

# LNOs: THE CRITICAL LINK IN CF-SOF INTERDEPENDENCE

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As our Army moves forward with the formalization of the concept of interdependence, conventional forces (CF) and special operations forces (SOF) will continue to work through the implementation of this activity during joint training and operations.<sup>1</sup> This implementation in training and operations is imperative as the future operational environment demands a seamless unified effort between all U.S. military efforts. Unfortunately, understanding the imperative does not inform the practical application of a concept. So how do CF and SOF execute this concept of interdependence? While there are many aspects to interdependence (such as interoperability of communications platforms, integration of assets, and communication between leaders and staffs), one specific action enables successful implementation of interdependence more than any other — the proper selection and utilization of a liaison officer (LNO). The LNO is the critical link to successful CF-SOF interdependence and is the single biggest factor in enabling operational effectiveness and ensuring consistency in CF-SOF unified action.

Interdependence is defined in U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet (PAM) 525-8-5, *U.S. Army Functional Concept for Engagement*, as: "...

the deliberate and mutual reliance of one unified action partner (UAP) on another's inherent capabilities to provide complementary and reinforcing effects. ...[Interdependence] applies to both Army units working interdependently and to unified action partners working interdependently with those Army units." This discussion will focus exclusively on the relationship between CF and SOF forces, but many of the comments and recommendations can be applied further by both CF and SOF in their interactions with other UAPs, whether they are U.S. government (USG) entities, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations (IGOs/NGOs), host-nation entities, or private groups. While CF and SOF can and will be deployed in unilateral operations in the future, this discussion assumes CF-SOF operation in a shared or adjacent operational environment.

## Bridging the Gap: Making Two Forces One

The culture that exists in the Army's CF is different than the culture that exists in SOF. This is not a pejorative statement, nor is it a statement implying quality or

*Soldiers with the 3rd Battalion, 509th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, keep watch from a fighting position at the Joint Readiness Training Center in Fort Polk, La., on 18 April 2014.*

Photos by SSG Christopher Klutts



righteousness of one culture over the other. It is not an opinion but a statement of observable fact. But it is important — in fact, it is critical to interdependence — to acknowledge the difference in cultures and understand that difference. This understanding is critical because it allows us to bridge that cultural gap, which in turn is the foundation of CF-SOF interdependence. This cultural difference is about systems and processes — how a brigade combat team (BCT) plans versus how a special forces advanced operating base (AOB) plans. It's about how a special operations task force (SOTF) processes information and how a BCT shares information. It is beyond what we wear and how we wear it — it is a difference in how we conduct our operations. When these two cultures share an operational area, are stakeholders in a non-contiguous or non-adjacent operational area, or are in some other combination of planning or operating with common interests, the most efficient single touchpoint for those two cultures is the establishment of an LNO (or team). Our doctrine tells us that the nature of military operations is an inherently human endeavor; therefore, it ought to follow that the conduct of military operations and how we execute military operations is also a human endeavor. Rather than using this to inform our suppositions of the enemy forces, operational environments, and civil populaces, we also ought to allow this principle to inform how we interact with our own military partners. As important as nodes, functions, and systems are to the implementation of the interdependence activity, they cannot replace the genuinely human aspect of putting Soldiers from one culture into the other (and vice versa) to bridge the cultural gap.

### **Interdependence as a Requirement of the Future Operational Environment**

TRADOC PAM 525-8-5 discusses the future force requirements for engagement and interdependence in the future operational environment in detail.<sup>2</sup> But what does that look like at the BCT, battalion task force, SOTF, and AOB levels? During the past 18 months, rotations at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, La., have increased emphasis on interdependence between CF and SOF forces.<sup>3</sup> This training is validated by multiple current operations in the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) area of area of responsibility (AOR) where 1st Infantry Division regionally aligned forces (RAF), from brigade to company level, are working adjacent to or within effects of the 10th Special Forces Group from SOTF to team level. During the JRTC rotations, interdependence has validated its relevancy multiple times. The significant highlights of this validation includes disparate planning efforts leading to conflicting mission execution, inability to develop common operating pictures, and lack of information sharing. Each of these observations can be analyzed in detail, but proper selection

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and utilization of LNOs is a common denominator in addressing the solutions. In short, CF and SOF must synchronize and coordinate various activities to ensure the effective accomplishment of the geographic combatant commander's end state.

Additionally, mission command of Army forces is heavily reliant on a holistic approach to conducting operations and agility and adaptability. As opposed to the old construct of command and control — where the underlying philosophy assumed that with more information

and more systems commanders could come close to a perfect description — mission command understands the importance of what we don't know in addition to what we do know. Three of the six principles of mission command (build cohesive teams through trust, create a shared understanding, and accept prudent risk) are examples of why mission command construct requires interdependence more so than the outdated construct of command and control. Mission command's acceptance of wicked problems inherent in complex, ever-changing, and uncertain operational environments demands that all forces within an operational area or stakeholders in a general geographic area develop a strong relationship to create shared understanding, build the cohesive UAP team, and understand what they don't know to help better inform their acceptance of risk.

### **Building Relationships and Addressing the Cultural Divide**

As stated earlier, systems, nodes, and functions are important. But the interoperability that those networks enable is only a component of interdependence. To truly reap the benefits of interdependence, CF and SOF organizations must build relationships with each other. Employment of an LNO is the most discernible and productive way to build organizational relationships. Commander-to-commander dialogue is more effective but occurs at irregular and lengthy intervals. Additionally, commander-to-commander dialogue oftentimes excludes key staff. Co-locating or co-basing, while also highly effective, is often not practical due to mission requirements for one or both of the forces. Systematic information exchange is readily available and informing but is far less effective at developing relationships. To get beyond interoperability and integration, units must employ and properly utilize LNOs in the interdependence activity.

*“Connectivity gives us the illusion of knowing... Real connections come when people engage, when there is eye contact, when there is a hand on the shoulder, and when the conversation is not one way.”*

– GEN (Retired) Stanley McChrystal, April 2014<sup>4</sup>

In the end, organizational relationships are much like individual relationships. Sending the right LNO to another organization is like looking them in eye and having a fruitful conversation with them, to use GEN McChrystal's example.

Much of the cultural divide stems from familiarity with each force. SOF officers and NCOs are being assessed earlier in their careers than in the past, and operations in Iraq and Afghanistan notwithstanding, CF and SOF units rarely train or operate together. While they may have the same home station or conduct operations in the same operational environment, they rarely train or operate together. All of the discussion below is applicable to both CF LNOs sent to SOF units and SOF LNOs sent to CF units.

### Planning Considerations

An excellent example of the difference of cultures is the planning methodologies utilized by each force. The BCT generally uses an in-depth military decision-making process (MDMP) methodology that generates mission orders and is sometimes informed by an abbreviated design methodology. Notably, it is the tactical mission and the tactical tasks that they will utilize to accomplish that mission that is driving the brigade's planning effort. The AOB and SOTF often use a planning effort based on MDMP but is more operational in nature. Considerations such as centers of gravity, target audience analysis, and time and space are weighted much more heavily. While grounded in MDMP and Army doctrine, it can appear to be a mission-tailorable confluence of MDMP, design, and the Joint Operation Planning and Execution System (JOPES). Special Forces teams are, like their conventional counterparts, conducting tactical tasks in the operational environment; however, unlike their conventional counterparts, the missions are often operational or strategic in nature. This is often what drives the difference in planning process. An LNO that is exposed to and can see the fight at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels can provide irreplaceable perspective to both forces when friction might arise.

Additionally, the planning horizons will often be different between CF planning and SOF planning. In the future operational environment, the seven phases of unconventional warfare (UW) will often drive SOTF planning. CF planning efforts will not start at the same time that SOF planning starts. CF planning will likely not start until Phase V of the UW planning process and employment — if it occurs — will be in Phase VI or later. More significant than the fact that the planning efforts are different is that planners at each force are not familiar with the other's process and sometimes aren't aware that a different process even exists. An LNO that is grounded in his parent unit's planning process and involved in the attached unit's planning process can provide invaluable insight to both organizations to better inform each planning process.

Lastly, the BCT's planning process is heavily dependent upon a large staff and leveraging all of the warfighting functions present in that staff. The SOTF's, and certainly AOB's, planning process is much less dependent on warfighting functions because of the lack of a robust staff. The effectively employed LNO can help facilitate critical staff-to-staff interaction that helps each element identify and leverage the other's inherent capabilities.

### Multiple and Alternate Perspectives

Probably the most important human element an LNO



*A 5th Special Forces Group Soldier teaches members of a host-nation force (role-played by U.S. Army Soldiers) how to assign sectors of fire before a training mission at JRTC on 12 April 2014.*

can provide a unit is a different perspective, specifically the perspective of his organic unit. Again, there are several fundamental differences in how SOTFs and BCTs conduct operations. These differences are necessary for each force to accomplish their assigned mission.

One such multiple perspective is the nature of tasks and end states for each force. In general, BCTs will conduct tactical tasks that achieve tactical end states. Historically, brigades operate at the tactical level of war. While modern warfare — molded by the information revolution — has blended the levels of war, brigades still achieve tactical end states in support of a larger headquarter's operational objectives. The SOTF, on the other hand, often conducts operations directly in support of operational or strategic objectives. Particularly in the conduct of UW, SOF elements operate in a different level of war. Certainly they are still conducting tactical tasks (destroy, seize, neutralize, etc.), but these tactical tasks gain operational and strategic effects by way of operating by, with, and through indigenous forces (at the tactical level) and garnering legitimacy for a shared cause. Partnered units often cannot see the difference of purpose between the two units. One unit might not understand another focusing on something they see as inconsequential while the other unit

might not understand the ramifications of targets that they are not tracking. The mature liaison element, grounded in its unit's modus operandi and adapted to its partnered unit, can provide a different and alternate perspective that helps paint a much clearer picture of partnered unit operations. This perspective can greatly inform planning sessions, the targeting process, and other integrating processes and continuing activities within a force headquarters.

Another area where perspective is important is methods and information sharing. All too often, miscommunication occurs simply because we don't understand how to transmit. We know what to communicate but get lost in how to transmit information. Sometimes this is a mission command systems issue, sometimes it is a time management issue, and sometimes it is organizational dynamics. Whatever the reason, the most effective method for mitigating these miscommunication mistakes is a quality LNO.

Information sharing is an important consideration in interdependence. Unfortunately, this is an area where units will often harm relationships by either not sharing enough or not handling information accordingly. Appropriate clearances for LNOs is just the beginning. How each force headquarters integrates the LNO into their main command post (MCP) or operations center (OPCEN), and what information they are willing to share is critical to building the relationship.

*"It was the idea that we were now part of a team where information became the essential link between us, not a block between us."*

— **GEN (Retired) Stanley McChrystal, April 2014<sup>5</sup>**

Alternate control/compensatory measure (ACCM) programs and other need-to-know type operations obviously cannot be violated, but in general, the more information partnered units share the better refinement to each other's shared understanding of the operational environment. Again, the liaison element serves as the critical link and can be of most benefit to each force by ensuring both comprehensive information sharing and ensure each unit is responsible and understands sensitivities attached to information.

Each unit is unique. With this uniqueness, each unit develops its own distinct perspectives. From non-standard logistics to the way in which they see the civil environment, a quality LNO can serve as a small investment that can bring an entire organization's perspective to another unit. This ability to help a partnered unit understand its partner will also help them provide that unit complementary and reinforcing effects on the battlefield.

### **Integrating the LNO to Operationalize Interdependence — Recommendations**

Effective integration of liaison officers and teams is — like most everything else in combat — easier said than done. However, one of the key purposes of JRTC is to provide the force with observable practices that enable tactical success for BCTs and SOTFs. As any unit has experienced, just providing a liaison team to another headquarters doesn't solve anything. We must properly resource and integrate

these LNOs so that they may operationalize the concept of interdependence.

### **Changing the Meaning of LNO**

The absolute first step in proper integration of liaison teams is a cultural shift in attitude about what the LNO is and what the LNO does. The very term "liaison officer/NCO" carries a tremendous amount of baggage. The assignment is viewed negatively for several reasons. First, you are away from your unit (and your boss and team) working for someone that has little vested interest in your success or failure, other than that tied to his own success or failure. Second, LNOs are rarely provided the detailed resources (specifically commander's critical information requirements [CCIR], reporting criteria, and daily communication with senior leaders from their organic units) that are required for successful execution of their jobs. Lastly, the term is usually associated with junior officers or NCOs that go to a higher headquarters just to serve as a communications link. It is imperative that we reframe our concepts about what constitutes a liaison team and its mission.

An LNO that successfully operationalizes interdependence really looks more like an area specialist team (AST) from SOF. They embed during planning, integrate themselves into the team, are viewed as part of the team, and work as a part of the staff rather than an outsider just observing or acting as a radio-telephone operator (RTO). Again, this change in perspective is required from both the supported and the supporting unit. A SOTF headquarters that receives a CF LNO and doesn't integrate him into the staff is just as negligent as a BCT that sends an inexperienced lieutenant with no security clearance to a SOTF. In fact, proper integration and utilization by the supported (receiving) headquarters is probably more important than anything the supporting (losing) headquarters can do insofar as preparation of the liaison team. Reframing our organizational concepts of what an LNO is — at least with regards to interdependence — is critical in the effort to operationalize and effectively execute interdependence.

### **Getting the Right Person**

Selecting the right Soldier for the job seems self-evident. Organizationally, however, we often select liaison teams as a matter of rank, position, or military occupational speciality (MOS). We limit ourselves to junior officers or mid-grade NCOs, maneuver or intelligence Soldiers, and those around the headquarters staffs. The selection of the LNO ought to be more about personality, interpersonal skills, and intellectual ability than rank, position, or MOS. As discussed earlier, SOTFs conducting UW have different perspectives on the missions and operations to be accomplished. Brigades should consider selecting Soldiers who see the big picture and think in terms of the operational and strategic levels of war. They ought to consider intellectual agile thinkers who can quickly assimilate SOTF-specific terminology and concepts. It is not enough to know what to say; you must understand the meaning behind these terms and concepts as well. SOTFs ought to consider sending those with interpersonal skills that will facilitate

## **Operationalizing Interdependence Vignette:**

### **Filling the Sangari Vacuum of Power**

During a recent JRTC rotation, the CF brigade had successfully repelled the enemy attack and was postured to conduct a brigade attack on the city of Sangari. The brigade realized that this attack would expel the enemy forces from the province, but it was not looking beyond the attack to transition to stability operations. The SOTF LNO understood the SOTF's unconventional warfare operations in the Sangari area. Working with the BCT S9, he coordinated through the offensive MDMP planning sessions and BCT targeting meetings for SOTF-trained and connected guerilla fighters to assume the vacuum of power. After gaining approval and constantly coordinating between the BCT and SOTF headquarters, they were able to have a plan in place to secure the peace after the BCT's attack. At the conclusion of the BCT's attack on Sangari, the BCT commander actually met the guerilla fighters and effectively transitioned responsibility of the area over to them under the authority of the host-nation provincial government.

their integration into a larger organization; someone who will not get overwhelmed with the friction created by such a large staff and the processes that define it.

And, of course, it should hurt. If the loss of the selected Soldier(s) doesn't hurt your organization, that is an indicator that you are not doing enough to enable interdependence. Commanders and leaders should remember that the loss of your LNO will be offset by the commensurate abilities brought to the staff by the reciprocal liaison team of your partnered unit. If two organizations exchange quality liaison teams, then they are enabling a far greater understanding of the operational environment, consideration of perspectives, and bridging of organizational cultures than if those Soldiers stayed in the unit. Contrary to the aforementioned misconception that selecting the right Soldier to be an LNO is self-evident, sending an LNO to a supported headquarters that hurts your unit actually helps your unit in the longer term and in the bigger picture. Commanders and leaders invariably come to this realization at the end of each rotation after seeing the many missed opportunities of interdependence.

#### **Commander and Staff Officer Responsibilities**

The liaison team is only part of the equation. Supporting (organic) and supported (receiving) headquarters also play a critical role in the proper implementation of LNOs. For supported headquarters, expectations and critical

information requirements are absolutely necessary to enable the liaison officer. While we want to select mature, smart people, none of our LNOs will have the experience or insight into what the commander wants or needs like the commander or his executive staff (deputy commanding officer [DCO], command sergeant major [CSM], executive officer [XO], S3). The commander ought to consider having a thorough discussion with the liaison team to clearly outline requirements. Someone on the commander's executive staff ought to have an open line of communication with the LNO and establish a daily reporting or communications window. Additionally, the brigade staff officers must know the liaison team's capabilities and requirements. They must understand where they can leverage the LNO, when they are wasting their time, and when they can assist the liaison team. Much as with a commander, the staff must anticipate their partnered unit's needs and assist them through either staff-to-staff coordination (facilitated by the LNO) or by leveraging the liaison team. As interdependence is defined as an "activity" of the engagement warfighting function, it is inherently a staff task.

The supported unit has responsibilities as well. The supported unit must integrate the LNO immediately and as much as possible into the unit's planning and operations. This includes the current operations floor of the MCP/OPCEN, working groups, planning sessions, and tactical command post (TAC) operations, if necessary. The supported unit needs to provide the liaisons with their own information requirements and shape their understanding of the unit and its systems and processes. Additionally, the supported unit ought to be receptive to the contributions of the liaison team. It does no good for the LNO to bring alternate perspectives and attempt to bridge the cultural divide if the supported unit does not consider the team's input and contributions. Lastly, the supported headquarters staff should leverage the liaison team and work with or through them to leverage the capabilities and resources of their counterparts in the partnered headquarters. The success of the LNO rests as much on the ability of the supporting and supported commanders and staffs as it does on the individuals executing the LNO mission.

#### **Conclusion:**

### **The LNO as an Operational Imperative**

The contemporary operating environment continually demonstrates to our Army the necessity for forces to work closely with other forces. Gone are the days when operations and missions in one unit's area of operations (AO) or another district or province did not impact another unit operating adjacent or near another force. The future operational environment — at least the understanding, prediction, and evidentiary prognostication that we have of it — further necessitates functional relationships between forces operating in, around, and near each other. Most importantly, the implications of failure in our interconnected global commons compel us to find ways to work better as a team. There are many ways in which units can further interdependence and tasks to accomplish

this activity. But none of these tasks or methods are as valuable as establishing a quality and effective liaison team to build the organizational relationship. This concept — that organizational relationships are what really matter in interdependence — is what drives the importance of the LNO. It is the LNO's ability to enable operational effectiveness and ensure CF-SOF unity of effort that truly makes them the critical link in CF-SOF interdependence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> TRADOC Pamphlet 525-8-5, *U.S. Army Functional Concept for Engagement*, dated February 2014, is the most comprehensive and authoritative articulation of interdependence to date. It lists interdependence as the fourth of four key activities of engagement, the seventh warfighting function. It broadly outlines the concept of interdependence and discusses force requirements.

<sup>2</sup> TRADOC PAM 525-8-5, page 18, para 2 and 3.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive summation of interdependence at JRTC, see LTC Lawrence W. "Hank" Henry's article "Institutionalizing Interdependence: The Mindset Change for the Future Operational Environment," which appeared in the April-June 2014 issue of *Special Warfare*. Of note, LTC Henry outlines the concept of ACPEA (acknowledge, coordinate, plan, execute and assess) for executing interdependence. The article is available at [http://www.soc.mil/swcs/swmag/archive/SW2702/APR-JUN\\_2014.pdf](http://www.soc.mil/swcs/swmag/archive/SW2702/APR-JUN_2014.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> GEN (Retired) Stanley McChrystal at TEDx event, published 20 April 2014, accessible at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVzcGhZ8Aeg>.

<sup>5</sup> GEN (Retired) Stanley McChrystal at TEDx event, published 7 May 2014, accessible at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jRkACywckE>.

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**Platoon leaders with B Company, 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, create a terrain model during a decisive action training environment exercise at JRTC, Fort Polk, on 24 April 2014.**