

# SOF-CF Interoperability in Large-Scale Combat Operations

*Insights from the Warfighter Exercises*

MAJ David M. Spangenberg

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## Introduction

Warfighter exercises (WFXs) train special operations forces (SOF) and conventional forces (CF) in a simulated, multi-domain, large-scale conflict against a peer-level threat. While these forces have distinct mission sets, their interoperability is essential for a unity of effort to achieve success on the battlefield. These exercises have highlighted two interrelated areas that consistently impact SOF-CF interoperability, particularly within the division and corps command posts. These two areas are knowledge of SOF capabilities and roles of liaison officers. The purpose of this article is to discuss these two areas, highlighting the observed challenges and best practices from the exercises over the last few years. This article also discusses some unresolved issues still requiring additional attention, and it provides recommendations for improving SOF-CF interoperability within the exercises.

## Knowledge of SOF Capabilities

Reports from the recent WFXs have consistently stressed the challenges posed by knowledge gaps within CF staffs and headquarters concerning SOF capabilities, limitations, and missions. One Mission Command Training Program (MCTP) observation stressed that “division and corps staffs lack a clear understanding of SOF capabilities during large-scale combat operations (LSCO).”<sup>1</sup> This gap in knowledge often leads CF staff and planners to consider SOF strictly as a tactical reconnaissance or precision strike force.

In one exercise, a division submitted “a broad request to ‘provide intelligence’ on an entire city. The request did not provide a specific area of focus, a requested timeframe, or a defined purpose for which the division made the request.”<sup>2</sup> Further, CF often failed to consider SOF’s ability to operate with indigenous forces as a sizeable tactical unit that could help significantly shape conditions on the battlefield. This knowledge gap has limited CFs’ perspective on how SOF missions could support or enable their own.

Additionally, CF have struggled to understand the variances with SOF concerning time and planning horizons. A CALL WFX post-exercise report highlighted that “the division tries to plan between 72 and 96 hours while very often becoming fixated on the next 12 hours. On the contrary, SOF, like Special Forces working with indigenous forces, have planning horizons well beyond 96 hours, often planning weeks or months in advance.”<sup>3</sup>

This is particularly true when SOF are operating in the strategic deep areas, contested or denied by enemy forces, requiring deliberate planning and efforts to avoid detection or compromise. One MCTP observation reinforced this stating, “Multiple attempts to leverage SOF efforts did not afford SOF assets time to conduct effective actions. Operating in a heavily denied environment, working with partner-nation forces, and leveraging unconventional warfare networks typically is a deliberate and time-consuming process.”<sup>4</sup> These variances in time-planning horizons and mission considerations often have led to challenges and mutual frustration during the exercises, particularly when CF requests SOF support within the next 12 to 24 hours.

This knowledge gap has also impacted CF's support to SOF, as evidenced in the following CALL WFX observation:

“From the onset of operations, the group attempted to employ the corps’ fires assets to engage targets in the strategic deep fires area. Some of these missions included targets in cross border areas, which the group’s rules of engagement (ROE) allowed. However, the corps fires frequently denied the requested fires missions, stating that it was either outside of their boundaries or not permitted by their ROE. However, this was an error by corps fires, which did not have the authority to deny the fires mission. This error stemmed from a lack of understanding concerning procedures and authorities when receiving fires missions in support of SOF. Ultimately, this prevented the group from effectively engaging high value targets in support of both strategic-level and corps-level objectives.”<sup>5</sup>

As seen here, these knowledge gaps can greatly inhibit both the needed mutual support and the unified effort between SOF and CF on the battlefield. There are several ways to mitigate this knowledge gap. One significant way would be with the help of liaison officers (LNOs).

### **Roles of Liaison Officers**

During the WFXs, LNOs have served a pivotal role in building and enabling SOF-CF interoperability. Several observations highlight best practices and key requirements for maximizing the benefits that LNOs offer. First, units must provide knowledgeable and capable LNOs. “High-caliber SOF LNOs and additional augmentees (intelligence, communications, and sustainment representatives) significantly contribute to the achievement of enhanced SOF-CF integration, interoperability, and interdependence (I3). SOF training audiences typically embed a liaison team in conventional staffs to mitigate risk, enhance complementary effects, and improve responsiveness.”<sup>6</sup> During one exercise, an SF group provided liaison teams to each adjacent division to ensure effective coordination and information sharing. These teams included personnel focused on “operations, sustainment, intelligence, and signal,” ensuring a “higher level of expertise that could not only inform the CF warfighting functions (WfF) of SOF efforts but also troubleshoot problems stemming from system compatibility issues.”<sup>7</sup>

The quality and initiative of the LNOs is also essential in supporting a CF unit’s request for effects. An observation from a WFX highlighted that “the process for a division to request and receive SOF support was vertically linear, passing through numerous echelons before entering the SOF channels. This took significant time, sometimes rendering the SOF effects request invalid or too late.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, the SOF LNO proactively worked informal channels to prevent the defined process from inhibiting the request, particularly within the time constraints of an eight-day exercise.

Next, along with the quality and expertise of LNOs, the receiving units must ensure the LNOs’ proper placement within the command post. “LNO teams require a place to perform their duties, access to key staff personnel, and access to conventional command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) systems. LNO teams must be located in a manner that allows them to interact with the current operations integration cell (COIC) and joint air-ground integration center (JAGIC) so they can quickly conduct coordination and deconflict operations.”<sup>9</sup> A CALL WFX observation highlights the benefits a division received in doing this:

“The division positioned its assigned liaisons in the center of the main command post as part of the current operations integration cell. With this, the liaisons could easily communicate with the current operations planners as well as hear the command post updates as they occurred. Further, this positioning provided them easy access to the analog and digital common operational pictures (COPs), facilitating awareness of the division’s current situation. This positioning also reinforced the division’s commitment to promoting interoperability and trust, giving the liaisons confidence in the value of their efforts [and] a sense of being part of the team.”<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, early integration of LNOs before exercises is essential for effective interoperability. In one instance, a division struggled to leverage SOF support stemming from its late integration of its SOF LNOs who arrived at the division only at the start of the exercise.<sup>11</sup> In another case, “SOF LNOs conducted linkup with the training audience prior to conducting the WFX. This paid huge dividends with the establishment of relationships, securing required space in the tactical operations center and receiving the required equipment.”<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, units need to provide the LNOs with opportunities to participate and brief in pertinent working groups and commander's updates. This helps the LNOs to improve support, deconflict efforts, reduce risk of fratricide, and foster shared understanding.<sup>13</sup> Update briefs provide an additional opportunity for LNOs to highlight or reemphasize key information that staffs or commanders may have overlooked. For example, in one exercise an "LNO received a report of a large obstacle belt in the division deep area. While the LNO provided this report to the division intelligence (G2), it did not receive adequate attention or analysis." During a subsequent commander's update brief (CUB), the LNO re-addressed the obstacle belt as it was one of the commander's critical information requirements, helping to ensure the division sufficiently adjusted its plans.<sup>14</sup> These forums provide the LNOs opportunities to highlight or communicate SOF capabilities and limitations as well as address any other knowledge gaps or improper planning assumptions concerning SOF amongst the staff. Active participation in the working groups also helps guide the CF planners on where SOF can best provide effects to support or enable their mission.

### **Unresolved Issues**

The WFXs have also helped uncover several unresolved issues and questions concerning SOF-CF interoperability in LSCO. While the units participating in the exercise have found ways to mitigate some of the challenges created by these unresolved issues, the issues persist, requiring more deliberate solutions.

One issue concerns the appropriate echelon for the placement of LNOs and their direct coordination efforts. Currently, it is unclear at which echelon SOF units should liaise with CF. During most exercises, SOF LNOs have typically tied in with divisions. As highlighted above, in a previous exercise, an SF group provided LNO teams to the divisions, which as a result created manpower challenges. Is this the best solution? Should SF groups acting as Combined Joint Special Operations Task Forces (CJSOTF) liaise or directly coordinate with divisions, or would a corps or higher be more appropriate? Arguably, an SF group would become overwhelmed seeking to coordinate with numerous divisions.

In one exercise, a corps' area of operations (AO) fell within a battalion-level Special Operations Task Force's (SOTF's) AO. In that case, should SOTFs or even company-level advanced operational bases (AOBs) seek to liaise with corps or divisions respectively, depending on the AO?

The appropriate process and echelon for CF requesting SOF effects remains unclear. One observation from a WFX highlights this:

"While this process of generating SOF effects requests at division and corps has been effective with the help of the SOF LNOs, it is not certain if the effects requests at this echelon should be specific for SOF. While the SOF LNOs can guide the divisions or corps of SOF capabilities to support certain missions, they cannot confirm or deny if there may be additional options other than SOF for fulfilling these requests. By making the request specific to SOF, units may miss other options that could potentially be as effective and timelier. However, this process of reviewing all available options for general effects requests at each echelon would also likely take substantial time, especially if the request still ultimately goes to SOF."<sup>15</sup>

One other significant challenge concerns the fielded systems and compatibility issues as highlighted in the following CALL observation:

"The SF group struggled to maintain full situational awareness of the battlefield, particularly concerning the adjacent conventional forces. This problem largely stemmed from network differences and a lack of systems fielded to SOF, which could have enabled greater information sharing. The group utilized the Command Post of the Future (CPOF) for its COP. However, the division and corps utilized the Command Post Computing Environment (CPCE). While these systems are compatible, there are still limitations preventing effective information sharing . . . Further, while the group had and used the advanced field artillery targeting and direction system (AFATDS), SOF-CF network differences prevented their linkages, forcing LNOs to update vital information manually within these systems.

“Additionally, SOF has not received a joint automated deep operations control system (JADOCs), a tactical airspace integration system (TAIS), or an air and missile defense work station (AMDWS). However, divisions and corps both heavily rely on these systems to integrate functions and create a better shared understanding of the battlefield. These gaps in systems and capabilities ultimately reduce shared understanding between CF and SOF, affecting interoperability and limiting SOF’s ability to anticipate CF support requirements.”<sup>16</sup>

## Recommendations

Even though several challenges and issues persist, SOF-CF integration arguably continues to improve within the exercises; however, there are things that units can and should consider to continue to improve. First, education is important; SOF and CF both need to understand how the other intends to fight in LSCO. FM 6-05 *CF-SOF Multi-Service Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Conventional Forces and Special Operations Forces Integration, Interoperability, and Interdependence* (CAC login required), as well as capability briefs are informative starting points for planners. However, these are not sufficient by themselves. Knowledge needs reinforcement from experience, such as repetitions in planning, preparing, and executing together as adjacent units. Further, LNOs participating in planning sessions and command post exercises is not enough; units need to plan and execute together. Specifically for WFXs, units would benefit from a SOF-CF planning event and rehearsal that defines and reinforces their command relationships, AOs, and missions as well as coordinates and de-conflicts their operations by phase.

With this, LSCO doctrine needs to help define and clarify the SOF-CF relationships at echelon. This should include doctrinally defined procedures and requirements for requesting effects from SOF. It should also address and define the appropriate or required levels and echelons of command for both SOF and CF that need to liaise and directly coordinate, such as CJSOTF with corps or division. This would help units better understand their relationships with adjacent units, and it would support having the appropriate units participate in the WFX. For example, if an SF battalion is expected to liaise with a division, then an SF battalion rather than an SF group should serve as the primary SOF training audience during division-centric WFXs.

Further, SOF and CF need to continue to invest and emphasize their LNO efforts. This includes choosing highly qualified teams of liaisons that are knowledgeable and proactive. The LNO teams need to report and integrate with their respective unit as early as possible. Further, units need to integrate the LNOs, ensuring placement and workspace within the main command posts’ COIC. Units also need to ensure that the LNOs participate in key working groups (for example, targeting, assessments, collection, etc.) and that they have a forum to brief the commanders and key staff leads on a frequent basis.

Lastly, SOF elements need to receive and operate on the systems that the CF corps and divisions use. This includes at a minimum CPCE, TAIS, AMDWS, and JADOCs. Further, SOF and CF need a solution to address the frequent communication and compatibility challenges posed by the differences in their communication networks.

## Conclusion

As demonstrated within the WFXs, there are many obstacles and challenges to SOF-CF interoperability. While units have demonstrated a remarkable flexibility to overcome and mitigate many of these challenges, this does not need to be the norm. Units can alleviate many of these issues by incorporating many of the best practices highlighted within this article in their tactical standard operating procedure. Further, SOF and CF can improve interoperability by pursuing additional training opportunities that require their units to plan and execute together. This additional experience would arguably serve as the best means to improve knowledge and awareness between SOF and CF. Lastly, the Army can improve and aid this interoperability by refining the LSCO doctrine that addresses SOF and CF roles on the battlefield and their relationships and interoperability requirements.

## Endnotes

1 FY19 *Mission Command Training in Large Scale Combat Operations Mission Command Training Program Key Observations*, Observation 5.1.5, pg. 80, <https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/20-15.pdf>.

2 CALL WFX 21-3 *Post Exercise Report*, 3ID, Observation 16, <https://www.jllis.mil/apps/index.cfm?do=binders:binder.cdrview&binderid=43060&cdrid=143492> (CAC required).

3 CALL WFX 21-1 *Post Exercise Report*, 82nd ABD, Observation 11, <https://www.jllis.mil/apps/index.cfm?do=binders:binder.cdrview&binderid=42410&cdrid=142890> (CAC required).

- 4 FY20 *Mission Command Training in Large Scale Combat Operations Mission Command Training Program Key Observations*, Observation 5.2, pg. 41 to 42, [https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/18085\\_2.pdf](https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/18085_2.pdf).
- 5 CALL WFX 21-2 *Post Exercise Report*, 10th SFG, Observation 14, <https://www.jllis.mil/apps/index.cfm?do=binders:binder.cdrview&binderid=42411&cdrid=143003> (CAC required).
- 6 FY19 *MCTP Key Observations*, Observation 5.1.4, pg. 79.
- 7 CALL WFX 21-2 *Post Exercise Report*, 10th SFG, Observation 11.
- 8 CALL WFX 21-4 *Fort Bliss Post Exercise Report*, Observation 14, <https://www.jllis.mil/apps/index.cfm?do=binders:binder.cdrview&binderid=43462&cdrid=144185> (CAC required).
- 9 FY21.1 *Mission Command Training in Large Scale Combat Operations Mission Command Training Program Key Observations*, Observation 3.3, pg. 34, [https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/FY21\\_MCTP.pdf](https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/FY21_MCTP.pdf).
- 10 CALL WFX 21-4 *Fort Bliss Post Exercise Report*, Observation 15.
- 11 CALL WFX 21-3 *Post Exercise Report*, 3ID, Observation 16.
- 12 FY20 *MCTP Key Observations*, Observation 5.1, pg. 41.
- 13 FY21.1 *MCTP Key Observations*, Observation 3.1, pg. 33.
- 14 CALL WFX 21-4 *Fort Bliss Post Exercise Report*, Observation 13.
- 15 CALL WFX 21-4 *Fort Bliss Post Exercise Report*, Observation 14.
- 16 CALL WFX 21-2 *Post Exercise Report*, 10th SFG, Observation 12.