

# Small Units Abroad:

## *A Model for Strategic Engagement*

CPT JON M. VOSS

Physically dislocated more than 5,000 miles from their battalion and brigade headquarters, the Bulls of B Company, 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT), 25th Infantry Division, participated in Operation Southern Jackaroo in May 2017 as the sole U.S. Army representatives in the multinational exercise. The exercise was hosted near Darwin, Australia, by the Australian 1st Brigade and also included elements from the 5th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, the Japanese Ground Self Defense Forces, and the U.S. Marine Rotational Force - Darwin. Set in the unforgiving outback, the ad hoc battle group coalesced to engage a fictitious enemy invasion of northern Australia. During the two-week exercise, the Bulls learned several key lessons that will grow in significance as partnered Theater Security Cooperation Programs (TSCPs) in the Pacific become a bigger and bigger pillar of readiness.

Company-level disaggregated operations can (and should) become a norm for strategic engagement. Several high-profile multinational training exercises take place in the Pacific theater that see a battalion- or brigade-sized U.S. contribution. These exercises are unfortunately very expensive and require an equally expensive investment in manpower and resources to plan and prepare. Additionally, the echelon that participates in these exercises must become wholly dedicated to its execution, effectively removing that unit from short-term availability to its parent brigade or division headquarters. This was not the case with Southern Jackaroo.



A Bull Company machine-gun team practices suppressing an enemy location during training at the Mount Bundy Training Area in Australia. (Photos courtesy of the 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment)



**Japanese and U.S. contingent company commanders receive an operations update from the Australian battalion staff during training at the Mount Bundy Training Area in Australia.**

The scope of this operation included only one U.S. Army infantry company. This limited footprint was light enough to allow the Bulls to turn around from a training rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, LA, and reset, retrain, and deploy to Australia within 65 days. In truth, from the time the company's equipment arrived back to its home station on Oahu to the time it departed was less than 10 days. More significantly, this took place without restricting the parent battalion headquarters or the remainder of the battalion's combat power from fulfilling a standard load of administrative, training, and planning requirements. Specifically for 1-21 IN, this meant a dedicated recovery and leave period, four changes of command (including the battalion change of command), three weeks of Expert Infantryman Badge testing, and redeployment of the majority of the battalion back to JRTC for opposing force (OPFOR) and host nation role-player support.

In this sense, the deployment of a single rifle company fulfilled strategic priorities while representing an efficient economy of force at the unit level. An added, though ironic, benefit was that the limited self-sustainment capability internal to a rifle company enhanced the effort to build partnership by requiring the Bulls to integrate more directly with the hosting battalion for necessary support. Company-level TSCP operations can thus allow for greater tempo in regional engagement while also enhancing the development of interoperability during those engagements.

To appropriately represent the capabilities of a U.S. Army rifle company, 1-21 IN conducted a micro-surge of manpower into Bull Company, allowing it to deploy as a complete company as per the doctrinal modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE). This micro-surge filled positions that were otherwise manned by Soldiers who were non-deployable due to medical, administrative, or professional development-related reasons. Second only to the professionalism and competence shown by the Bulls during Southern Jackaroo, this full-force representation spoke most clearly to the multinational participants about American commitment to support the exercise.

This prioritization of manpower for Bull Company to support the exercise did not come without a cost. The sister rifle companies that contributed personnel lost some of their ability to achieve the 85-percent manning standard required by the Army's Digital Training Management System (DTMS) in order to earn a "Trained" status during training. Similarly, training conducted by the Bulls during Southern Jackaroo did not produce as tangible of an increase in the Bulls' DTMS-reflected readiness because those personnel returned back to their parent companies upon return to Schofield Barracks, preventing the Bulls from counting them toward the DTMS standard. So, while the overall readiness of the battalion to deploy and conduct partnered, joint, and coalition operations clearly increased due to the exercise, the technical readiness — as seen through the metrics of DTMS — suffered. Units

participating in future company-level TSCPs will have to balance this metric-based readiness with the less-tangible readiness cornerstones of the TSCP.

In addition to appropriately tailored manpower, Southern Jackaroo showed how company-level expeditionary operations (especially in northern Australia) can be enhanced with several key non-standard pieces of equipment. The 2nd IBCT headquarters fielded several items to the Bulls based on feedback from the exercise planners, to include individual tents for protection from particularly ferocious mosquitoes and wildlife, boonie hats, and high-strength insect repellent. These proved vital. The hosts of the exercise, the 1st Brigade of the Australian Army, employed several other pieces of equipment to great effect, to include solar chargers, jungle fatigues and combat shirts, man-portable radio amplifiers, and high frequency (HF) radio systems. By fielding equipment like solar chargers and emphasizing the use of HF radio, units can increase their flexibility and reduce the logistical overhead for rifle companies operating independently.

Not to overstate the independence of the Bulls during Operation Southern Jackaroo, it bears noting that the brigade headquarters deployed a small mission command element to support the Bulls with over-the-horizon communication and exercise support. This element consisted of two Soldiers to operate a few pieces of brigade-level communication equipment, along with several junior officers to coordinate staff functions, conduct routine reporting, and manage unexpected issues. Led by a captain, the brigade “white cell” was a small but necessary addition to the manifest. Thanks to the help of this element, the Bulls were able to focus almost exclusively on training and integration with their Australian hosts.

As part of Operation Southern Jackaroo, each multinational partner participated in live-fire training exercises at the platoon and company levels. Live-fire training is invaluable for unit and leader development, but units participating in TSCP operations need to be careful not to assume live-fire training hosted by partner nations will replicate training standards at home-station facilities. In the case of Southern Jackaroo, Australian range control regulations and training management techniques proved difficult for the Bulls to navigate through effectively, ultimately resulting in live-fire training scenarios that did not meet the requirements laid out in Army training and evaluation outlines (T&EOs) for platoon and company live-fire training. To avoid this, leaders at the company, battalion, and brigade levels need to have an early and open dialog with exercise planners to clearly articulate the U.S. training objectives for the training (per the mission essential task list [METL]) and determine where those objectives line up with the training objectives of the TSCP. During planning and execution, junior and senior leaders need to guard their expectation that participating in a TSCP will fulfill sustained readiness requirements like platoon certification and must be prepared to absorb a potential decrease in DTMS qualifications in order to meet the operational or strategic objectives of the multinational training deployment.



**Elements from Bull Company load a U.S. Marine Corps MV-22 Osprey with their attached Australian Military Police Dog Handling Team during Operation Southern Jackaroo.**

These lessons came along with incredible relationships and newfound respect and confidence in our Pacific partners and in our ability to operate alongside them in the future. The future of warfare in the Pacific most likely includes companies operating dislocated from their parent headquarters and in close conjunction with partnered nations. Training exercises with those nations represent an incredible opportunity to build and reinforce the lessons that will make such warfare successful. To maximize those opportunities, company-level engagement is the most effective and efficient model when applied along with lessons from the Bulls during Operation Southern Jackaroo.

At the time this article was written, **CPT Jon M. Voss** was serving as commander of B Company, 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division. He currently serves as the military assistant to the U.S. Army Pacific Strategic Effects Director.



**Soldiers from Bull Company integrate closely with their Australian partners during an urban engagement as part of Operation Southern Jackaroo.**