

Lessons-Learned and Organizational Improvements: Saber Squadron in Exercises Saber Strike 16 and 18

by CPT Jared D.L. Moore

Sitting in the regiment's manifesting area May 30, 2018, elements of 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment (Saber Squadron), made their final preparations for the first leg of their tactical roadmarch (TRM) from Vilseck, Germany, to Orzysz, Poland. For most of the troopers, Saber Strike 18 was their first major multinational exercise with the unit. For a handful of troopers and leaders, this was their second time participating in Saber Strike, an annual North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exercise conducted across the Baltic countries.

For those familiar with Saber Strike 16, the mindset of the leadership, the preparation and the eventual execution of Saber Strike 18 were different from its predecessor. The changes implemented in Saber Strike 18 converted it from a demonstration of capabilities into a series of tactical operations to increase the unit's readiness while still maintaining a focus on assuring allies, deterring adversaries and, if necessary, defending NATO.



Figure 1. Soldiers assigned to Outlaw Troop, 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, conduct rural and urban reconnaissance during Saber Strike 18 in Skrunda, Latvia, June 7, 2018. Saber Strike 18 was the eighth iteration of the long-standing U.S. Army Europe-led cooperative training exercise designed to enhance interoperability among allies and regional partners. (U.S. Army Photo by SGT Timothy Hamlin, 4/2 Cavalry Regiment)

Maintenance mindset

For a long TRM, maintenance is a key issue. For Saber Strike 16, Saber Squadron's TRM timeline included several maintenance days. The squadron's and regiment's leadership decided to integrate dedicated maintenance days into the TRM timeline as mitigation based on their prior experiences with TRMs in 2015. As planned, there was about one maintenance day for every one or two days of roadmarching.

To maximize the unit's time and complete the commander's intent, Saber Squadron conducted civil-military engagements with elements not actively involved in maintenance on the dedicated days. Between Vilseck and Orzysz, Saber Squadron conducted three dedicated maintenance days, with another two days in conjunction with a wet-gap crossing rehearsal, resulting in a total TRM timeline of 10 days for Saber Strike 16 to Orzysz.

Over the next two years, 2nd Cavalry Regiment conducted three more major TRMs to northeast Poland to support our enhanced forward presence (eFP). With the data from Saber Strike 16 and eFP, the goal for the Saber Strike 18 TRM was to get from Vilseck to Orzysz in five days without maintenance stops. This meant the squadron needed to validate its Soldiers' and equipment's ability to conduct an extended-duration TRM before Saber Strike 18. Saber Squadron's answer to this problem was an event called the "GTA 500."

Each troop conducted a roadmarch around Grafenwoehr Training Area (GTA) once a month, from March to May 2018, in preparation for the TRM. As they progressed, the roadmarches grew from 90 minutes to three hours. The roadmarches allowed the squadron to identify major issues with vehicles prior to the Saber Strike 18 TRM and conduct maintenance at home station. Also, the GTA 500 gave the squadron an opportunity to conduct a full-dress rehearsal of convoy and recovery operations.

Troops conducted other training events concurrently such as weapons ranges, gas-mask training or command-post exercises. This allowed them to continue their unit training progressions in conjunction with Saber Strike 18 preparations.



Figure 2. A Polish army Infantry Fighting Vehicle and U.S. Army AH-64 Apache helicopters with Battle Group Poland participate in the culminating live-fire event of Saber Strike 18 at the Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, June 15, 2018. Exercise Saber Strike 18 was held June 3-15 at training areas in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Participants from 19 countries participated in the eighth iteration of the exercise, including Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom. The long-standing U.S. Army Europe-led cooperative training exercise is designed to enhance readiness and interoperability among allies and regional partners. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by SPC Robert Douglas)

In addition to the roadmarches, Saber Squadron executed full vehicle-lubrication orders for all the vehicles executing the TRM. The lubrication orders included all hub oil and differential fluids as well as the usual coolant, transmission fluid and oil. For the Stryker fleet, this was a very common maintenance procedure. However, for many of the troopers, including senior leaders, replacing hub oil and differential fluid in humvees or any of the family of medium tactical vehicles was a new experience since the maintenance focus has usually been on the

Stryker fleet. Troopers and leaders both embraced the learning opportunity and were excited to execute the in-depth lubrication orders. The mechanics displayed equal excitement to train everyone and decrease their workload on the TRM.

Another common problem from Saber Strike 16 was lugnuts loosening and falling off during the TRM. To mitigate this, the operators tightened all lugnuts and used paint markers to place a visual indicator on each lugnut in the tighten position. The mark allowed operators to identify loosening lugnuts easily at refueling stops or remain-overnight (RON) sites. During the dispatching process, the squadron's mechanics inspected all the lugnuts and lubrication orders with the operators to doublecheck the vehicles.

The preparation changes had an incredible effect. At the end of the five-day TRM, only three vehicles failed to reach Orzysz under their own power. Of those, only one vehicle required a recovery asset to move it. During the five days, the only dedicated maintenance times were the 30-minute refuel stops and overnight stops. For comparison, in Saber Strike 16, six of nine recovery assets towed or carried a disabled vehicle upon arrival at Orzysz, despite five days of dedicated maintenance time. The changes to its home-station preparations enabled Saber Squadron to conduct a rapid TRM across Poland without the need for extended maintenance periods.

Managing assets

In addition to the preparation changes, the regiment wanted to use internal assets as much as possible during Saber Strike 18 to test its internal-sustainment capabilities. A few of the constraints were using military water containers, using organic recovery assets and having no bulk-to-bulk fuel resupply for the forward-support troop (FST) until Orzysz. This was a stark contrast to Saber Strike 16 sustainment considerations.

For Saber Strike 16, multiple regiment external assets supported Saber Squadron during the TRM. Within the squadron task force, there were three lowboys task-organized from 21st Theater Sustainment Command (TSC) for the entire roadmarch. Prior to Orzysz, the squadron received two resupplies through the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). DLA contracted civilian fuel trucks and conducted bulk-to-bulk resupplies with the four M978s (military fuel trucks) assigned to the task force. Class I resupply also came through DLA contracts direct to the squadron. Quartering parties in rental cars received the Class I drops 24 hours in advance of the main body at the next templated RON. In addition to the food, the unit received 1.5-liter bottles of water for personnel as their primary water source – not bulk water or military containers.

For Saber Strike 18, the only enablers assigned to Saber Squadron were combat enablers from the Air Force and regimental engineer squadron, and a small sustainment package from the regimental support squadron (RSS). RSS provided an additional M978 and one Medical Evacuation Vehicle for the operation. For recovery assets, the squadron only had its three organic wreckers and one Modular Catastrophic Recovery System for the roadmarch. One wrecker, one M978 and one tank-rack module specifically supported one subordinate unit, Outlaw Troop, which moved 24 hours in advance of the main body for the entire TRM to Orzysz.

To increase organic fuel capacity, the FST received two 2,500-gallon tank-rack modules after Saber Strike 16. This doubled the FST's organic fuel capacity from 5,000 to 10,000 gallons to assist with future operations. Also, all vehicles carried eight fuel cans during Saber Strike 18, doubling what vehicles carried during Saber Strike 16. During predetermined short halts for maintenance and driver swaps, all vehicles refueled using only fuel cans in Saber Strike 18. Support elements only issued retail fuel at RON sites or for unplanned requests during the Saber Strike 18 TRM. By contrast, in Saber Strike 16, quartering parties established retail fuel at the short halts, and the fuel cans were for emergencies only.



Figure 3. The fires team from Outlaw Troop, 4/2 Cavalry Regiment, conducts a combined-fires brief with members of the Latvian army in Skrunda, Latvia, June 7, 2018. (U.S. Army Photo by SGT Timothy Hamlin, 4/2 Cavalry Regiment)

Saber Squadron largely depended on like-vehicle recovery to ensure recovery assets remained open for catastrophic vehicle issues during Saber Strike 18. With five fewer recovery assets available to the squadron than during Saber Strike 16, this was necessary to ensure mobility without losing tempo. Also, a major concern during Saber Strike 16 was the potential for damage to the towing vehicle during the long-duration movements. With the in-depth home-station maintenance and multiple GTA 500s, Saber Squadron was confident in its ability to execute like-vehicle recovery for the TRM without damaging the towing vehicles. To mitigate strain on one vehicle, convoy commanders swapped towing vehicles at short halts and held RONS as necessary.

The focus on cutting the movement time to Orzysz, instead of conducting maintenance days and engagements, decreased the need for resupply during the TRM. Increasing internal capabilities such as fuel capacity, and encouraging recovery and sustainment at the lowest level, enabled the squadron to carry the necessary supplies and maximize the use of its equipment to self-sustain during the TRM without resupply. The result of the TRM was a validation of the squadron's ability to self-sustain for an extended-duration road march using only regimental internal assets.

'Get there, do something and tell the world'

At a tactical level, the focus for Saber Strike 16 was not on enhancing Saber Squadron's tactical proficiency in terms of key collective tasks (KCTs) or mission-essential tasks (METs); it was demonstrating interoperability and capabilities in support of NATO operations. This is readily apparent from the commander's intent in the Saber Strike 16 operations order: "The comprehensive purpose of this operation is to set favorable conditions for the NATO Summit in Warsaw. We will accomplish this through the conduct of a series of tactical tasks that demonstrate our operational mobility and freedom of maneuver that create the strategic effect of enhancing the [a]lliance."¹ The regimental commander summarized the intent into a simple phrase for all 2nd Cavalry Regiment troopers to remember: "Get there, do something and tell the world."² With this mindset, Saber Squadron moved forward to execute Saber Strike 16.

Throughout Saber Strike 16, the squadron conducted 12 engagements and one live-fire exercise. Of the 12 engagements, three were tactical engagements: a wet-gap crossing in Weiden, Germany; a wet-gap crossing at Chelmno, Poland; and a forward-passage-of-lines (FPoL) at Torun, Poland.

The importance of the civilian-military engagements was very high. On more than one occasion, Saber Squadron elements missed their templated movement times due to planned engagements running over allocated times or an impromptu engagement occurring at a refuel site.³ To prepare for the engagements, troopers cleaned vehicles with on-hand supplies and applied a “special sauce,” internally produced by the unit, on all display vehicles to give them a freshly cleaned appearance. Troopers at the displays wore clean uniforms, Stetsons and spurs, and carried display boards for the vehicles translated to the local language. Messaging their presence and demonstrating their capabilities was the squadron’s priority.

For the tactical events, including the live-fire, elements from the squadron rehearsed for two days before execution to ensure the exercise and key events occurred on time to facilitate observation by distinguished visitors and onlookers. Outside of the FPoL and live-fire exercise, no Saber trooper wore body armor or personal camouflage. Also, at the river crossings, very-important persons rode across the bridges in tactical vehicles, flags representing participating nations flew at key points on the crossings, and only combat elements, not support elements, conducted the wet-gap crossings. The events focused on messaging the capabilities and solidarity of NATO according to the commander’s intent.

However, the events did very little to increase Saber Squadron’s proficiency on their METs. As a former troop commander noted, outside of the six days rehearsing and executing the wet-gap crossings and the FPoL, most of the training benefits were at the individual and crew level. Those individual and crew tasks “[did] not necessarily translate into one or two clear KCTs or METs, but rather influence[d] nearly all of them.”⁴

For most, the deployment MET was the only MET that significantly increased because of Saber Strike 16. As such, the 20 days spent executing Saber Strike 16 did little to increase Saber Squadron’s readiness outside of achieving proficiency at some of the supporting individual and crew-level tasks.

Recognizing the potential training opportunities, the regiment focused heavily on using Saber Strike 18 as an opportunity to increase unit readiness. The mindset shifted from demonstrating capabilities to conducting tactical training events to increase MET proficiency. The changes to the commander’s intent for Saber Strike 18 echoed this change: “The purpose of this operation is to demonstrate 4/2 [Cavalry Regiment]’s readiness and rapid-deployment capability with [operational plan] informed reconnaissance-and-security operations that stress squadron and troop mission-command systems and enables the regiment to execute offensive and defensive operations while building readiness and interoperability.”⁵ This contrasts with the Saber Strike 16 intent of demonstrating capabilities and messaging presence. For Saber Strike 18, validating internal systems and increasing lethality was the method of assurance and deterrence.



Figure 4. LTC Gregory Campion, commander, 4/2 Cavalry Regiment, welcomes the arrival of his Soldiers to the Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, during Saber Strike 18, June 5, 2018. (U.S. Army Photo by SGT Timothy Hamlin, 4/2 Cavalry Regiment)

Improving METs, KCTs

Saber Squadron participated in four key events during Saber Strike 18 to improve on its METs and KCTs. The squadron's main-body elements – consisting of Palehorse Troop, Quickstrike Troop (-), Headquarters and Headquarters Troop (HHT) and FST – participated in the seizure of Rulka Airfield, a contested wet-gap crossing near Kaunas and the defense of Siauliai Airfield in Lithuania. Simultaneously, Outlaw Troop participated in Latvia's Saber Strike 18 exercise, involving a delaying action from the Baltic coastline to a defensive perimeter around Skrunda Training Area. Each of these events had an unscripted force-on-force element and presented each unit an opportunity to test its systems against a live opposing force. Also, outside of necessary site surveys during joint-event lifecycle planning events, the squadron conducted no on-site rehearsals (terrain walks) before the execution of these events.



Figure 5. Saber Strike 18 training locations in northeastern Europe showing the Baltic States in color (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), as well as Poland – all NATO members – with the Kaliningrad Oblast (Russia), the Russian Federation and Belarus also shown. (Based on Wikipedia map by Blomsterhagens)

During the major training events in Saber Strike 18, all the squadron's subordinate units participated. For the wet-gap crossing in Lithuania, all main-body elements crossed and the site remained tactical, minus the local civilian onlookers. At Rukla and Siauliai, all the squadron command nodes tested their systems to receive and synthesize real-world reports while simultaneously planning future operations in a contested environment, which trained the unit according to multiple KCTs and METs. Rukla added an additional challenge for the combat trains and field trains as they coordinated the movement of small logistical-package convoys from Kazlu Ruda to Rukla, a 90-kilometer movement. For Palehorse and Outlaw, the live enemy during the force-on-force enabled them to use Saber Strike 18 as a way to validate their own standard operating procedures and increase their unit's proficiency according to their specific unit KCTs and METs.

During these events, and for most of the TRM, all equipment and Soldiers used camouflage and body armor. The mindset was tactical. Saber Squadron only used military-issued water containers, and troopers and leaders

conducted their engagements with muddy boots and camouflaged faces – and wore their Stetsons only as required for special events. The squadron did not want to simply message or show its capabilities during Saber Strike 18 – it wanted to validate its capabilities and demonstrate its unit’s readiness to assure allies, deter adversaries and, if necessary, defend NATO.

The changes implemented by Saber Squadron between Saber Strike 16 and Saber Strike 18 enabled it to use the training event to build on unit readiness while simultaneously supporting NATO. While Saber Strike 16 provided some training benefits, it was largely a capabilities display heavily focused on messaging rather than unit readiness. What Saber Strike 16 provided was many lessons-learned for the squadron and the regiment that enabled them to maximize the training value of Saber Strike 18. The focus on unit readiness during Saber Strike 18 came with one major downside: a lowered integration of allies into squadron operations.

Outlaw Troop had the most exposure in terms of allied integration during its mission in Latvia while working directly for a Latvian headquarters as a subordinate maneuver unit. Outside the few hours at the wet-gap crossing and the 24-hour mission at Siauliai, there was little integration of allied elements into Saber Squadron’s main-body operations during the 23-day exercise. As comparison, in Saber Strike 16, there was a Bundeswehr Company from 8th Aufklarungs Battalion attached to the squadron for the entire exercise, and every tactical operation integrated some multinational element.

Overall, Saber Strike 18 achieved the commander’s intent to test Saber Squadron’s capabilities, improve unit readiness and demonstrate its ability to assure allies, deter adversaries and, if necessary, defend NATO. With improvements on integrating allied units, Saber’s experience in Saber Strike 18 serves as a great model for future U.S. units participating in NATO training events to increase unit readiness and demonstrate the alliance’s readiness.

CPT J.D. Moore is a graduate student at the University of Kansas in social and cultural studies as part of the university’s master’s of science in education program. Previous assignments include task-force sustainment observer/coach/trainer, Operations Group, Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany; commander, HHT, 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, Vilseck, Germany; commander, Troop O, 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, Vilseck; squadron S-4, 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, Vilseck; and executive officer, HHT, 4th Squadron, 10th Cavalry, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO. During Saber Strike 16, he was 4th Squadron’s S-4, and during Saber Strike 18, he commanded HHT, 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment. CPT Moore’s military schooling includes Cavalry Leader’s Course, Maneuver Captain’s Career Course, Army Reconnaissance Course, Armor Basic Officer Leader’s Course and Airborne School. In addition to pursuing his master’s degree, he holds a bachelor’s of science degree in U.S. history from the U.S. Military Academy.

Notes

¹ Operations Order 16-13: Saber Strike 16; Headquarters, 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment; Vilseck, Germany; May 6, 2016.

² Operations Order 16-13.

³ CPT Ryan Stone, FST commander for Saber Strike 16; interview by author via email correspondence; Nov. 11, 2018.

⁴ CPT Noah Scribner, Palehorse Troop commander for Saber Strike 16; interview by author via email correspondence; Nov. 15, 2018.

⁵ Operations Order 18-17: Saber Strike 18; Headquarters, 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment; Vilseck, Germany; May 7, 2018.

Acronym Quick-Scan

DLA – Defense Logistics Agency

eFP – enhanced forward presence

FPoL – forward-passage-of-lines

FST – forward-support troop

GTA – Grafenwoehr Training Area

HHT – headquarters and headquarters troop

KCT – key collective task

MET – mission-essential task

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

RON – remain overnight (site)

RSS – regimental support squadron

TRM – tactical roadmarch

TSC – theater sustainment command