

Design to Execution Into the Suwalki Gap

Col. Charles Kemper, Minnesota Army National Guard

Maj. Jacob Helgestad, Minnesota Army National Guard

Maj. Nathan Colvin, U.S. Army

Maj. Simon Cox, British Royal Marines

Saber Strike is a United States Army Europe (USAREUR) joint/combined exercise focused in the Baltic region of Europe. The annual exercise looks to improve interoperability among NATO allies and partner nations through a series of tactical exercises in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. For Saber Strike 2017, a single tactical action was used to exercise related aspects of all levels of war (i.e., strategic, operational, and tactical) in a demonstration of the Alliance's

commitment to maintaining the independence of the Baltic States through deterrence.

Among the many component situational and field training exercises that entailed Saber Strike 2017, the decisive operation for the exercise was a multinational air assault (AASLT), attack on an objective, and a forward passage of lines (FPOL) in southern Lithuania. The mission demonstrated the ability of the combined force to execute a decisive tactical action, sequenced in time,



Previous page: Soldiers from Bravo Company, 2nd Combined Arms Battalion, 136th Infantry Regiment (Minnesota Army National Guard), exit a CH-47 on 17 June 2017 during an air assault into the Suwalki Gap in southern Lithuania. Bravo Company provided an infantry platoon to X-Ray Company, 45 Commando British Royal Marines, for the exercise. (Photo courtesy of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Minnesota Army National Guard Public Affairs)

space, and purpose in conjunction with other tactical actions in Saber Strike to support an operational plan aimed at creating a theater strategic effect. The focus of this paper is on the operations conducted in the Suwalki Gap in southern Lithuania (see figure 1, page 3).

Exercise Objectives and Preparation

USAREUR identified three specific training objectives for Saber Strike 2017. The training objectives emerged from a strategic desire to deter outside actors seeking to undermine the cohesion of the Alliance by demonstrating the ability of USAREUR and NATO to speedily assemble, decide, and act in a contested environment.

The first, and most challenging, objective was improving interoperability between the forces of the United States, NATO allies, and partner nations. Interoperability is more than just the ability to communicate via radio or other electronic means. The fundamental component is the ability to operate tactically as a task force. This requires making dissimilar national doctrine, equipment, and procedures

compatible with one another while also

Col. Charles Kemper, Minnesota Army National Guard, is the commander of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division (1/34 ABCT), and director of Post Market Quality at Boston Scientific. He is a graduate of the Army War College and has an MBA from the University of Illinois. He most recently served as the division operations officer, 34th Infantry Division.

Maj. Jacob Helgestad, Minnesota Army National Guard, is the operations officer of 1/34 ABCT. He is a graduate of the School of Advance Military Studies and has a master's degree in strategic leadership from American Military University. He most recently served as the deputy chief of plans and chief of future operations for 34th Infantry Division.

coping with complications stemming from the legacy of different security experiences among the forces as well as the use of different languages.

The second objective was to conduct a multinational AASLT into the Suwalki Gap using U.S. Army aviation assets brought to eastern Europe under Operation Atlantic Resolve. The third objective was to conduct a FPOL of enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) Battle Group Poland to eFP Battle Group Lithuania.¹

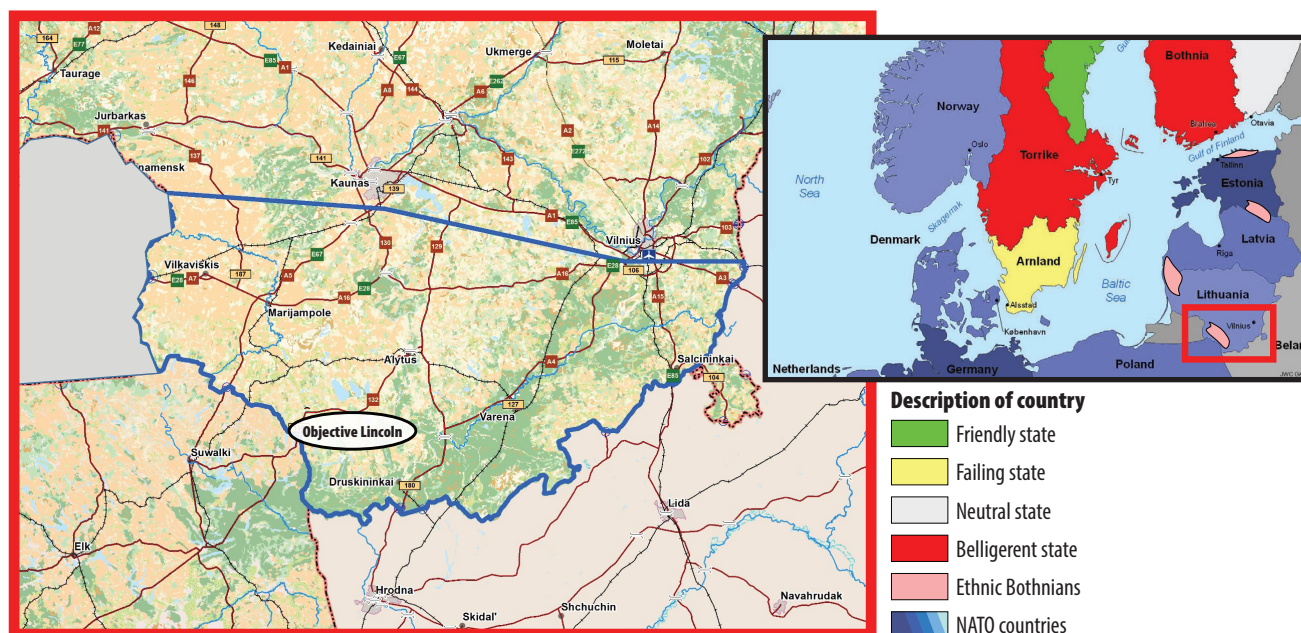
The Suwalki Gap is a sixty-mile-wide piece of strategically important land connecting Poland and Lithuania. The Gap offers a corridor for NATO to pass ground troops into the Baltic region during combat operations, or for Russia as the closest land route to push troops to Kaliningrad. The Suwalki Gap is clearly vital ground. The AASLT into, and FPOL through, the Suwalki Gap was meant to demonstrate the combat power and interoperability of the NATO alliance while simultaneously identifying continued compatibility challenges.

Training Area. No military installation exists in the Lithuanian portion of the Suwalki Gap. However, the Lithuanian National Defense Volunteer Force (NDVF) conducting their annual Strong Shield exercise within the Suwalki Gap allowed for a linking of exercises. Strong Shield encompassed an area covering approximately

forty kilometers by forty kilometers, offering substantial training space for the AASLT and attack of

Maj. Nathan Colvin, U.S. Army, is the operations officer of 3rd General Support Aviation Battalion, 10th Aviation Regiment, 10th Combat Aviation Brigade, Fort Drum, New York. He is a graduate of the School of Advance Military Studies and holds master's degrees from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and Central Michigan University. He recently completed the Strategic Broadening Seminar at the Intermediate Command and Staff Course (Land) at Joint Command and Staff College, Shrivenham, United Kingdom.

Maj. Simon Cox, British Royal Marines, is the company commander, X-Ray Company, 45 Commando Royal Marines. He has completed the Advanced Amphibious Warfare Course and Intermediate Command and Staff Course (Land) at Joint Command and Staff College, Shrivenham, United Kingdom. He most recently served as amphibious planner at Striking and Support Forces NATO, Lisbon, Portugal.



(Photo courtesy of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Minnesota Army National Guard Public Affairs)

Figure 1. Exercise Saber Strike 2017 Operations Conducted in the Suwalki Gap in Southern Lithuania

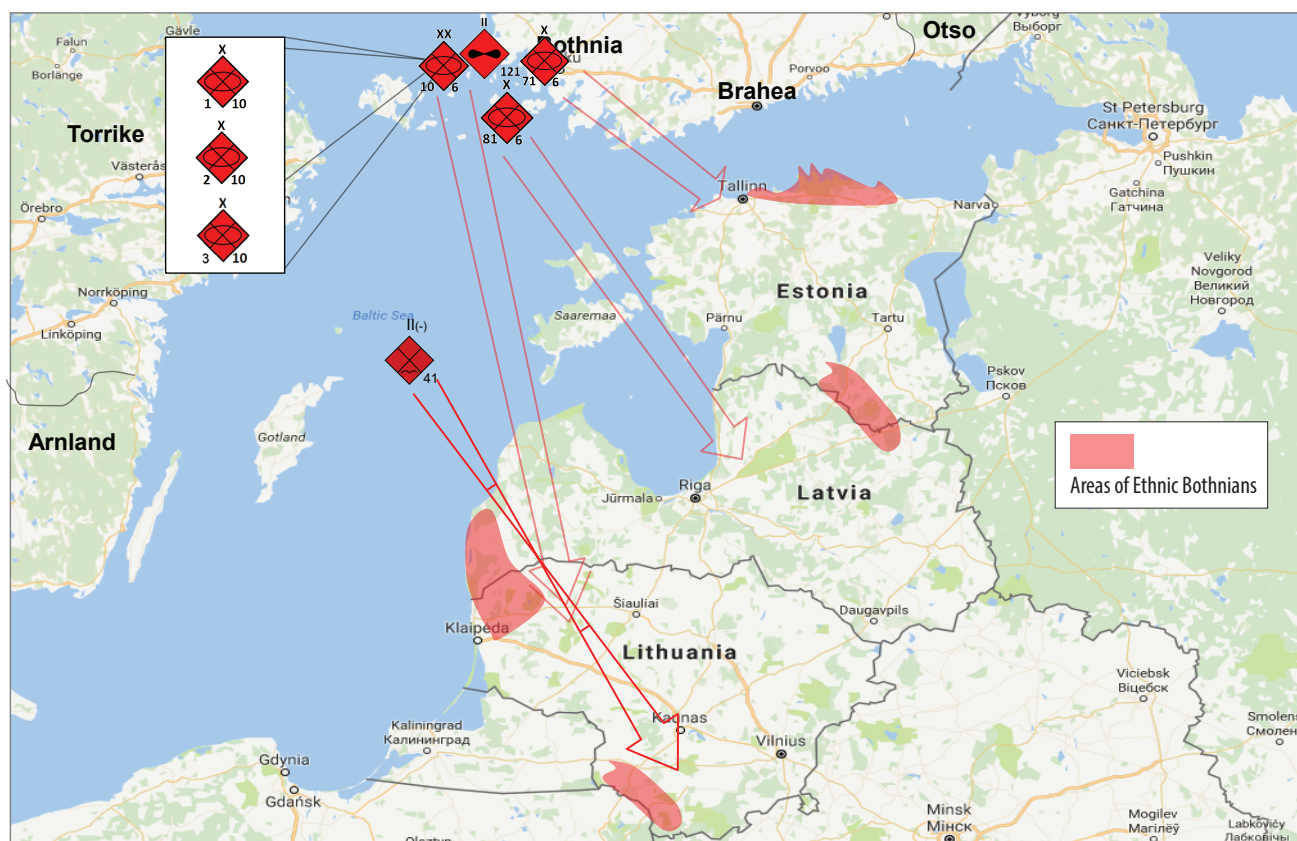
an objective. The training area itself was civilian-owned land, coordinated by the Lithuanian military for use by the AASLT Task Force. Although all helicopter landing zones required coordination and certification prior to landing, because of the Lithuanian coordination with local landowners the ground force had freedom of movement on their patrol routes to the objective. On the training objective, the opposing force established themselves to allow for the continued flow of civilian traffic while simultaneously preparing a deliberate defense.

Scenario design. In order to provide a shared understanding of the operational picture driving Saber Strike 2017, and specifically the AASLT, attack, and FPOL, USAREUR used the Skolkan scenario as the architecture for the opposing force. The Skolkan scenario supports a NATO Article 5 response, focused on “preserving the territorial integrity of NATO members”² The final opposing force scheme of maneuver was a multibrigade attack into the Baltics, with Lithuania itself having a single enemy division attacking to isolate the capital and seize key terrain in the Suwalki Gap. Additionally, a notional enemy airborne battalion jumped into the Suwalki Gap to seize the two roads that run north and south through the gap and connect Poland and Lithuania (see figure 2, page 4).

In the initial stages of the training scenario, the notional enemy airborne battalion deployed a reinforced company-sized element that established positions on the identified objective for the exercise. Spanning approximately twelve kilometers along Highway 132, Objective Lincoln was the objective for the AASLT task force to seize. Objective Lincoln was further divided into three smaller objectives: Adams, Bush, Carter, all key intersections on Highway 132.

As a common language, doctrine enables combined arms operations. In this exercise, the AASLT planning occurred using the U.S. Army 101st Airborne Division’s *Air Assault Gold Book*, the standard in the U.S. XVIII Airborne Corps, and Field Manual 3-99, *Airborne and Air Assault Operations*.

Force structure. For this component of Saber Strike, the seizing of Objective Lincoln via an AASLT and subsequent FPOL, identifying a coordinating headquarters, a ground task force, and an aviation task force were the critical first steps to building the force structure. The task of developing the force structure for the mission fell to the USAREUR Saber Strike planners; looking to have a brigade-level lead proved challenging as all brigades participating in Saber Strike 2017 were decisively engaged in their specific part of the exercise. The exception



(Photo courtesy of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Minnesota Army National Guard Public Affairs)

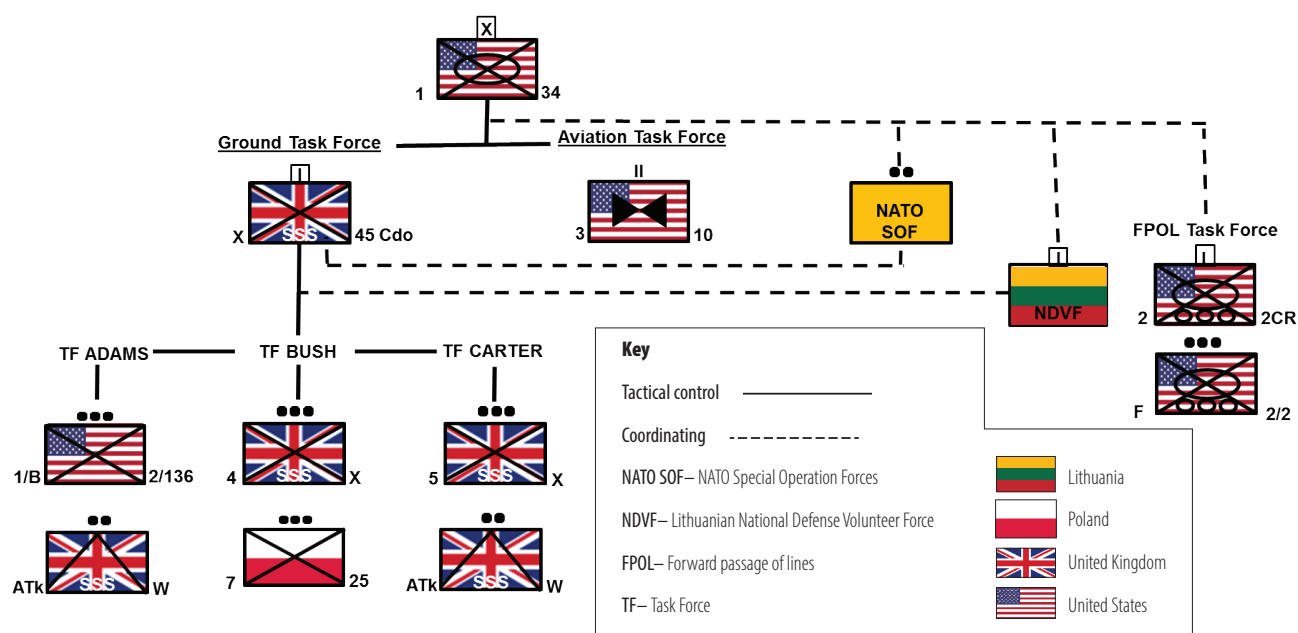
Figure 2. Phase II of Exercise Saber Strike 2017—a Notional Enemy Airborne Battalion Jumps into the Suwalki Gap to Seize Key Terrain

was 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Minnesota Army National Guard (1/34 ABCT), which formed the foundation of the U.S. contingent of the Saber Strike Exercise Control Group. 1/34 ABCT became the air assault headquarters, gained responsibility as the coordinating headquarters for all parties involved, and became Task Force Red Bull (see figure 3, page 5). Col. Charles Kemper commanded 1/34 ABCT and subsequently became the commander of Task Force Red Bull with the task force staff comprised of members of the 1/34 staff. Eventually, Task Force Red Bull received staff augmentation from the Croatian Air Force, the Lithuanian Air Force, and the Lithuanian National Defense Force.

Finding elements for the ground tactical force proved no less challenging. All infantry units in Lithuania were already engaged in other events. USAREUR expanded its search to Latvia and Poland eventually securing X-Ray Company, 45 Commando

British Royal Marines (X-Ray, 45 Commando) as the foundation for the ground tactical force. Additional ground forces came from Bravo Company, 2nd Combined Arms Battalion, 136th Infantry, Minnesota Army National Guard, and 7th Air Cavalry Battalion, 25th Air Cavalry Brigade from the Polish Army. Taken all together, these forces came to form the ground task force. Finally, for the air component USAREUR benefited from the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade's deployment to Europe as a rotational force with 3rd General Support Aviation Battalion, 10th Aviation Regiment (3-10 AVN REGT) identified as the aviation task force.

The FPOL required its own force structure in addition to the one needed for the AASLT. The focus of the FPOL was the eFP Battle Group Poland and Lithuania. Specifically, Fox Troop 2nd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment (F/2/2 CR), with forces from Romania and United Kingdom, forming Task Force Cougar conducting the FPOL. The intent was a FPOL that passed an



(Photo courtesy of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Minnesota Army National Guard Public Affairs)

Figure 3. Task Force Red Bull Task Organization

element of the Polish Battle Group, Task Force Cougar, through the Suwalki Gap to reinforce the German-led battle group in Rukla, Lithuania.

Finally, NDVF provided opposing forces for both the aviation and ground elements. During subsequent conferences, coordination, and planning sessions elements of Special Operations and United States Air Force joined the Task Force Red Bull as enablers and multipliers.

Staging area. Since there was no designated training area in the Suwalki Gap, there was also no area in the region large enough for Task Force Red Bull, the ground tactical force, and aviation task force, to stage prior to execution. The Lithuanians offered Kuzla Ruda Airbase as an option to stage the Air Assault Task Force. As an abandoned airfield, Kuzla Ruda had the bed down space for all the helicopter airframes. Additionally, it provided barracks for X-Ray, 45 Commando coming from Latvia and the Polish soldiers coming from Poland. Finally, the space around the airfield offered ample room for 1/34 ABCT tactical command post (TAC), 3-10 AVN REGT command post, and all respective company command posts.

Of the task force elements identified for execution, only 1/34 ABCT and the NDVF staged in Lithuania for the duration of the exercise. Throughout the Baltic region and Poland, 3-10 AVN REGT had elements supporting

all operations only converging on Kuzla Ruda at the ninety-six hours prior to the AASLT execution. When 3-10 AVN REGT moved from Latvia they flew X-Ray, 45 Commando to Kuzla Ruda, one of the many logistical coordination pieces resolved during the planning process.

Logistical network. The development of a logistical network to support the AASLT task force at both Kuzla Ruda and in the Suwalki Gap proved the most difficult obstacle to overcome. However, one can argue it was also the most important. As strategically important as the Suwalki Gap is, it is “logistics that bring troops to this point.”⁵ It not only required coordination amongst the participating units but also between Lithuania and the parent nations of the participating units. In its role as exercise sponsor, the G-4 (Logistics) USAREUR proved invaluable as the organization to receive and coordinate all statements of requirement. The statements of requirement are a contracting agreement between nations that clearly identify the classes and funding of supply required by each respective nation.

Operation Lake Superior: The Suwalki Gap

Operation Lake Superior—the name given to this operation—was a five-phased operation to seize Objective Lincoln (key terrain), open ground lines of



communication, and conduct a FPOL in the Suwalki Gap. A multinational AASLT task force (Task Force Red Bull), comprised of an aviation task force and ground tactical force, became the foundation to execute Operation Lake Superior. The execution of the air assault was the most complex phase of the operation. It required a shared understanding and sequencing of events in time and space from army, marine, and air force units represented from six nations, all of which had never previously worked together.

Air Assault Task Force Headquarters (Task Force Red Bull: 1/34 ABCT). As an armored brigade combat team, acting as the tactical headquarters for an air assault is a unique mission set. For this exercise, 1/34 ABCT had three training objectives: conduct an attack, conduct an air assault, and conduct expeditionary deployment operations. For execution, 1/34 ABCT deployed its TAC to Lithuania, capitalizing on an excellent training opportunity and expanding upon lessons learned at 1/34 ABCT National Training Center rotation 16-07.

Upon USAREUR publishing the operations order for Operation Lake Superior, the staff of 1/34 ABCT

Maj. Simon Cox, commander of X-Ray Company, 45 Commando Royal Marines, talks with soldiers from 7th Air Cavalry Battalion, 25th Air Cavalry Brigade, Polish army, 15 June 2017 near the pick-up zone in Kuzla Ruda, Lithuania. The 7th Air Cavalry Battalion provided a platoon to the Royal Marines for their air assault into the Suwalki Gap. (Photo by 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Minnesota Army National Guard Public Affairs)

initiated the military decision-making process during its monthly drill assemblies. Even though the exercise coordination dictated items like the landing zones and objectives, there remained enough of a requirement for planning and development of planning products that the staff received invaluable training. The staff focused on sequencing the operation in time and space, developing the timeline using the ninety-six-hour planning window described in the *Gold Book*. The sequencing enabled synchronization across Task Force Red Bull, ensuring unity of effort toward a common goal of the AASLT, attack on Objective Lincoln, and FPOL.

Execution sequencing occurred through the publication of a clear commander's intent and allocation of key tasks. These two items enabled a shared



The 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division (1/34 ABCT), Minnesota Army National Guard tactical command post is camouflaged 17 June 2017 in the Suwalki Gap, Lithuania, as elements of 3/10 General Support Aviation Battalion fly on the horizon. 1/34 ABCT provided mission command of a multinational air assault and forward passage of lines in the Suwalki Gap during Exercise Saber Strike 2017. (Photo courtesy of the 1/34 ABCT Public Affairs)

understanding among all forces operating in the task force. The ground commander's understanding of the intent and key tasks allowed him to exercise disciplined initiative when communications failed. Overall, phasing of the operation by Task Force Red Bull enabled the principles of mission command and clear sequencing of the operation in time and space.

With a newly formed task force, which had never worked together, the decision to make each phase a clear, concise step supported interoperability and sequencing. These phases consisted of the following:

- Phase One: Planning and assembly of the task force
- Phase Two: Air assault
- Phase Three: Attack
- Phase Four: Consolidation and reorganize
- Phase Five: Forward passage of lines

Sequenced to enable synchronization in time and space, the articulation of each phase's end state supported a shared understanding, reinforced during rehearsals.

Although the *Gold Book* prescribes a ninety-six-hour planning window, this assumes all forces are co-located.³ 1/34 published its operation order three months prior to execution due to the operational tempo of all units in the task force. This allowed the aviation and ground elements to staff the order prior to execution. Prior to the entire task force forming, an opportunity presented itself in early June to execute the air mission coordination meeting. This meeting paid huge dividends as it presented the first opportunity for all elements of the task force to meet and initiate dialogue.

The focus for 1/34 ABCT while at Kuzla Ruda, the staging area, was execution of the air mission brief and the task force combined arms rehearsal (CAR). Both events synchronized Task Force Red Bull in time and space and built a shared understanding for the aviation and ground elements. Of significant importance at the CAR were the addition of special operations forces (SOF) and the Lithuanian Joint Tactical Air Controller (JTAC) responsible for all air space control within the restricted air space created for the exercise and representatives from F/2/2 CR. Having SOF brief during the CAR ensured a shared understanding amongst all elements of Task Force Red Bull on how they planned to infiltrate into the area of operations to conduct suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD). This synchronized the JTAC controlling fixed wing assets dedicated to conducting SEAD with Task Force Red Bull. Furthermore, this validated 1/34

ABCT's decision support matrix and launch criteria for the AASLT with 3-10 AVN REGT flying the mission and X-Ray, 45 Commando receiving intelligence from SOF once on the ground. The participation of F/2/2 CR ensured good coordination of the conduct of the FPOL, specifically the link-up procedures, the designated checkpoints in the passage lane, and the battle handover line.

One of the greatest challenges during execution was the tyranny of distance and its impact on communications. Kuzla Ruda and Objective Lincoln are approximately seventy-three kilometers apart. This required the 1/34 ABCT TAC to deploy forward from Kuzla Ruda approximately three hours prior to *fixed-wing-on station* to conduct SEAD. With their Lithuanian JTAC co-located in the TAC, this allowed 1/34 ABCT to apply mission command to the air space as well as communicate with SOF on the ground. The use of a Joint Capabilities Release (JCR), a friendly force tracking system, allowed communication between 1/34 TAC and 3-10 AVN REGT back at Kuzla Ruda as well as between 1/34 ABCT Main in Riga, Latvia and F/2/2 CR in Poland.

Once established, the 1/34 TAC tracked the battle through both analog and digital means. An objective for the 1/34 TAC was continuation of camouflage techniques developed at the National Training Center to ensure survivability in a decisive action environment. Augmenting the TAC staff were two Croatian Air Force officers who provided additional staffing focused on the aviation aspect of execution.

Ground tactical force (British Royal Marines).

The ground task force was led by X-Ray Company from 45 Commando Royal Marines, part of the United Kingdom's 3 Commando Brigade. Operation Lake Superior presented to them and the overall force a number of unique opportunities that led to the generation of two overarching training objectives: conduct combined, joint and multinational planning; and execute combined, joint and multinational offensive operations.

The construct of Task Force Red Bull had a company-sized group working directly in support of a brigade staff. This enabled the rapid and effective planning of a relatively complex operation. Given the locations of Objectives Adams, Bush, and Carter, and only two workable landing zones, the crux of the plan was coordinating the delivery of sufficient combat power to seize and hold each objective in order



to enable the FPOL. Insufficient lift capacity to move the ground task force in a single wave shaped the final plan. Competition for seats on the aircraft between the ground task force and other participants was resolved by 1/34 ABCT taking the lead for coordinating and prioritizing space on each aircraft ensuring execution of the ground task force commander's plan.

The air mission brief and CAR were key to ensuring that the ground plan was both supportable and supported by the other elements of Task Force Red Bull. The timing of the air mission brief allowed the ground task force commander to subsequently deliver orders to his subordinates and receive a back brief on their plans. He was then able to bring this information to the CAR—ensuring synchronization from the lowest level up to the brigade combat team staff.

At the lower tactical level, the ground task force was faced with the challenge of integrating force elements from three different nations despite only being co-located for seventy-two hours prior to the operation. It is testament to the professionalism of

A marine from X-Ray Company, 45 Commando British Royal Marines leads a patrol 17 June 2017 from a landing zone in the Suwalki Gap in southern Lithuania. The Royal Marines formed the core of the ground assault force tasked to seize three objectives in the Suwalki Gap and subsequently established a passage lane for elements of 2nd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment. (Photo courtesy of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Minnesota Army National Guard Public Affairs)

members of the Alliance that swift resolution of issues surrounding language, equipment, and location provided sufficient time for detailed planning and delivery of orders at troop and platoon level. This was to pay dividends during execution.

The task force was subsequently organized in to three sub-task forces, one for each objective. Each sub-task force had its own battle space and clear mission set, with the headquarters there to ensure synchronization and deconfliction of activity.

The ground task force headquarter's role during Operation Lake Superior was to shield the subordinate

commanders from the complexities of brigade-level operations in order to allow them to focus on their own mission, in this case to close with and kill the enemy.

Aviation Task Force (3/10 AVN REGT). The goals of the Aviation Task Force during Operation Lake Superior mirrored those of their mission essential tasks; conduct air assault, conduct air movement, casualty/medical evacuation, provide air traffic services, and expeditionary operations. Because of how the unit was task organized within Task Force Red Bull, the team intended to conduct platoon-level reconnaissance, screens, and hasty and deliberate attacks.

Leveraging the USAREUR five pillars, the team also looked to focus on interoperability in a distributed environment. With the strategic goal of maintaining viable lines of communication to enable the cohesion and existence of the NATO alliance in the Baltics, the use of the Skolkan scenario enabled the development of a robust enemy situation.

Initially deployed throughout the Baltics for Saber Strike, the aviation task force eventually converged in Lithuania. Prior to the execution of the AASLT, the aviation task force dealt with extended lines of communication, mission command relationships changing often, and units constantly supporting new multinational partners.

In other words, it was an operational example of Gen. Mark A. Milley's concept of "miserable, disobedient, and victorious" in the future operating environment.⁴

The aviation task force experienced what we should expect when fighting in a short notice mul-

tinational Article 5 scenario, with units constantly on the move, fighting backward and forward with little time between missions for deliberate planning, and certainly not massed in any way previously anticipated with the structure of proscribed modified tables of organization and equipment.

Once crews repositioned from Latvia to Lithuania, awaiting them was an exceptional phenomenon—a fully functional field site, complete with forward arming and refueling point, air traffic services, camouflaged living areas, an aviation battalion command post, and a co-located brigade command post, fully resourced with the people, equipment,

and resources for deliberate AASLT mission planning.

These tactical enablers were only possible because of the strategic movement by air and sea of 1/34 ABCT from Minnesota to Lithuania and the operational success of 3-10 AVN REGT 1400 km convoy, overland shipment, and air deployment from Germany. The sequencing of both movements in time



A marine from X-Ray Company, 45 Commando British Royal Marines, and a soldier from 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division (1/34 ABCT), Minnesota Army National Guard, participate in a planning session 14 June 2017 during Exercise Saber Strike in southern Lithuania. 1/34 ABCT formed the air assault task force headquarters and X-Ray Company the ground task force for an air assault into the Suwalki Gap. (Photo courtesy of the 1/34 ABCT Public Affairs)

and purpose anticipated the decisive point in the operation against a highly mobile adversary.

Task force enablers. The identification of the task force enablers mentioned above occurred at the planning conferences as staffs identified missing, needed components for successful execution of Operation Lake Superior. Examples included JTACs to control airspace as well as special operations forces (SOF) to conduct SEAD. Such planning not only increased the lethality of Task Force Red Bull but also greatly enhanced the training for all parties. The integration of SOF from both Lithuania and the United States and their fixed-wing close air support were paramount to successful mission execution.

The Lithuanian and United States SOF operated in four roles. First, they conducted SEAD behind enemy lines. Once they found the enemy air defense artillery assets, they used B-1B strategic bombers to destroy the targets. Second, they conducted reconnaissance of Objective Lincoln, attempting to confirm or deny the intelligence picture on the ground. Third, as many of the pilots had previously never operated in this area, the operators conducted pathfinder operations on the landing zones. Finally, once the ground force exited the aircraft and established a defensive perimeter, SOF conducted an intelligence debrief to the ground forces.

The United States and Lithuanian Air Forces both provided fixed-wing aircraft to conduct SEAD and close air support. To conduct SEAD, the United States Air Force provided both B-1B strategic bombers and F-16s. Operating alongside SOF, Lithuanian JTACs guided the aircraft to their targets. During the attack on Objective Lincoln, B-1B bombers and Lithuanian L-39 fighters provided close air support directed by X-Ray, 45 Commando's NATO certified JTAC.

Operation Lake Superior Execution and Successes

The aviation move went as planned despite inclement weather with the entire ground task force delivered on time to the correct location. One real life contingency presented itself as thunderstorms began to develop in the local area. Despite connectivity difficulties, the United States Air Force weather forecaster was able to pass weather information over secure communications. This enabled the company commander, acting as the air mission commander, to make

appropriate risk assessments and route alterations to continue the mission without incident.

The separate ground elements all conducted their assaults on the three sub-objectives on Objective Lincoln within ninety seconds of each other. This occurred after night movements between five to ten kilometers. During the movement to the objectives tactical communications were very difficult, both up to 1/34 ABCT TAC and down to the sub-task forces. For a significant period, there was a complete loss of communication. Despite this, the three sub-task forces were able to conduct synchronized assaults onto their respective objectives over a twelve kilometer stretch of highway. However, because of coordination achieved at the CAR, the problem of intermittent radio communications had zero impact on the operation because of the application of discipline initiative by junior leaders.

During the ground attack on Objective Lincoln, 1/34 ABCT maintained contact, via JCR, with F/2/2 CR. This allowed tracking of the passing force as they moved north to the link-up point. Through communication via JCR with F/2/2 CR, 1/34 ABCT radioed continuous updates to X-Ray, 45 Commando, aiding their visualization of the common operating picture of all friendly forces operating in the area. Upon the seizure of Objective Lincoln, 1/34 ABCT TAC jumped to a centralized location for the passage of lines. The passage of F/2/2 CR went smoothly, again aided by the face-to-face coordination that had taken place at the CAR forty-eight hours prior.

Another first, for such a large-scale mission, was that all participants including SOF, aviation, and the multinational ground force were able to conduct the operations with secure NATO communications. A task-force-wide communication exercise prior to execution ensured the ability for all parties to communicate via radio. However, despite the success, the exercise did highlight the need for a more robust communication security and signal operation instruction distribution system inside of NATO to ensure ground forces are truly interoperable at all times.

Upon seizure of Objective Lincoln, the FPOL occurred along the same stretch of Highway 132. As previously stated, this was a force-on-force exercise with the Lithuanian NDVF acting as the opposing force. The Lithuanians mirrored the Skolkan exercise design, providing a company-size element, with an infantry platoon



occupying each objective with air defense artillery assets. During SEAD, SOF targeted these assets. However, during the AASLT, the same air defense artillery assets used the AASLT as a training opportunity. This presented a unique training opportunity for the Lithuanians as well as 3-10 AVN REGT.

Other Lessons Learned

From an aviation perspective, there were many advantages to the situation in Kuzla Ruda. First, and most important, the commander of 1/34 ABCT set out a clear vision to his staff that included a stipulation that the execution of all briefs and rehearsals follow the “Gold Book Standard.” Despite the ground force’s relative inexperience with AASLTs, this provided a unique perspective for 3-10 AVN REGT to see “what right looked like” when a unit sets itself to a full planning process. In addition to bringing their great focus and positive attitude, the members of the 1/34 ABCT came armed with large-sized walkable terrain maps that

A Lithuanian joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) patrols with British Royal Marines 17 June 2017 during Exercise Saber Strike in southern Lithuania. During the ground assault, the Lithuanians provide NATO-certified JTACs to the Royal Marines. The Lithuanian JTACs guided U.S. Air Force B-1B bombers onto the objectives for close air support, enhancing the combat power of the Royal Marines. (Photo courtesy of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Minnesota Army National Guard Public Affairs)

enabled detailed briefings and rehearsals. The second advantage the unit experienced was support from the professional and experienced team of Royal Marines. Within the first day, they deftly created a tactical plan expertly communicated to the ABCT and 3-10 AVN REGT commanders’ planning teams.

It is also important to note that the sequenced approach to building Task Force Red Bull combat power was only possible because of the resources provided by other allied forces. For example, at Kazlu Ruda, Lithuanian forces provided the outer cordon security

of the base with a mostly conscript force together with water purification capability for food and sanitation—true force multipliers. Foresight by USAREUR planners, resulted in augmentation of Lithuanian forces by attaching Tennessee Air National Guard security force personnel to guard aircraft and flight line.

Summary

The Suwalki Gap mission was a success. Overall, this mission proved to be an invaluable experience, difficult to replicate inside the United States. After years of fighting primarily ideological campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the opportunity to conduct a mostly terrain-focused campaign exercise against a notional invasion by conventional forces helped restore atrophied conventional capabilities.

As the U.S. Army focuses on decisive action scenarios in the future, there are greater opportunities to train in this way, even if it is in a more distributed environment. The campaign developed by USAREUR and subordinate units is a great step toward large scale, interoperability-focused exercises. The Suwalki Gap operation is an example of single tactical event achieving strategic goals. These strategic goals included:

- Utilizing strategic mobility to deploy from the continental United States to Europe.
- Increasing interoperability and identifying areas for improvement.
- Demonstrating the ability to seize and hold key terrain with strategic consequences.

Achieving these strategic goals required the development of an operational approach that enabled success by all elements of Task Force Red Bull.

At the tactical level, there was overwhelming success from a training perspective. First, efforts allowed a multinational task-organized team to work successfully together. The work conducted among the elements of Task Force Red Bull, X-Ray, 45 Commando, and 3-10th AVN REGT, was productive and smooth. The Task Force Red Bull commander kept the team disciplined, hitting all the major components of the air assault planning process in accordance with the 101st Airborne *Gold Book*. This provided for the standardization of input and product making necessary to stabilize and harmonize detailed planning and execution among the diverse elements of the force.

Additionally, the distributed forces and unfamiliar procedures that the exercise had to deal with were reflective of real-life operations in any newly formed task force. As a result, because there was often not time for detailed rehearsals, issues with planning contingencies that had a potentially adverse impact were mitigated by developing good personnel relationships and an overall can-do attitude among the allied forces. These two factors were as valuable as promoting standardized tactics, techniques, and procedures because they encouraged disciplined initiative and flexibility in dealing with the changes wrought by the types of emerging circumstances that allied forces will have to face in the event of a real world contingency against an invading adversary. ■

Notes

1. United States Army Europe, Exercise Saber Strike 2017, "Main Planning Conference Out Brief" (PowerPoint presentation, 16 February 2017).

2. Karen S. Sampson, "Skolkan Scenario Introduced at JPMC," Army.mil, 7 October 2016, accessed 14 November 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/176321/skolkan_scenario_introduced_at_jpmc.

3. 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), *Gold Book* (Fort Campbell, KY: U.S. Army, February 2016), 1–9.

4. Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "Miserable, Disobedient & Victorious: Gen. Milley's Future US Soldier," Breaking Defense (website), 5 October 2016, accessed 14 November 2017, <http://breakingdefense.com/2016/10/miserable-disobedient-victorious-gen-milleys-future-us-soldier/>.

5. Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. and eds. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Kingston, ON: Legacy Books Press, 2008), accessed 14 November 2017, <http://www.legacy-bookspress.com/Books/Jomini.pdf>.