

LNO Lessons Learned:

Tactical Liaising with One of NATO's Newest Members

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When Russia re-invaded Ukraine in 2022, it sent shock waves through Europe. Russian aggression motivated Finland to seek NATO membership after 29 years as a NATO partner, and after an 11 months-long ratification, the country became the 31st member state.¹ Two weeks following Finland's NATO accession, Task Force (TF) Mustang deployed to Niinisalo, Finland, from Camp Herkus, Lithuania, to participate in Operations Arrow 2023 and Lock 2023 during its Operation European Assure, Deter, and Reinforce rotation.

TF Mustang, a combined arms battalion, included elements from the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment and A Company, 8th Brigade Engineer Battalion (BEB) from the 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Cavazos, TX. Operations Arrow and Lock, large battle group (BTG)-sized exercises, took place in Niinisalo and Vekaranjärvi, Finland, respectively, to test collective combined arms maneuver in a multinational setting. During Operation Arrow, two opposing Finnish BTGs commanded subordinate American companies. Our two line companies, Assault and Combat Companies, were under the tactical control (TACON) of two different battle groups commanded by senior Finnish officers. In Operation Lock, TF Mustang fought as our own entity with subordinate Finnish units — to include a recce (reconnaissance) platoon, tank platoon, mortar company, engineer company, and mechanized infantry company — serving alongside our organic line companies.² During both exercises, we sent liaison officer (LNO) teams to create shared understanding with our Finnish partners.

According to Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, LNOs enhance the working relationship between coalition and host-nation units through coordination, synchronization, and cooperation.³ In his article "Enhancing Interoperability: The Foundation for Effective NATO Operations," Dr.



The author discusses mission details with the Blue Battle Group's deputy commander prior to the start of Operation Arrow's force-on-force exercise. (Photos courtesy of 1LT Christian Arnett)

James Derleth, a senior training advisor at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Hohenfels, Germany, discusses the three components of interoperability: technical, procedural, and human. Technical interoperability refers to finding ways for allies to work together technologically. Procedural interoperability involves changes to doctrine and organization to create shared understanding between two nations. The last tenet, human interoperability, builds trust and operational readiness through face-to-face interaction and joint training.⁴ LNOs are extremely important to multinational operations, as they create a shared understanding between the U.S. Army and its allies across all three forms of interoperability. This is especially vital when it pertains to allies like Finland, who is now able to train with other NATO nations as a fellow member. Interoperability is defined by NATO as “the ability for Allies to act together coherently, effectively and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational and strategic objectives.”⁵ NATO interoperability, therefore, is extremely important to the defense of its allies and partners.

Recent articles on tactical liaising discuss the importance of the LNO team to mission command through creating cohesive teams, promoting shared understanding, and providing our allies the ability to accept risk and use disciplined initiative. In 2015, CPT Kenneth O’Reilly and CPT James Devlin, observer-coach/trainers (OC/Ts) at JMRC, wrote about the importance of battalion commanders selecting and implementing LNOs as they will be tasked to articulate the commander’s intent to our allied commanders and ensure they are tied into the mission-planning process.⁶ The authors’ observed experiences draw very close parallels to mine as an LNO to our Finnish allies.

Operation Arrow — Early LNO Challenges

TF Mustang began its experience in Finland with Operation Arrow. This exercise was strategically significant, featuring the first U.S. battalion to train in Finland following that state’s NATO accension. It consisted of force-on-force training between two BTGs, both composed of elements from different NATO allies under the command of two Finnish headquarters. TF Mustang assigned its infantry company team (Combat Company) to the Blue BTG and its tank company team (Assault Company) to the Yellow BTG. Both BTGs started on opposite ends of a long, narrow, north-south range and attacked each other for five days, switching sides halfway through the exercise.

During Operation Arrow, an NCO from TF Mustang’s fire support element and I served as LNOs to the Blue BTG. We followed behind the Blue BTG’s tactical command post (TCP) in a Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV). Essentially a tactical operations center (TOC) on wheels, the TCP was led by the BTG’s deputy commander/operations officer. He and his team had all the elements necessary to control the battlefield from that one vehicle. Our JLTV was outfitted with two Single Channel Ground and Airborne Radio Systems (SINCGARS), but all of the battalion’s tactical voice bridges (TVBs) were given to maneuver elements, preventing direct radio connection to the Finnish BTG headquarters. Therefore, one of the members of our LNO team would routinely go to the TCP vehicle to check in with the deputy commander, or he would exit his vehicle to talk to us in urgent cases. Through these face-to-face conversations, we maintained the human aspect of interoperability. Over the five days of multinational collective maneuver, we built trust.

With their battle-tracking capabilities, the Finnish TCP often had a good idea of where each subordinate unit was on the battlefield. However, they sometimes had communication issues with Combat Company due to intermittent technical challenges with the company’s TVBs. The TCP quickly resolved this issue by using us, the American LNOs, as a key part of the PACE (primary, alternate, contingency, emergency) plan. We always had one radio programmed to Combat Company’s frequency and the other radio switching between the company and battalion fires frequencies. Whenever one radio went down, we ensured the working radio was programmed to the company frequency. We were able to improve the technical component of the interoperability by being the Finnish command’s line of communication to their U.S. subordinates.

The Finnish headquarters frequently used their American LNOs to improve communication and create shared understanding of the current operations on the battlefield. During mission planning, the Finns liked to plan quickly in order to distribute the plan in a timely manner. Due to planning that often happened on-the-go, we (LNOs) did not always get to be a part of the mission-planning process. This sometimes resulted in the utilization of U.S. infantry as a simultaneous supporting effort on the flanks instead of as a clearing effort at the front, causing Finnish armor to encounter concealed enemy anti-tank teams. When the American Infantry Soldiers were sent ahead of the tanks, they were not allotted enough time to conduct proper clearance. One of the Finnish Army's strengths is the ability to move tank formations through dense vegetation at rapid speeds. Since we were not present for the planning of those missions, we were unable to convey the time necessary for dismounted infantry to clear ground prior to the movement of Finnish tanks. Another effect of our absence from mission planning was our inability to fully understand the BTG commander's intent and assist U.S. subordinate units in its clarification. Based on these examples, procedural interoperability was not fully realized during this exercise. An important lesson learned for future LNOs attached to an allied higher headquarters: It is critical for them to be embedded in the mission-planning process to provide critical insights regarding the capabilities and limitations of supporting U.S. units.

Operation Lock — Building on Lessons Learned

Following Operation Arrow, TF Mustang moved 200 miles east to Vekaranjärvi, Finland, for Operation Lock where it became the first U.S. unit to train east of the Kymi River in generations. For this exercise, we trained with a Finnish mechanized infantry company, scout platoon, advanced mortar system coy (company), combat support platoon, and a BTG headquarters under its TACON. For most Finnish soldiers, this was their first experience being led by Americans; they were fully integrated into a U.S. task force and operated side-by-side with American Soldiers.⁷ During mission planning at the TOC, we integrated Finnish staff officers into the mission decision-making process (MDMP) and the rapid decision-making and synchronization process (RDSP). As experts in Finnish tactics, they were beneficial additions to our tactical planning. They held significant roles in battalion operations rehearsals and quickly proved that we could trust them just as they learned to trust us. During Arrow's five-day force-on-force period, the Mustangs faced a Finnish BTG-sized element with similar capabilities. I served as a battalion planner as well as LNO to the Finnish battalion headquarters, so I split my time between the tactical command post (TAC) and the TOC plans tent.

TF Mustang's TAC consisted of the task force commander (1-8 CAV's battalion commander) and S2 in one vehicle, the S3 and I in a second vehicle, the fire support officer (FSO) and his targeting NCO in a third vehicle, and the Finnish TCP as the fourth vehicle. During this operation, TF Mustang again used TVBs to communicate with our attached Finnish units, but intermittent outages forced us to at times rely on our LNO PACE plan. Therefore, I often found myself as a runner between the S3's vehicle and the Finnish TCP, liaising with the Finnish headquarters to maintain shared understanding. I needed to communicate the TF Mustang commander's intent, collect operational updates from subordinate Finnish units, and identify and mitigate friction points with the Finnish headquarters. I focused on the human and procedural components of interoperability to assist the TF commander with his on-ground decision-making process.

While both exercises were successful in improving multinational interoperability between the two allies, Operation Lock proved to be more successful for several reasons. First, we spent more time preparing for each battle period. During Operation Arrow, both BTGs seemed to compete as to which could move onto the next objective the quickest. While speed is an important characteristic of the offense, it is still important to properly prepare for each engagement. By incorporating the Finns into our MDMP and RDSP processes, we were able to create plans that were more successful than the opposing battle group's. Even using hasty RDSP, we synchronized warfighting functions, ensured shared understanding between U.S. and Finnish forces, and "red hatted" the plan (imagining what the enemy planned to do) in preparation for the



TF Mustang conducts a combined arms rehearsal with Finnish allies prior to the start of the force-on-force portion of Operation Lock.

opposing force. Through the planning process, we were able to create detailed operational graphics and decision support matrices (DSMs) that could be properly distributed and studied during our rehearsals. By ensuring multinational representation at the rehearsals, we were able to practice different scenarios and apply our DSMs to build well-rehearsed contingency plans. Before each engagement began, both American and Finnish forces knew they could trust each other during difficult situations.

When liaising with the Finns as part of Operation Lock, we did a better job of anticipating friction before it occurred. During Operation Arrow, we often talked about what had already happened on the battlefield as if the focus of the discussions was battle tracking. In Operation Lock, the leaders in the Finnish headquarters and I were able to discuss future actions within the battle through shared understanding of the execution checklists (EXCHECK) and DSMs created by the battalion staff. It was during this time that we were able to learn a lot from our Finnish allies. They taught us how to use the thick terrain more to our advantage and forecast its challenges before facing them. They were also very proficient at understanding our enemy, teaching us how to better anticipate their actions. Their participation in our mission planning greatly contributed to the overall success of the mission.

Key LNO Takeaways

Overall, training with the Finnish Army was an extremely rewarding experience for both nations, especially considering Finland's recent admittance into NATO. While there is still work to be done to synchronize Finnish doctrine and standard operating procedures (SOPs) with those of NATO, it was very apparent that they are excited about what the future holds. For U.S. units training with Finnish forces in the future, it is important to emphasize to them the importance of utilizing LNOs properly and effectively.

As I look at LNOs through a broader lens, I believe we could do a better job at making them a significant part of most operational environments. FM 6-0 does a great job identifying the roles and responsibilities of a liaison officer. It also describes how having effective LNOs can benefit units. However, more discussions need to be had about how this is achieved. What training can we put potential LNOs through to ensure

they are effective at the tasks required of them? What products and tools can we provide them with to help them properly represent the interests and SOPs of their units?

In the meantime, we can focus on best practices that LNOs can apply to make both the United States and our allies successful. If given the proper dedication and focus, LNOs can be extremely critical players in multinational operations. Here is a summary of those practices:

- **Be Vocal:** When conducting mission planning, the LNO may not be on the forefront of your allied commander's mind. It is your job as the LNO to convey your commander's intent to them. Sometimes you will have to be assertive, but you need to remain respectful. You may have information that could be important to the mission, but it will never help if you keep it to yourself. Be vocal but do not be a pest.
- **Build Trust:** As an LNO, the best way to build trust is to be present and on time. Additionally, have conversations with your allies to build positive working relationships. This will help you to trust each other and make operations more effective.
- **Be Patient:** There may sometimes be a language barrier between you and your allies. There are also many terms and acronyms utilized by the U.S. Army that are not known to them, and vice versa. You need to have the patience to work through these issues to achieve a shared understanding.
- **Understand the Commanders' Intent:** In order to be an effective LNO, you need to understand the commander's intent of both your unit's commander and the allied commander you are liaising with. You need to be able to effectively communicate your commander's intent so your allies understand the task and purpose of any adjacent or subordinate American unit. You also need to be able to effectively explain the allied commander's intent to U.S. units.
- **Understand Your Force's Capabilities and Limitations:** In addition to the commander's intent, you need to understand your force's capabilities and limitations. The allied force you are liaising with will not know your SOPs or the capabilities of your vehicles and weapons as well as you do. You need to use this information to help inform your ally's mission-planning process so that they are effectively utilizing U.S. units attached to them.
- **Mission-Planning Products and Graphics Distribution:** During RDSP and force-on-force operations, it is a good idea to create analog products as a redundancy for the distribution of graphics. Due to varying circumstances (such as quick turnarounds between battle periods, the time required to send graphics via Joint Battle Command-Platform [JBC-P], or JBC-P slant), this proved to be a good practice. Additionally, our allies did not have the option to communicate via JBC-P. Therefore, we replicated "releasable to NATO" products and graphics using large acetate sheets that we distributed to each U.S. and allied subordinate unit at the daily orders briefs.
- **PACE Plans:** Operating in the thick Finnish terrain sometimes affected communication transmissions. As an LNO, you need to plan for contingencies during these situations. Runners worked best for us. During both operations, I functioned as a runner to the Finnish TCP. Throughout Operation Arrow, I had frequent face-to-face communication with their TCP commander and transmitted orders to U.S. subordinate units via our radios. In Operation Lock, I often ran between the S3's vehicle and the Finnish TCP co-located at our TAC to reduce friction points, and I coordinated with them to communicate with our Finnish subordinate units on their radios. The Finns also had runners on dirt bikes that they would send to link up with subordinate or adjacent units as an emergency.

By focusing on the three tenets of interoperability, the use of LNOs provided TF Mustang valuable training though clear communication and shared understanding. I believe that U.S. Army doctrine could do more to highlight the connection between effective LNOs and multinational interoperability. If we can properly convey the importance of liaising to both our allies as well as our own Soldiers, then I believe we can be a more lethal force.



Notes

¹ "NATO Member Countries," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 14 February 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52044.htm.

² LTC Jay Ireland and MAJ Ryan Van Wie, "Task Organizing the Combined Arms Battalion for Success in Eastern Europe," *Military Review*, 103/6 (November-December 2023): 35-44, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2023/Task-Organizing/>.

³ Field Manual 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, May 2022, paragraph 2-104.

⁴ Dr. James Derleth, "Enhancing Interoperability: The Foundation for Effective NATO Operations," *NATO Review*, 6 June 2015, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2015/06/16/enhancing-interoperability-the-foundation-for-effective-nato-operations/index.html>.

⁵ "Interoperability: Connecting Forces," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 11 April 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_84112.htm.

⁶ CPT Kenneth O'Reilly and CPT James Devlin, "Interoperability at JMRC: Mission Command and the LNO Team," *Infantry* 104/4 (October-December 2015): 56-59, [https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2015/OCT-DEC/pdf/14\)%20O'Reilly-Interoperability.pdf](https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2015/OCT-DEC/pdf/14)%20O'Reilly-Interoperability.pdf).

⁷ 1LT Brandon Akuszewski and CPT Larry Tran, "Tanks Need Infantry to Lead the Way," *Armor* 135/4 (Fall 2023): 20-24, https://www.moore.army.mil/Armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2023/Fall/3%20Akuszewski_Tran.pdf.

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