Lessons from the Underground

How the Joint Multinational Readiness Center Trains Resistance to Occupation

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We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender.

—Winston Churchill

It was a foggy autumn night in the hills near Hohenfels, Germany. Thirty local guerrillas and their U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) advisors made their final weapons checks before initiating the raid on the "enemy's" command post. After days of negotiations with resistance and town leaders, target reconnaissance, and rehearsals, the raid would finally stick it to the enemy and let them know that an active resistance movement would no longer stand for the occupation of their homes. Though the preparation was long and exhausting, the raid's execution was brief, and only a few minutes were needed to achieve the desired effect. As the unscathed raiders withdrew from their objective and melted into the hills, the enemy's maneuver forces were left blinded without a functioning command-and-control system, and they were now a ripe target for the friendly "Donovian" 11th Mechanized Infantry Division to punch through the enemy's lines and finally liberate the area.

Though fictitious, this scenario illustrates how SF detachments and their European partners train to resist occupation during large-scale combat operations (LSCO). Since 2010, the U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) training team, "Wolverines," has been a critical component to the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC), a combat training center (CTC), located within the Hohenfels Training Area. JMRC is charged with training U.S. and NATO SOF and European partners in special operations and resistance force (RF) operations.

This article argues JMRC's innovative approach to training resistance to occupation by placing SOF and NATO RF elements on the opposing force (OPFOR) side of maneuver exercises has yielded lessons unique to JMRC and the European area of operations. We make this point in three sections by (1) describing how JMRC supports combined SOF and RF "stay-behind" operations during LSCO training scenarios, (2) giving special attention to how the integration of RF forces and civilians on the battlefield (COB) helps replicate

Special operations forces (SOF) and resistance force members move to an objective area during Combined Resolve 24 at Hohenfels Training Area, Germany. (Photo courtesy of the Joint Multinational Readiness Center SOF Team)

dynamics of warfare trends in today's environment, and (3) illustrating the value of the unique exercise design by offering three irregular warfare (IW) lessons that are not replicated to the same degree at other CTCs.[1]

JMRC and Its Special Operations Training

JMRC provides a unique training experience for SOF with its location in central Europe and the vast array of allies and partners that participate in training. The significantly higher proportion of NATO force involvement supports the validation and exercising of existing NATO and U.S. doctrine and collects lessons learned to evolve tactics, techniques, and procedures for inclusion in future doctrinal concepts.[2] In line with the U.S. Army's Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, JMRC trains U.S., NATO allies, and Partnership for Peace nation leaders, staffs, and tactical formations up to brigade combat teams in the "combined arms employment of joint and Army capabilities" to conduct ground operations during multidomain operations.[3] Through a simultaneous command post exercise, JMRC also supports maneuver units with a U.S. or NATO division serving as the brigade's higher command to connect the maneuver exercise to the joint force.[4]

The JMRC's SOF Team training objectives leverage the U.S. Army Special Operations Command's *USASOC Strategy-2035* to develop forward-looking and realistically achievable training objectives for the participating SOF units. The SOF Team nested the strategy's concepts of cyber integration; partner investment; and the need to improve conventional force-special operations forces (CF-SOF) integration, interoperability, interdependence (I3) into the existing LSCO scenario at JMRC.[5]

With an average of four rotations per year, the SOF exercise employs a Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) design focused on improving CF-SOF I3 and providing timely operational support to CF commanders. While operations at JMRC are primarily tactically focused, the SOTG employment enables CF commanders to visualize SOF capabilities like reconnaissance and deep battlespace targeting.[6]

JMRC's central European location allows the SOF Team to provide training for the U.S. Army SOF core competency that is focused on partnered operations: "Living among, training, advising, and fighting alongside people of foreign cultures (operating in the human-centric and personality-dependent domain)."[7] The multinational exercise design is a natural fit for U.S. SOF, allies, and partner rotational training units (RTUs) to work as combined special operations task units (SOTU) and SOTGs. Recent and future participants include SOF from over ten allied and partner nations. Many of the training objectives are often associated with irregular warfare (IW) from U.S. doctrine, while in NATO, the objectives are nested more generally under tasks for combined action as part of the military assistance mission.[8]

JMRC SOF rotations typically include U.S. Army SF operational detachment-alphas and allied SOTUs training, advising, and operating alongside RFs conducting an internal defense against an occupying force (collectively described as "SOF and RF"). Exposure to partner building in a LSCO training environment provides unique opportunities for both U.S. and multinational SOF operators as well as the theater aligned RF partners that are not presently replicated to the same degree at the other two CTCs, the National

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Training Center (NTC) and the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). This is not to say that NTC and JRTC do not train U.S. and multinational SOF operators with a RF. The size of training areas available at NTC and JRTC allows SOF to focus to a greater degree on deep operations. The limited size of the approximately 10 km x 20 km training area of JMRC leads to a greater focus on SOF and RF training in close proximity against an occupying force; the nature of the JMRC training area leads to complimentary efforts for the spectrum of SOF training tasks with NTC and JRTC.

A special operations forces (SOF) training unit establishes command and control during Combined Resolve 24 at Hohenfels Training Area, Germany. (Photo courtesy of the Joint Multinational Readiness Center SOF Team)

How JMRC Trains Resistance to Occupation

In June 2022, the SOF team developed and implemented an IW training construct that places the U.S. Army SF operational detachment-alphas, allied SOTUs, and the RF on the OPFOR side of the exercise to provide a more challenging and realistic training experience. The design leverages JMRC's force-on-force model that situates a multinational brigade combat team as the Blue Force (BLUFOR) against a free-thinking OPFOR maneuver force replicated by the U.S. Army's 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment (1-4 IN).[9] Placing the SOF and RF units on the OPFOR side allows the OPFOR to integrate SOF capabilities into typically conventional force missions, for mutually supporting objectives (where applicable) while still allowing SOF to conduct its IW training with an emphasis on resistance to occupation-specific tasks. SOF's role on the OPFOR side also provides the BLUFOR commanders a series of dilemmas that better replicate the complexity of modern battlespace.

This exercise design sets the stage for the OPFOR commander and the SOF leadership to train on the

CF-SOF I3 tasks to achieve operational success. The use of liaison officers between the SOTG and 1-4 IN has been instrumental in helping commanders develop and visualize a common operating picture that takes both the CF and SOF perspectives into account. The liaison officer exchange has been vital in coordinating SOF-requested indirect-fire missions and providing a timelier operations picture to conventional force commanders.

To simulate the stay-behind nature of resistance movements, the RF is integrated into the JMRC-supported "Red Network" within the training area several days prior to the start of the exercise. This allows RF to complete an area reconnaissance, conduct a series of meetings with the COBs, and assimilate the RF into the social fabric of the towns before the conventional forces enter the training area. The civilian role-players provide the RF with capabilities that are required to support an IW campaign in a denied environment.

For SOF, the rotation is approximately twenty-one days. Each exercise begins with five days for arrival and tactical SOF unit mission planning. SOF units must plan, prepare, execute, and evaluate every move and action in accordance with doctrine and unit standard operating procedures. Thereafter, for the following four days, each unit conducts an infiltration into an "uncertain" environment, performs a linkup with a local RF, conducts area familiarization, and conducts combined SOF and RF training to prepare for execution of the force-on-force period of the exercise.[10]

Following these periods, the ten-day force-on-force exercise begins, as the SOF and RF are positioned to conduct shaping operations in concert with the OPFOR's maneuver force objectives against the BLUFOR. The JMRC SOF free play model simulates a limited communications environment where SOF operates continuously in the enemy's rear area. Without a formalized command relationship between SOF and the RF, the SOF elements try to work alongside their RF counterparts to assess the operational area and organize the RF into an effective fighting force. When the BLUFOR enters the training area, the environment officially becomes contested as the SOF and RF elements are now forward of the OPFOR CF. The SOF and RF must work together and find common objectives to shape the battlespace while working to support the operational-level objectives and limit BLUFOR success.

With continued emphasis on SOF support to LSCO, CF-SOF I3 remains an important SOF training objective, and coordination with the OPFOR remains a constant consideration. JMRC simulates an invading OPFOR division with an abundance of fires and enablers, while 1-4 IN physically replicates up to a maneuver brigade. Though the 1-4 IN's battalion battle staff is considerably smaller than a typical brigade-level staff, it does integrate SOF reconnaissance reports and calls for indirect fire into its respective collection plan and targeting efforts. Operating well behind the forward line of troops among BLUFOR command and control, logistics, and fires formations, SOF and their RF partners have been important interdependent partners to help shape the battlespace for the OPFOR commander's immediate tactical fight.

To support these shaping operations, the SOF and RF formations need to be proficient in various IW tasks that emphasize the challenges of operating forward of CF. This exercise design allows SOF and RF units to "put their money where their mouth is" and truly test and, in turn, refine unit standard operating procedures in the contested environment scenario. Some of these IW tasks include conducting area and partner force assessments, organizing resistance forces, building a support network, training and advising resistance fighters, integrating cyber capabilities into detailed planning, establishing a variety of communication methods, and conducting kinetic small-unit operations such as ambushes and raids.

The Role of Resistance Forces and Civilians on the Battlefield

Since the early 2010s, elements of allies and partner RFs have been a mainstay at JMRC, where the units focused on training to resist occupation by a hostile foreign force.[11] Over time, RF participation by multinationals increased to develop RF capabilities. RF participants provide thirty to forty personnel who operate as all pillars of a resistance movement from the different towns in the training area. These RF elements partner with a respective SOF element throughout the exercise, which provides advice and mentorship on developing a resistance network while conducting small-unit operations. In turn, the RF elements assist their partners with information on key civilian personalities, area familiarization, and access to support, in addition to providing kinetic small-unit actions.

A special operations forces (SOF) training unit conducts an urban raid during Combined Resolve 24 at Hohenfels Training Area, Germany. (Photo courtesy of the Joint Multinational Readiness Center SOF Team)

Integral to IW is the concept that activities take place among local populations. At JMRC, the COBs help provide this needed complexity during the rotation through cultural, linguistic, and scenario background for the BLUFOR, SOF and RF RTUs to interact with throughout the exercise. Typically, at JMRC, German and other European citizens serve as the COBs and role-play as residents of the different towns, creating a realistic setting that cannot be replicated to the same theater focused degree at the other CTCs.

The COBs are essential to simulate the operational environment (OE) in the training area and include both key personalities and common townspeople. Where the townspeople are tasked to serve as the general population and backdrop of a town, by design, key personalities have more detailed biographies as they are expected to interact with the various RTUs more closely. The JMRC OE team develops these biographies for those to play roles such as town mayors, police officers, doctors, nurses, shipping company employees, café owners, journalists, and so on. Of course, all elements of society cannot be replicated but the intent is for the key personalities to provide the most relevant interactions for RTUs that operate in and around population centers. In addition to COBs, JMRC also supports training of government organizations such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. State Department, and the Red Cross to exercise their real-world missions and provide the RTUs with another layer of realism to support their training objectives.

The true value of having COBs participate in the exercise is to help RTUs understand interactions with civilians can have both positive and negative consequences on operations. To simulate these consequences, the COBs react to all RTU decisions and actions within the training area. As RTUs conduct kinetic and non-kinetic actions, the OE team works diligently to develop appropriate responses for the COBs to carry out that

represent changes in the local population's attitudes and support. Essentially, the COBs reinforce that public opinion matters during combat operations and not just during stabilization efforts.

The JMRC SOF Team capitalized on this complex human terrain to enhance its exercise design for SOF and RF participation. Like the conventional RTUs, it is within this OE construct that the SOF and RF RTUs operate. The big difference is that the SOF and RF RTUs must blend into the human terrain to accomplish their training objectives. Essentially, the SOF and RF elements must win over the populations from within the towns to be able to operate.

Prior to implementing the innovation that placed the SOF and RF elements on the OPFOR side, BLUFOR-aligned SOF and RF RTUs mainly trained with complex battlefield injects (CBI) as the primary stimulus to exercise their training objectives. Unfortunately, CBIs have their own labor-intensive problems as they require the reallocation of OPFOR elements away from primary training focus to meet specific BLUFOR training objectives that may not be met through the organic free play force-on-force exercise construct. For example, OPFOR elements may be tasked to conduct raids against BLUFOR logistics and command post sites to help test the security of those units. The OPFOR CBIs that supported BLUFOR SOF units were no different. Therefore, CBI development and execution to support SOF training objectives were deliberately choreographed as the OPFOR could not maintain a constant presence to truly test the SOF and RF RTU's ability to operate forward of CF for the duration of the exercise.

Placing the RF and SOF RTU on the OPFOR side of the exercise eliminates this problem and creates ideal conditions to train IW tasks. Once the BLUFOR occupies portions of the training area, the SOF and RF, operate as "stay-behind" forces, and operate in a more challenging environment. This force-on-force scenario highlights key lessons that are valuable to SOF and RF. Interestingly, if the JMRC SOF Team exercise model continued to support BLUFOR maneuver objectives, the SOF and RF elements would not have had the opportunity to train in a persistently challenging scenario, it is likely these lessons would have gone unnoticed.

Irregular Warfare Lessons Learned during JMRC Rotations

The employment of caches to emplace and recover supplies. The primary source of logistics for SOF and RF in this training scenario is the use of caches where supplies can remain safely hidden from the BLUFOR.[12] Establishing caches help to protect the scarce resources these elements need to successfully operate. The SOF and RF elements begin each training rotation positioned in the various towns prior to the start of the exercise. Once the training begins, BLUFOR tactical units establish traffic control points (TCP) and roving security patrols to control the battlefield, limiting SOF and RF freedom of movement.

The challenge for the SOF and RF elements is to determine cache locations prior to BLUFOR units occupying the battlespace. Ideally, the resistance emplaces caches where they can access the supplies as part of a normal pattern of life. Additionally, the RF should also emplace caches in areas that will support actions. For example, if the RF must transit through an area known to have TCPs, the RF would emplace caches outside of that area so they would not be compromised if stopped and searched at the TCP.

Success during previous exercises required SOF and RF elements to accurately develop and continue to refine potential BLUFOR locations and movements, which enabled SOF and RF to emplace and use their caches.

The challenge of travelling in a contested environment. SOF and RF elements need plausible reasons to move around once the BLUFOR formations occupy portions of the training area. Leveraging JMRC's investment in COBs, the SOF and RF elements employ a variety of civilian vehicles, such as taxis, utility trucks, buses, and sedans to plausibly move around the area during normal working hours. As the exercise progresses, the training area soon becomes subsumed with the main battles where the BLUFOR and OPFOR engage in regular fighting with indirect fires and tactical formations maneuvering across the prominent maneuver corridors. At this point in the exercise, the continued presence of "civilian" vehicle traffic becomes noticeably suspicious. After all, who would continue to attempt to go about their daily business in areas with active maneuver fighting? Truly innocent civilians would flee or at a minimum attempt to avoid the areas with active fighting.

Unfortunately, simulated maneuver combat cannot truly replicate the force of earth-shaking explosions, the volume of visible tracers, and of course the numerous odors of acrid smoke that would signal to anyone that active fighting is occurring nearby. This presents the challenge to SOF and RF to develop an accurate picture of active fighting areas.

Success during previous exercises required SOF and RF to be more deliberate about their movements, plan routes to attempt to avoid BLUFOR formations, and use all available resources to accomplish their training objectives.

Balancing the demands of support and kinetic operations. As evidenced by historical conflicts, resisting occupation is not a short-term operation.[13] With a typical ten-day force-on-force exercise at JMRC, it is challenging for SOF and RF to display tactical patience that would be normal to a long duration campaign. Therefore, SOF and RF elements need to balance COB support with shaping the maneuver space through reconnaissance, calling for indirect fire, and small-scale raids and ambushes.

As an artificial yet effective compromise, the SOF and RF elements organize COB support to conduct small-unit tactical actions. This division of labor helps make the most of the limited time during the exercise to both develop the support to operate and continue to disrupt the BLUFOR through kinetic actions. With that said, security is a paramount consideration to determine when and where to strike the BLUFOR while maintaining survivability.

The SOF and RF are assigned initial locations within the different towns during the exercise. There is no requirement for SOF and RF to remain within those locations. The exercise design affords SOF and RF freedom of choice to make decisions and move as they see fit based on their understanding of the BLUFOR maneuver. If desired, they could move to another town or even a remote patrol base to continue to operate.

Success during previous exercises required SOF and RF elements to consider if their actions were not only visible to the BLUFOR but what effect it had on the civilian population. SOF and RF success used the concept known as the "threshold of violence" to determine if their actions could compromise their forces by the BLUFOR or lose the support of the civilian population.[14] With each passing exercise day SOF and RF are asked to achieve increased effects, and the risk to their force increases. The process used to assess the risk is the real value in attempting to balance support with kinetic operations.

Conclusion

Training at JMRC provides a unique experience for U.S. SOF to advise, assist, and accompany partner resistance forces forward of CF during exercises. It enables SOF and RF to highlight ways to learn what works to meet training objectives. Placing the SOF and RF elements on the OPFOR side of the exercise enabled this complex environment for SOF and RF to navigate. This design has created a completely free-play force-on-force exercise that affords these elements the opportunity to train forward of CF. SOF and RF participants can learn the second- and third-order effects of their actions, such as identifying effective cache locations, travelling in contested environments, and balancing support with kinetic operations.

U.S. Army Special Operations Command and its subordinate commands, the 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) and U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, should consider JMRC as an IW training ground for U.S. SOF. Continued (or increased) participation in JMRC's multinational LSCO rotations will only benefit U.S. SOF formations whether they are preparing for operations in the European theater or globally as LSCO scenarios will require participation from various, if not all, U.S. SOF elements. ■

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Notes

Epigraph. "Never Surrender," International Churchill Society, accessed 18 September 2024, https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/famous-quotations-and-stories/. This quote was part of a speech given by Winston Churchill in front of the House of Commons on 4 June 1940, following the evacuation of British and French armies from Dunkirk.

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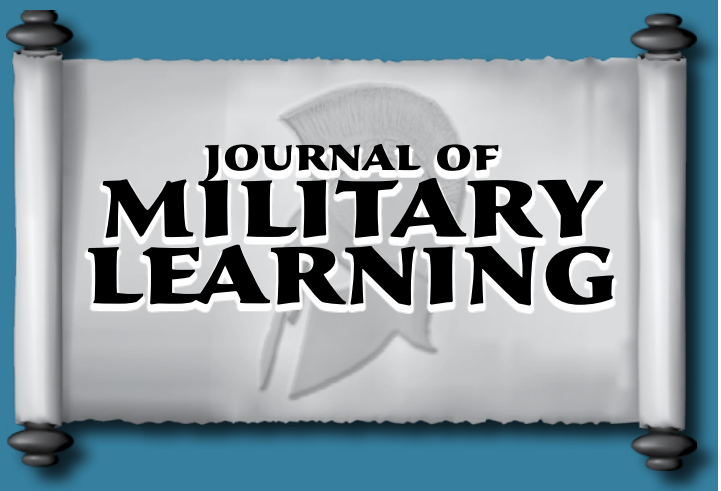

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