

Regionally Aligned Forces Europe Produce Long-Term Readiness

By LTC Dan Hodermarsky, MAJ Brennan Speakes and MAJ Oliver Davis

After the third rotation to Europe of 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), 3rd Infantry Division, in support of the Regionally Aligned Forces (RAF) Europe mission, the BCT's S-3, the BCT's support-operations officer (SPO) and the BCT executive officer sat down to try to codify what 1st ABCT accomplished over nearly 12 months' deployment.¹

This was in Winter 2016, so Objective-T was the unit-readiness standard that focused primarily on collective live-fires as a key indicator of a unit's training status. Unfortunately, our BCT deployed across 17 countries, mostly down to the company level, so there were limited opportunities to conduct large-scale collective live-fires. Examining the training events we executed, we realized that RAF Europe produced a readiness at echelon in both the long and short term.

We will walk through a visualization of how the BCT built readiness in the short term at small-unit level (platoon/company), at times at the higher collective level (battalion/brigade) and, in the long term, when considered a real-world leader-development laboratory.

Situation

The European environment was permissive, but we were concerned that foreign forces were monitoring and testing the BCT's security posture. At the time, Russia was overtly participating in military action in Ukraine, so we were aware of the potential hybrid threats.² Hybrid threats capture the complexity of the RAF Europe operational environments, the multiple actors involved and the blending among traditional elements of conflict. This is especially relevant in multi-domain operations, and we assumed that we were in the "competition" phase of operations and that the brigade's role included demonstrating credible deterrence.

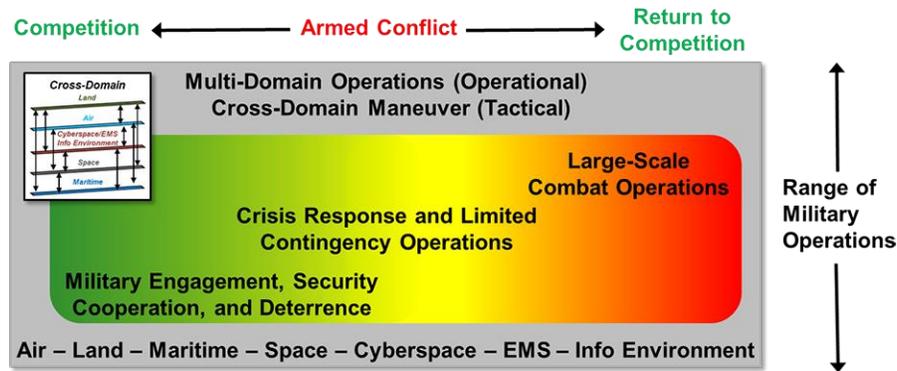


Figure 1. Competition continuum.

Building readiness at platoon, company level

The platoons and companies/troops/batteries of 1st ABCT, 3rd Infantry Division, likely had the best training experience over the ABCT's rotations in 2015-2016. The brigade executed 24 Gunnery Table VI³ iterations, 12 platoon and company/troop/battery live-fires for each unit in the BCT.

Opportunities for squads, platoons and companies to execute small-arms qualifications and situational-training exercise (STX) lane training were countless. Most units were able to train at echelon daily, normally in conjunction with their allied counterparts. We often conducted physical training with our allies across obstacle courses and foot marches as combined-team-building competitions. If mastery comes through repetition, the number of reps provided by small units that aggressively train in a European RAF environment are able to produce highly trained small units.

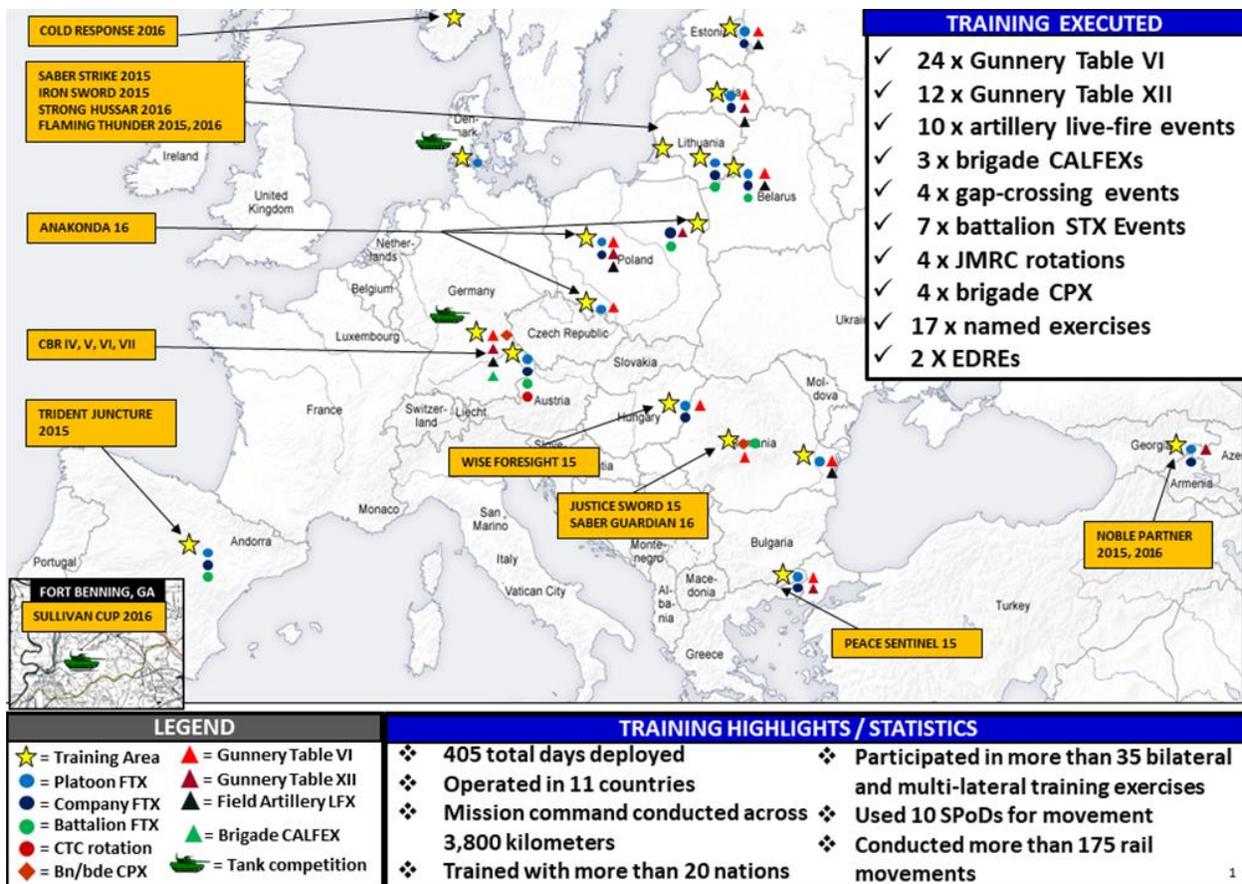


Figure 2. 1st ABCT, 3rd Infantry Division’s training review March-June 2015, September-December 2015 and April-October 2016.

Building readiness at battalion, brigade level

Achieving a T- or higher by the current Objective-T standards at battalion and brigade level is meant to be difficult. It requires teams at these levels to execute STX and live-fire exercises training in day and night conditions at echelon.

During our European RAF rotations, there were limited opportunities for battalions and brigades to execute these types of events with all their own organic subunits. Battalions often commanded multinational companies during exercises (Saber Strike, Iron Sword), and the brigade commanded multinational battalions during Combined Resolve exercises at Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC). The 7th Army Training Command (ATC) resourced these exercises well, but they did not result in bringing every battalion or the ABCT above P ratings.

Where the battalions and the brigade made up ground was staff training at command-post exercises (CPXs). The 7th ATC at Grafenwoehr resourced brigade-level CPXs during each rotation. The 7th ATC also resourced a cavalry squadron rotation at JMRC. These CPXs allowed the brigade and battalion staffs to get well-resourced repetitions in the operations process, allowing the brigade and battalion commanders excellent opportunities to train their staffs.

Sustainment experience

The disposition of the European RAF ABCT forced our sustainment teams to work through real-world problems at an accelerated operations tempo. Executive officers, S-4s, unit-movement officers, forward-support companies and the brigade-support battalion (BSB) worked diligently to ensure people and equipment arrived at the right place at the right time. The RAF rotation exercised all the principles of sustainment, exposing our junior officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to a level of planning often reserved for the most senior levels. The 3rd BSB

commander assumed the role as the sustainment coordinator and ensured sustainment synchronization through detailed concepts of support, synchronization meetings and rehearsal-of-concept drills.

The brigade deployed equipment by rail, sea and air from Fort Stewart, GA, to Europe and back over each rotation. During rotations to Europe, the ABCT operated at multiple airports and seaports to embark and debark combat vehicles, equipment and Soldiers. The ABCT would aggregate, build, disaggregate and reconsolidate combat power multiple times over its time in Europe. This was done while simultaneously sustaining training events at all echelons and in multiple multinational exercises.⁴ Junior officers and NCOs had to be keenly aware of national regulations for movement timelines, especially as the ABCT had short windows to transition between exercises.

Whether an infantryman or a functional logistician, battalion S-4s found themselves working theater-level sustainment plans to ensure their warfighters received the support they deserved. In today's European operating environment, the theater-sustainment command (TSC) through area-support groups and mayor cells takes an active role in ensuring life support is in place while brigades build combat power and prepare for onward movement. As Atlantic Resolve was a relatively immature concept, battalion S-4s found themselves responsible for developing agreements between the host nations and the United States that included feeding, billeting and even contracted support.

Maintaining equipment readiness was a challenge as theater processes were immature compared to today's situation. Our teams moved repair parts by air, rail and sometimes 15-passenger van to units in the field to maintain operational tempo. Line-replaceable-unit repair became difficult, as the brigade Direct-Support Electrical System Test Set could not support armored formations spread across the entire theater. Ammunition had to clear national borders; rail teams had to be deployable and flexible to be prepared to adjust turrets five miles as trains crossed from one country into another. U.S. Army Europe and 21st TSC transportation staffs worked long hours resourcing almost every heavy rail car on the continent in support of moving the ABCT to and from multiple locations.

As the United States doesn't expect to fight a war unilaterally, the most significant learning experience was for leaders to learn sustainment interoperability. Through multiple exercises, most notably the Combined Resolve exercises, leaders at all echelons had to learn how to sustain organizations from multiple countries during decisive action. Understanding the task organization, capabilities and requirements became key. To illustrate, during Combined Resolve V, the BCT gained mission command of a Romanian battalion, which had subordinate companies from three countries. Understanding Class III (B) and V requirements, compounded with international agreements for support, added a layer of complexity that developed flexible and adaptive junior leaders.

Experience in security cooperation

Prior to the RAF deployments, most junior leaders had not participated in a deployment outside the continental United States, and even combat veterans were unfamiliar with the RAF mission. For many of us, this was the first experience with security cooperation⁵ as a primary task.

Soldiers and leaders liaised directly with upper echelons of host-nation defense forces and country teams to plan training missions, coordinate transit plans and discuss any resource shortfalls. The RAF mission was an outstanding opportunity to train with multinational counterparts that typically does not happen. Other than 173rd Airborne Brigade, 2nd Cavalry Regiment and 25th Infantry Division, most U.S. Army Forces Command units do not get to conduct training missions with allies and partners. If large-scale combat broke out, Soldiers and leaders who participated in a RAF Europe mission now have a working knowledge of multinational operations.

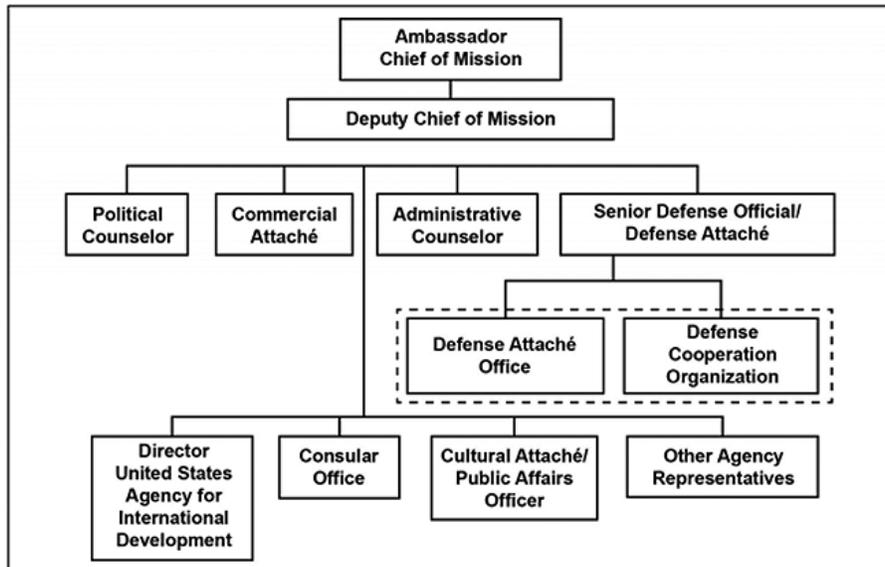


Figure 3. Country team structure.

Long-term returns on investment

Beyond the immediate experience and training readiness produced by rotations to Europe by 1st ABCT, 3rd Infantry Division, there will be a long-term return through leader development. The junior NCOs and officers who made things happen will be more expert in their craft as they progress in rank and responsibility. Company commanders and their master gunners often created to-standard gunnery ranges out of nothing but an open field. They studied the ABCT gunnery manual requirements; walked the dirt with compasses and Surface Danger Zone overlays; and, with assistance of 7th ATC mobile-support teams, were able to emplace targets and execute gunnery. This experience is invaluable, and these platoon- and company-level leaders have built up gunnery ranges from scratch and now have a deeper understanding of the doctrinal training requirements of a mechanized formation – as well as the ballistics and direct-fire control considerations of their combat platforms.

Senior leaders like LTG Ben Hodges, the U.S. Army Europe commanding general during 1st ABCT, 3rd Infantry Division’s rotations, created a leader-development laboratory. Reminding officers of the level of detail units understood about the terrain and battle plans during the Cold War, and how it mirrored what units could hand over to their follow-on units in Iraq/Afghanistan, energized battalion commanders and their teams. Units created “battle books” for their assigned areas; commanders took officers and NCOs on terrain exercises without troops and had professional discussions of how to fight in these locations. This built a bench of officers and Soldiers who now will have a greater understanding of how the bridges in the Balkans affect armor, and how the Suwalki Gap between Poland and Lithuania affects operational maneuver. These leaders executed multiple rail loads and road movements; understood operational reach and tempo at the tactical level; and can take these lessons forward the rest of their careers.

The European RAF mission continued to evolve after 1st ABCT, 3rd Infantry Division, completed its last rotation in 2016. ABCTs now execute heel-to-toe nine-month rotations spread across similar distances, but also consolidate and execute major exercises a bit more frequently. Rotations will continue to evolve, but we offer that the preceding impacts to unit readiness at echelon and long-term leader development are still major factors from the European RAF mission for an ABCT.

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Notes

¹ 1st ABCT's RAF deployment cycle spanned 2015-2016. Rotations were three months (Spring-Summer 2015), three months (Fall 2015) and six months (Spring-Summer 2016). The 1st ABCT was followed by 3rd ABCT, 4th Infantry Division, who executed the first "heel-to-toe" nine-month rotation in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve.

² Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 3-0 states that a *hybrid threat* is the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, terrorist forces or criminal elements unified to achieve mutually benefitting threat effects.

³ In most of the eastern locations (the Baltics, Romania, Bulgaria), moving-vehicle targets were not available on tank/Bradley ranges. The ABCT executed modified Table VI crew qualifications by substituting stationary, frontal tank targets at the appropriate range according to the ABCT gunnery manual. The Unit Status Report during these periods was updated to reflect that crews were qualified only on these modified Table VIs.

⁴ Three of these exercises required armor country teams to deploy intra-theater by sea: Trident Juncture in Spain, Cold Response in Norway and Noble Guardian in Georgia.

⁵ *Security cooperation* is all Department of Defense interactions with foreign security establishments to build security relationships that promote specific U.S. security interests; develop allied- and partner-nation military and security capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations; and provide U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access to allied and partner nations (Joint Publication 3-20).

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

AOBC – Armor Officer Basic Course

ATC – (7th) Army Training Command

BCT – brigade combat team

BSB – brigade-support battalion

CALFEX – combined-arms live-fire exercise

CPX – command-post exercise

CTC – combat-training center

EDRE – emergency-deployment-readiness exercise

FTX – field-training exercise

LFX – live-fire exercise

JRMC – Joint Multinational Readiness Center

MCCC – Maneuver Captain's Career Course

NCO – noncommissioned officer

RAF – regionally aligned forces

SPO – support-operations officer

SPoD – seaport of debarkation or surface port of debarkation

STX – situational-training exercise

TSC – theater-sustainment command