefit from the collective security provided by strong alliances.”

— 2010 National Security Strategy¹

Why is Mission Command Important?

“NATO, including the United States, will defend Estonia. Will defend Latvia. Will defend Lithuania. Will defend all of our NATO allies. As NATO allies, we stand together. We stand as one.”

— President Barack Obama²

As we continue to employ regionally aligned forces (RAF) and conduct more training exercises with our European allies and partners, the reality is that it is becoming less and less likely that U.S. forces will conduct unilateral operations. For this reason, it is imperative that battalions look at their task organization and figure out how to properly leverage interoperability and partnership. Interoperability is defined as the ability of systems, units, or forces to provide services to and accept services from other systems, units, or forces and to use their services so exchanged to enable them to operate effectively together.³

Battalions at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) who are task-organized a multinational company often struggle to achieve effective interoperability, and one of the main reasons is the inability to effectively conduct mission command. The lack of mission command creates frustration at all levels, hampering interoperability. The implementation of the liaison officer (LNO) team is instrumental to the success of executing mission command and achieving interoperability when conducting operations with multinational units. A battalion's ability to quickly understand what its multinational company has to offer and then utilize those capabilities effectively will have a huge impact on its success.

Opening Vignette

“Roger, out,” the task force commander replied on the radio after receiving an update to his combat power. It was now 1530 and the task force had been on the offensive since early morning, seizing multiple objectives. They had lost significant combat power in doing so and now had to turn to one of the two multinational companies (COY) within its task force.

The task force had integrated LNO teams into the multinational COYs upon arrival at JMRC with the intent to increase their ability to effectively conduct mission command, and they were soon to reap the benefits of doing so. The battalion commander called 1LT Queen, the officer in charge (OIC) of the LNO team embedded in the multinational COY, over the radio and gave him a rally point so he could link up with the COY commander. The COY moved to that location and linked up with the task force commander, who tasked them to seize the final objective — a village which had approximately a platoon-sized enemy

element. The COY would attempt to seize the village while a section of tanks would provide overwatch. The LNO team was equipped with radios, which gave them the ability to communicate with the tank platoon leader over a secure net, a capability the COY wouldn't have without the LNO team. The COY commander, with the assistance of 1LT Queen, quickly developed a plan to seize the objective. 1LT Queen was a senior first lieutenant who had the experience and knowledge to assist the COY commander in making a tactically sound plan. Once the plan was complete, the COY commander briefed his platoon commander while 1LT Queen back-briefed the task force commander over the radio and then they began movement into the village.

The 1st Platoon made contact first with two enemy squads defending from an abandoned combat outpost (COP). 1LT Queen quickly got on the radio and coordinated with the tanks in overwatch, communicating where the friendly elements were and passing on targets to the tanks. The tanks engaged and destroyed the enemy guard towers, allowing the platoon to maneuver onto the COP and successfully seize it with minimal casualties. While 1st Platoon was seizing the COP, 2nd Platoon moved out of the wood line and began its assault on the village and immediately made contact.

The platoon took casualties, but they were able to seize a foothold within the village. Although they had seized the foothold, they were still taking effective direct fire from the enemy. The COY commander realized he was outmatched in the village, so he had 1LT Queen send a situational report back to the task force commander and ask for additional forces. The task force commander told him that there were no additional forces available and they had to seize the village on their own. With that guidance the COY commander called his 3rd Platoon forward to link up with 1st Platoon and move into the village to assist 2nd Platoon, which was still taking effective fire. The two platoons were able to engage and destroy multiple targets, causing the enemy to withdraw and take up new positions within a building in the southeastern portion of the town. As the COY maneuvered on the enemy, the LNO team provided the task force commander with timely and accurate reports as well as recommendations from the COY commander until the mission was complete.

Ultimately, despite their differences in radios, tactics, equipment, and language, the multinational COY successfully achieved their assigned mission. The key enabler in this case was an effective LNO team at the right time and place that was trusted by both the COY and task force commanders.

Mission Command and the LNO Team

Mission command is one of the most important foundations of unified land operations. Mission command is defined as the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations.⁴ Battalions at JMRC that embed LNO teams into multinational companies have had better success executing mission command than those that do not. These LNO teams are able to build cohesive teams, create a shared understanding, assist the company commander in exercising disciplined initiative and accepting prudent risk, and ensure mission orders and the commander's intent are understood.

Building a cohesive team through mutual trust is extremely difficult when integrating a multinational company. Building a team does not happen overnight, but due to the tempo of unified land operations it almost has to. The way a battalion receives and integrates a multinational COY into its formation will set the stage for the rest of the time they will work together. Battalions need to identify their LNO teams prior to meeting their multinational units for the first time and integrate them immediately. Too often at JMRC, the multinational companies are brought into the operations process too late, severely degrading the ability to create a shared understanding.

Integrating the LNO team early allows the battalion commander and staffs to synchronize collaboration and open dialogue while assisting the battalion in creating a shared understanding. Battalions at JMRC often do a poor job at making sure the multinational companies understand the problem set or the overall goal for an operation. The companies generally understand what their mission is but do not understand the larger picture and how they fit in it. The LNO team can play an important role in ensuring that the multinational commander has a shared understanding, knows how he fits in the battalion's overall plan, and understands what the overall endstate is, which ultimately facilitates the development of mutual trust.

A major principle of mission command is providing a clear commander's intent. When a battalion commander has multinational commanders in his task force, he must ensure that his commander's intent is understood by those commanders. Not all multinational commanders will speak fluent English, and on a rare occasion, a multinational commander may speak very little English. This has proven to be a major issue at JMRC and usually results in a misunderstanding of the battalion commander's intent. Often, the multinational commander will not ask for clarification during a brief or rehearsal, so it is assumed that he has a clear understanding. The LNO team can fix that issue by attending all briefs and rehearsals with the multinational commander and make sure that he understands everything. If any questions or issues arise, they can then be brought to the battalion commander's or staff's attention. Commanders often rely on subordinates to exercise disciplined initiative, especially when attempting to seize, retain, or exploit the initiative. When conducting unified land operations, taking the initiative is essential in mission success. Initiative allows commanders to maintain the tempo necessary to defeat the enemy. This can be difficult when integrating multinational companies into U.S. battalions, as some multinational units do not understand initiative as we see it. Some multinational armies are built upon Soviet doctrine, which does not value initiative at the lower echelons in the same way as more Western armies. Another major issue is that the units have not worked together before and when using initiative, knowing and understanding your higher commander plays a role in exercising disciplined initiative. An effective LNO team will understand the battalion commander's intent and ensure the multinational commander is operating within that intent while exercising disciplined initiative.

When exercising mission command, commanders must use mission orders to assign tasks, allocate resources, and issue guidance. It is imperative that the multinational companies understand these mission orders. The LNO team can assist the multinational commander in understanding the mission orders. The team needs to attend all briefings and rehearsals, and they need to read all orders from battalion. This way they are not only helping the commander, but they understand the mission as well. In some instances, a multinational commander may be too embarrassed to ask for clarification during a briefing or rehearsal, so the LNO can assist by bringing those questions to the battalion commander or staff. The language barrier can be a huge issue when using mission orders. Battalions must limit the use of jargon, spell out all acronyms, use doctrinal tactical tasks, and issue clear and concise orders to overcome the barrier. Successful tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) have been to clearly define the tactical task and purpose or use NATO terminology.

Some multinational units do not accept prudent risk like we do. The commander may not understand our process for assessing risk, or if he does, he may not put the level of emphasis on risk mitigation that is needed during an operation. The LNO team can assist the commander in this process, for both accidental and tactical risk. The battalion commander or staff can give guidance to the LNO team in regards to risk, and they can assist the multinational commander in the risk mitigation process. Battalions need to provide their risk management worksheets to the company commander. That way he understands how important it is, and he can utilize the battalion's plan when mitigating risk at his level.

What is an LNO?

U.S. maneuver battalions must fully understand the necessity of an effective LNO team. According to Appendix E of FM 6-0, *Mission Command*, liaison is that contact or intercommunication maintained between elements of military forces or other agencies to ensure mutual understanding and unity of purpose and action. Liaison helps reduce the fog of war through direct communications. It is the most commonly employed technique for establishing and maintaining close, continuous physical communication between commands.

Commanders use a liaison during operations and normal daily activities to help facilitate communication between organizations, preserve freedom of action, and maintain flexibility. Liaison provides senior commanders with relevant information and answers to operational questions. It ensures they remain aware of the tactical situation. Liaison activities augment the commander's ability to synchronize and focus combat power. They include establishing and maintaining physical contact and communication between elements of military forces.

LNO Manning

Manning of the LNO team(s) will be difficult. Giving up the right Soldiers will hurt somewhere. It is critical enough that a unit should consider pulling platoon leaders with strong platoon sergeants or requesting external augmentation. Best practices have been to use LNOs with the attached multinational companies. However, the same principles can be applied when establishing LNOs with adjacent units. A battalion commander should choose a team that he trusts and a team that is competent. If the LNO team isn't thought of as a potential combat enabler, then there will be significant issues in executing disciplined initiative and facilitating the multinational partner's capabilities. The LNO team and the battalion need to clearly understand and articulate the command relationships between the battalion and the multinational unit. If the command relationship is not understood, it poses significant issues during the planning and sustainment phases.

The team needs to have an OIC and an NCOIC. The OIC should be a senior lieutenant or junior captain with a maneuver background to facilitate synchronization of the battalion plan along with the company. The OIC needs to be an officer that the battalion commander trusts to do the job as the team has a significant impact on his ability to conduct mission command. The OIC needs to understand the planning process as he may be assisting the commander in developing his plan.

The NCOIC should be either a senior staff sergeant or a sergeant first class but have had some type of platoon sergeant time. His platoon sergeant experience will be key because most of his time and effort will be spent ensuring the company is managing its logistics properly, whether it be sending reports or receiving supplies from battalion. Many multinational units lack the ability to plan and coordinate logistics as well as casualty evacuation.

If the LNO team is using a command and control (C2) vehicle, then it will need a driver and possibly a gunner. Best practices have been that these roles are filled by either a medic or forward observer. This way they are not only just a Soldier operating as a driver or gunner, but they serve another purpose. In some cases, the multinational companies lack medical training and supplies, so a well-trained medic can be beneficial on the battlefield. A forward observer is beneficial when calling for fire; however, a well-trained OIC or NCOIC can call for fire or control close combat attack (CCA).

Proposed Equipment Package for an LNO Team Integrating with Multinationals

The LNO team must have the ability to maneuver mounted and dismounted.

Movement and Maneuver — The team needs to have a vehicle with a crew-served weapon (M240B, MK 19 or M2 .50 cal) if the multinational company is mounted. This will allow the LNO team to move with the multinational company as well as give them firepower to defend themselves. If at all possible, it should not stand out from the vehicles the company has as the enemy will try to destroy the C2 vehicle.

Intelligence — Some multinational companies have their own intelligence collection platforms and some do not. Depending on the mission of that company, it may be beneficial to include a Raven unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) with operator in the LNO team. At the very least, the battalion needs to develop a plan that keeps the LNOs aware of any intelligence updates on the battlefield, whether that be through the operations and intelligence (O&I) net or another means of communication.

Fire Support — The LNO team needs to have the capability to call for indirect fire as some multinational units cannot call for fire. The team should either have a forward observer as part of the package or a competent OIC or NCOIC that can plan for and call for fires.

Protection — Some multinational units will have very minimal hauling capabilities. This severely degrades their ability to haul Class IV around the battlefield. Equipping the LNO team with a trailer to tow behind its HMMWV is a way around this problem. This trailer will allow the LNO team to haul a Class IV package for the company in case they need to build obstacles, especially in the defense.

Mission Command — Vehicle platforms need to be outfitted with a Blue Force Tracker (BFT) and at least two mounted radios, one to monitor battalion command and one to monitor the multinational company command net. This is the most important piece of the package, as it allows the multinational commander to communicate with the battalion. The LNOs must have a plan to maintain mission command while dismounted as well.

Sustainment — As already mentioned, the multinational units can lack hauling capabilities. If the LNO team has a trailer, they will be able to haul supplies for the company. Most multinational companies have little to no Class VIII, so the LNO team must have an understanding of the Class VIII and they may have to facilitate resupply for the multinational company.

Conclusion

In closing, when partnering with multinational companies, LNO teams allow the battalion to effectively execute mission command. The LNO team will allow the battalion and the multinational company to become a cohesive team and to have a shared understanding. The team will assist the battalion commander in providing his commander's intent, assist in issuance of mission orders, facilitate acceptance of risk and exercise disciplined initiative. A properly resourced and integrated team allows for a smooth integration. The task force mentioned in the opening vignette effectively utilized the LNO team which enabled successful issuance of orders and his commander's intent over a secure net to the COY commander for that mission. The LNO team also ensured the COY commander exercised disciplined initiative by providing the battalion with updates from the ground when assaulting the final objective. The LNO team will not provide all the solutions when integrating multinational companies and executing mission command. However, units that integrate and utilize LNO teams sooner at the company level have had successful rotations.

Notes

¹ 2010 National Security Strategy, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.

² Quoted in U.S. Army Europe special publication *Smart Europe*, http://www.eur.army.mil/pdf/USArmyEurope_SpecialPublication-Web.pdf.

³ FM 1-02, *Operational Terms and Graphics*.

⁴ Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, *Mission Command*.

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*The LNO OIC assists the multinational company commander in developing his plan.
(Photo by SGT Michael Broughey)*