

NEWS FROM THE FRONT

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**Tactical-Level Multinational Interoperability During
Operations Resolute Support and Freedom's Sentinel**

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News from the Front:

Bloodhound Package

Tactical-Level Multinational Interoperability During Operations Resolute Support and Freedom's Sentinel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) embedded with the 264th Engineer Clearance Company (Spartans) and gained lessons learned during their operations in support of Operations Resolute Support and Freedom's Sentinel. The Spartans provided CALL insights while conducting combat patrols on area denial and route clearance, as well as experiencing a look at a Bloodhound package.

This article focuses on these key topics:

1. The role of U.S. forces as an enabler to coalition forces ground commanders
2. Lessons learned during deliberate and dynamic route clearance packages
3. Multinational interoperability at the platoon level and below

This CALL News from the Front article highlights an engineer company in support of Operations Resolute Support and Freedom's Sentinel. The article references the company's pre-deployment train-up and role as an enabler to the coalition forces that are the lead response forces in theater. This provided CALL a firsthand look at the concept of multinational interoperability between U.S. forces and our partners while conducting combat operations. Most U.S. Army leaders are assigned to U.S. force structure; however, while outside the wire the Bloodhounds were in direct support of either the Czech or Georgian military leadership while providing security to the area surrounding Bagram Airfield (BAF).

As the drawdown of U.S. conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan dominated the media headlines and the speeches of politicians, the 264th Engineer Clearance Company (Spartans) were clearing routes in the snowy Parwan Province of Afghanistan. Despite pressure from senior leaders to reevaluate their personnel numbers to do more with less, the 264th ensured the routes located within the Bagram Ground Defense Area (BGDA) were clear. Their route clearance mission was a priority for the Commander of Bagram Airfield (COMBAF), and ensured the security and safety of its surrounding population.

Operation Resolute Support and its train, advise, and assist (TAA) mission highlights the main efforts of this theater. Yet under the cover of darkness, the Spartans -- along with their coalition partners -- looked for improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and other threats to the BGDA. Their efforts are tied directly into TAA mission success by allowing freedom of movement throughout the province.

Front Cover: Establishing a presence, Bloodhounds out on patrol on a cold night in the Bagram Ground Defense Area (BGDA). Regardless of weather or time of day, patrols apply heavy pressure to disrupt enemy activity and deny emplacement of IEDs. (All photos in this article taken by MSG Nicholas Blevins, Center for Army Lessons Learned)

Overview of the 264th Engineer Clearance Company (Spartans)

Stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C., the Spartans support the XVIII Airborne Corps as a scalable route clearance package capable of being rapidly deployed worldwide. As a member of the 27th Engineer Battalion (COMBAT) (AIRBORNE), the unit is uniquely comprised of airborne and non-airborne combat engineers (MOS 12B), horizontal construction engineers (MOS 12N), and enablers uniquely tailored to support the battalion's global response force (GRF) mission. The unit is authorized 148 personnel; it brought close to that number to theater. Most units deploy with less after they are stripped of non-essential personnel prior to deploying.

In preparation for their deployment, the Spartans conducted individual, squad, platoon, and company certification at Fort Bragg to validate unit capability prior to departing for Afghanistan. Training consisted of a progressive crawl, walk, run approach to convert all organic platoons to route clearance platoons (RCPs) and integrate new Soldiers. Training focused on drivers training, handheld device familiarization, mounted detection systems, and squad/platoon lanes. A majority of training was conducted in the hours of daylight which led to the unit's first lesson learned – the unit needed more pre-deployment training during hours of limited visibility to mirror current operational restrictions. "This no-notice deployment was executed in four months," stated the company commander, CPT Joseph Ryan.

Trained as organic platoons, the "Bloodhound" (BH) mission required platoons to shift focus to adapt and operate as squad-sized enablers directly integrated with coalition forces. The BHs have incorporated the unit's unique detection capabilities with coalition force security to create a coalition-led multifunctional force. 1LT Griffin Gerchman (2nd Platoon Leader), who took over his platoon on the first day of the deployment, stated he would have liked language training for the countries he directly enabled. This diverse force includes Czech, Georgian, and occasionally Polish soldiers. The ability to communicate and share objectives was critical in a time-sensitive situation to provide more clarity to what was happening on the ground. He was able to mitigate the language barrier through constant dialogue before, during, and after the mission. 1LT Gerchman also acknowledged that he forced himself to slow down while communicating over the radio and use deliberate military terms.



Although not doctrine, 264th Engineer Clearance Company used smaller elements combined with its coalition partners to create a route clearance package capable of deterring and defeating enemy forces. Here, a squad from 2nd Platoon prepares to roll out on another mission.

CPT Ryan commanded a unique unit spread across multiple bases in Train, Advise, Assist Command – East (TAAC-E) and Train, Advise, Assist Command – Southeast (TAAC-SE). CPT Ryan's company was tasked with several different mission sets. Working out of forward operating bases (FOBs), these diverse mission sets included: route clearance, force protection, quick reaction force (QRF), construction, and protective security details (PSD). The platoons operating in the BGDA were direct support to Task Force (TF) Lion and the Defense Forces of Georgia. As a necessity, they developed a unique relationship where each unit was

critical to the other's security. They operated as squads and formed custom packages that are not aligned to doctrine.

The Spartan Soldiers quickly adapted to the environment and equipment, but due to garrison limitations and programs of record, many new systems and techniques had to be trained on and incorporated in theater. Bloodhound route clearance elements also had to adapt to working for 10 different platoons, split evenly between the Czechs and Georgians. To accomplish this, noncommissioned officer (NCO)-led training, coordinated by company 1SG Silvio Calle, detailed and set the standard for joint patrols. Within weeks of arriving, each allied platoon trained independently to learn the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) for a culminating training event -- a battalion-led validation lane.

What stood out the most was the bond that developed between the engineers and their coalition partners. Pre-patrol birthday celebrations, shooting competitions, and daily interactions allowed the leaders and Soldiers of each country to establish a mutual trust. When asked where there was a lack of success, they pointed out that culture training and recovery operations could be improved. Culture training related to their patrol partners would have given them a better understanding of how each country operates and executes its mission set. Recovery operations in theater happened more often than during the train-up.

Overview of Task Force Lion

TF Lion members are from the Czech Republic and are primarily made up of airborne infantry soldiers. The country has roughly 10.6 million inhabitants and its Army has just over 25,000 personnel. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992, the all-volunteer force was founded in its current form. The Czech military is young compared to its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners, but it has stood the test of time to maintain its identity and heritage. In Afghanistan, a war it has supported since May 2002, the Czech military plays a prominent role in providing security to the area surrounding BAF.

TF Lion is essentially staffed as a company augmented with additional staff. The task force has a company command team and five operational platoons but is staffed with all the components as a battalion. It has human resources (S1), intelligence (S2), a robust operations section (S3), logistics (S4), communications section (S6), and a role 1 medical clinic. TF Lion also employs its own intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets.

Each Czech platoon is led by a platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and three squad leaders. The platoon leader (PL), platoon sergeant (PSG), and squad leader (SL) each operate their own vehicle with four to five dismounted troops. These five platoons rotate out and give the task force flexibility and fresh Soldiers to conduct their mission. They are responsible for denying the Taliban and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – Khorasan (ISIS-K) terrain to facilitate attacks against BAF.

TF Lion built its roster in early 2017 and finalized its manpower that summer. It focused on drivers training, combat lifesaver training (CLS), weapons training, and devoted numerous hours to culture training. TF Lion also conducted two separate pre-deployment site surveys

(PDSS). This allowed the leadership to get a view of operations on the ground and obtain a current intelligence assessment to bring back to home station for training. The task force's culminating training event was a 14-day exercise validated by a one-star general. Each country serving in Afghanistan prides itself on its ability to accomplish its mission, and the Czech Army is no different. One platoon leader pointed out how they used eight months to develop a lethal fighting force. They trained on potential scenarios and re-enforced battle drills at the squad and platoon level. They fired their weapons every two weeks leading up to the deployment. The task force utilized soldiers that previously served in the area of operations (AO) as role players.

One issue during the task force's train-up was not being able to train with a route clearance company to develop procedures for operations. TF Lion used a mock U.S. engineer patrol while conducting train-up for its mission.

Defense Forces of Georgia

One of the largest, but mostly unknown, contributors of forces in the BGDA is the Republic of Georgia and its land forces. Consisting of a battalion-sized force, the Georgians split the area around BAF with TF Lion. Founded in 1991, the Georgian land forces are no stranger to conflict and stand as a staunch partner of the U.S. military.

The Georgian land forces active duty strength is estimated at 37,000. The Republic of Georgia spends roughly 1.83 percent of its gross domestic product on its military. As a former Soviet republic, it joined the NATO Partnership for Peace program in 1994. It is currently pursuing a military force within NATO standards. The Georgian land forces have participated in Iraq and actively rotate forces into Afghanistan.

The Georgian infantry battalion currently has U.S. Marine Corps advisors embedded within its formations to enhance and build its capability. The Marines partnered with the Georgian Army during the Georgians' pre-deployment train-up, and validated their force through a mission readiness exercise (MRX) at Hohenfels, Germany, at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC). Once validated, the Georgian infantry battalion proceeded to Afghanistan with U.S. Marine advisors embedded in every patrol.

The current advisor group of Marines are the first all-reserve force from 2nd Battalion, 25th Marines Regiment out of Garden City, NY. This all-volunteer team became the 8th rotational unit from the U.S. Marine Corps to advise the Georgian Army in Afghanistan. They mobilized in June 2018. The 2/25th attended a Marine Corps advisor course for six weeks which included culture training, advising 101 classes, and role-playing scenarios to prepare Marines for their mission.

The Georgian Army conducted a dedicated train-up with its embedded U.S. Marine counterparts. This train-up consisted of multiple field training exercises ranging from tactics and training on mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles, communications platforms, and U.S. weapons. In order to facilitate joint interoperability, the Georgian defense forces traded in their Russian-made equipment for modern U.S. military equipment. While operating in Afghanistan, the Georgian Army strictly uses U.S. equipment. Like any advising mission, the

Georgians and the U.S. Marines had both success and growing pains. The Georgian Army still uses a Soviet-style leadership that is top-down driven. Each level of officer leadership is hesitant to make decisions without authorization from their higher headquarters. NCOs within the formation are not empowered like their U.S. counterparts, and platoon commanders are in charge. As a result, leadership is reluctant to make simple yet critical decisions like dismounting on a patrol to interrogate a threat.

The Georgian junior leadership is growing more accustomed to Western military leadership styles; some have attended U.S. military academies like West Point. They understand both written and verbal direct orders, but have not grasped concepts like implied tasks. Everything must be specified or directed by their higher command.

Despite their contrasting leadership styles and command and control techniques, the Georgian Army was successful working with the Bloodhounds. SSG Martinez, a squad leader in 3rd Platoon, provided his Georgian counterparts solid guidance on particular routes and suggested adjustments needed for their patrols. His efforts complemented the U.S. Marines' advising of Georgian platoon commanders; as a result, the Georgians performed better during patrols and internal base force protection measures.

Out on Patrol

Prior to leaving the forward operating base, the platoon leader (PL) or squad leader (SL) receives the mission from the ground commander -- either a Czech or Georgian lieutenant. The U.S. engineer element is not in charge of the convoy or its protection; instead that task falls on its coalition partners. In preparation for the mission, the engineer PL or SL confirms the route, reviews recent intelligence summaries, and digitally verifies the day's route to ensure they can guide the convoy. Certain routes require deliberate clearance; that is decided during the mission brief provided by the coalition patrol leaders.

CALL participated in a patrol with the Bloodhounds to obtain observations. As the residents of BAF bedded down for the evening, the Bloodhounds prepared to roll out with TF Lion. Soldiers and leaders started their pre-mission checks and inspections; drivers conducted preventive maintenance checks and services on their vehicles; and gunners climbed into the turrets and mounted the crew-served weapons. The NCOs prepped the radios and received any last-minute guidance from the platoon leader. Other equipment, like mine detectors and camera systems, were prepped and stowed to facilitate the safety of the routes.



The platoon sergeant gives the pre-patrol brief covering everything from routes; primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency (PACE) plan; convoy order; and actions on contact. This brief is highly detailed yet allows the junior leaders to make critical decisions while on patrol.

The Bloodhound mission is a multinational patrol that employs route clearance, an explosive ordnance team (EOD), and a mounted infantry platoon or squad. The Czechs and Georgians have their own AOs and are responsible for terrain denial in those areas. The 264th Engineer Clearance Company elements are crucial enablers to the success of the security patrols.

During the patrol, the route clearance teams set the pace for the maneuver force, ensuring the mounted actions of the patrol were tactically sound while conducting deliberate clearance on pre-determined routes. The toughest and most disciplined job belongs to the Husky vehicle driver. They employed both a mine and wire detection system to scan the ground for IEDs. The Husky vehicle driver stayed in constant communication with the PL or SL to relay information to the ground force commander.

The Spartans took the lead everywhere the convoy went. They pride themselves in knowing they will find an IED first, interrogate it, and pass it off to the EOD team for exploitation. Prior to mission, SSG Martinez stated that one improvement his team needed was more recovery training. Just his luck, his vehicle hit a soft spot on the road and the mine roller attached to his vehicle was stuck. His team leader, SGT Hamilton, quickly launched his dismounts for security and developed a plan to recover the vehicle. Critical thinking by this NCO led to a quick and safe recovery of this SL's truck. There was no damage to the vehicle. Some typical good-natured ribbing by the squad members at the driver provided spirited laughter rolling back to the FOB.



The gunner scans his sector, ready to engage threats to U.S. and coalition forces. The Bloodhounds maintained a high level of security and ensured the mission was completed safely.

Summary

Most personnel at Bagram Airfield do not know that these missions happen daily under the darkness of night while most residents are fast asleep. Routes vary and different areas are checked, thus ensuring an unpredictable pattern to deny and disrupt enemy forces from employing IEDs or attempting to attack the base with indirect fire. The 264th Engineer Clearance Company and its coalition partners are a look into future warfare operations. As near-peer countries are preparing their military forces for conflict that could involve U.S. intervention, the U.S. military and its partners continue to strengthen their military partnership daily in theaters like Afghanistan. The understanding of our allies' tactics, equipment, and personnel is critical to the next fight against near-peer adversaries.

Multinational interoperability at the lowest levels is just as important as operating at the strategic and operational levels. Tactical-level multinational interoperability provides a sense of confidence and experience that junior Soldiers and leaders will carry forward.