

# A Multinational Focus on Operations in the Jungle

## A Field Observation Report on Jungle Operations and Interoperability

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“The truth is that the jungle is neutral. It provides any amount of fresh water, and unlimited cover for friend as well as foe - an armed neutrality, if you like, but neutrality nevertheless. It is the attitude of mind that determines whether you go under or survive. 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.' The jungle itself is neutral.”

– Frederick Spencer Chapman

Army Regulation (AR) 34-1, *Interoperability*, defines the namesake term as “the ability to act together coherently, effectively, and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic objectives”. It goes on to further stress the importance of rapid integration with Unified Action Partners (UAPs) to forge a common operating picture and accomplish U.S. and Coalition objectives.

In a response to a request from the French Jungle School through the French Liaison Officer at the United States (U.S.) Combined Arms Center the U.S. Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) collaborated with the Army’s jungle warfare experts at the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division’s – Jungle School. In support of this request the Lightning Academy for the 25<sup>th</sup> ID sent Captain (CPT) Colin T. Stone to the First Annual International Jungle Seminar in November of 2021 in Kourou, French Guiana.

As the Officer in Charge (OIC) of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division’s Jungle Operations Training Course (JOTC), CPT Stone identifies with the challenges of interoperability that have been uniquely shaped by the environmental challenges endemic to Jungle operating environments.

After the closure of its predecessor of the same name based in Fort Sherman, Panama, the JOTC became the only course in the U.S. Army which trains Soldiers in specific skills required for Jungle environments. Since its inception the JOTC has committed itself to

creating and bolstering the international connections that the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (ID) maintains with its UAPs across the entirety of United States (U.S.) Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM).

The experiences that the JOTC and the 25th ID have accumulated over several decades of operations in the Pacific theater have allowed for the identification, analysis, and rectification of a large number of interoperability challenges, and both organizations enjoy healthy and productive relationships with international partners. While this system of relationships provides 25th ID based units an enduring cadre of individuals with jungle skills and experience in the INDOPACOM area of responsibility (AOR), it has seen significantly less experience in Jungle regions in other AORs. With this in mind, the JOTC, as well as its parent schoolhouse the Lightning Academy, has sought to increase outreach to foreign schoolhouses and operational units working in jungle regions in both U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM).

As part of this initiative, CPT Stone and select cadre recently attended the First International Jungle Warfare Seminar hosted by the Third French Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment in the country of French Guiana. To increase interoperability along with representatives from several South American and several Western European countries, the team spent 5 days conducting round-table-style discussions and presentations to share tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), lessons learned, and area of operation (AO) specific innovations to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of region-specific jungle interoperability. The conference attendees walked away from this seminar with a renewed appreciation for the difficulties of integration with foreign partners in these types of environments. There was a much greater appreciation for how greatly jungle environments and challenges can vary globally, even within similar zones of latitude. This article will discuss some of these challenges, and specifically how the interoperability in terms of human, technical, and procedural factors pose problem sets that are unique to the region that any U.S. INDOPACOM-aligned unit is accustomed to living and working around.

Traveling to French Guiana is difficult. With current conditions, a traveler may only fly into the main city of Cayenne from another French territory - usually Martinique, Guadeloupe, or mainland France itself. From Cayenne, it requires about an hour of driving on the only well-established trans-regional highway to reach the city of Kourou, strategically important to most of Western Europe, and to the United States for its proximity to the Guiana Space Center (French: Centre spatial guyanais; (CSG)), and to the French military for the regimental headquarters of the 3<sup>rd</sup> French Foreign Legion (3 REI). The 3 REI maintains an active operational presence throughout the entire territory and is employed in two main capacities: in defense of the aforementioned CSG on behalf of the European Space Agency, and in the fight *contre l'orpaillage illégal*, or against illegal gold mining, which poses a significant environmental threat due to the primary means by which the gold is extracted. Of particular interest to the Lightning Academy team was a subordinate unit of the 3 REI, the *Centre d'Entraînement en Forêt Équatoriale (CEFE)*, or Equatorial Forest Training Center- where all Jungle-specific training for the entire French Army takes place.

The CEFE hosted eleven international delegations present at the 1<sup>st</sup> International Jungle Warfare Seminar for the final two days of discussions that included demonstrations, and allowed attendees an inside look at the courses the schoolhouse runs and the unique challenges that the French Guiana jungle presents. The CEFE offers, broadly, courses in three categories: physical hardening, leadership, and specific skills. Participants were able to observe many similarities between the course catalog provided by the CEFE and that of the U.S. 25<sup>th</sup> ID Lightning Academy and were pleased to see that both schoolhouses provide training for a wide variety of skill sets, from basic familiarization to advanced combat training. What was striking is the differences in course execution that had clearly manifested from the differences in operating environments.

The jungle on Oahu and throughout the Hawaiian Islands is similar to many jungles throughout the INDOPACOM AOR- it is characterized by relatively smaller trees with minimal or permeable canopies, which allows the passage of ample amounts of sunlight to the forest floor. This sunlight, combined with the nutrient-rich soils and high levels of annual rainfall, leads to dense, seemingly impenetrable thickets of vegetation which drastically reduce the ability of maneuver units to move through virgin terrain at the pace their commanders ask of them. The JOTC, calls this type of jungle – secondary jungles. These exist in sharp contrast to what can be experienced in French Guiana: broad canopies at significant height that blocked enough sunlight to prevent significant undergrowth, or what is called a primary jungle. This seemingly minor difference has more broad implications for what many jungle warfare schools the world over consider paramount to effective operations: mobility. The JOTC plays out in a manner similar to shock therapy for first time jungle-goers in terms of the challenges associated with jungle mobility, and the program of instruction (POI) pulls heavily from those of Military Mountaineering and Assault Climbing courses because rope-based movement and mechanical advantage systems are basic tools of the trade in steep, dense, and muddy secondary jungles. The emphasis on mobility systems is not lost in the primary South American jungles, but rather it takes the predominant form of familiarization with fluvial means of mobility. The large number of river systems and almost-complete reliance of the inland civilian population on river-based supply routes mean that a solid understanding of riverine infiltration and exfiltration, small boat tactics, direct and indirect fire control between watercraft, and riverine casualty extraction become much more significant factors than they would in an environment where the mobility challenges manifest themselves differently. These differences in operating environment and in schoolhouse emphases are certainly not the extent of the challenges to interoperability between units from the two different locales, but they do set the stage for a meaningful discussion about the obstacles facing rapid integration with Unified Action Partners in the region.

The Army broadly defines levels of interoperability on a numeric scale from 0 to 3. A level 0 would correspond to a Partner who is not interoperable with the U.S. Army, and a 1, 2, and 3 respectively would correspond to Partners who are deconflicted, compatible, and integrated. These levels of interoperability are further synthesized with human, procedural, and technical components of interoperability. The human dimension in this context consists primarily of human based activities- undertakings, behaviors, actions,

and pursuits. The human dimension of interoperability undoubtedly brings a unique problem set to any interaction with a Unified Action Partners, and thus my experience observing human-dimension challenges to UAP integration and interoperability as whole is fairly limited in scope.

While there were 11 international delegations present, the location and organization of the seminar were both conducive to observation of French cultural norms and human dimension facets more so than they were for the other countries present. There is a fairly obvious linguistic challenge in human interoperability, as there would be for any Unified Action Partner who does not consider English its primary language, but this challenge is fairly exacerbated in the French Foreign Legion. The Legion, as it exists in French Guiana under the 3 REI, is composed primarily of foreigners from Brazil, Madagascar, and Nepal, who have elected to serve in the French armed forces. Not only is there relatively little English-speaking ability outside of the French officer corps, but the French-speaking ability of many Soldiers is much more lacking than it likely would be in a conventional unit with a common first operating language. Differences in cultural priorities also factor into the challenges facing effective interoperability. An American staff officer who is accustomed to working lunches and minimal breaks throughout the day would likely be surprised at the 2-plus hour lunches and dinners eaten as a unit.

Likewise, an American noncommissioned officer (NCO) might be surprised to find that the boundary between the French Officer and NCO corps exists much more tangibly than it does in the United States. Of course, these differences in linguistics and in minor cultural priorities are hardly major obstacles to development of shared understanding and mutual trust, but they are certainly facets to consider when examining the potential of operating jointly. The human dimension of interoperability also encompasses, to some degree, a different subset of individuals as it exists in the 3 REI than it would in a comparable U.S. Army light infantry battalion due to the differences in operational task organization. A foreign legion platoon, stepping off onto a patrol in the Amazonian jungle to identify and destroy illegal gold mining sites would be required to include members of the French *Gendarmerie*, the militarized police force. While this example of law enforcement interoperability would not seem out of place for an infantry battalion in-country, it is likely that this degree of reliance on civilian authority would not be commonplace in equivalent U.S. military domestic operations. Overall, however, the 3 REI in French Guiana appears to be a modernized and effective force that would have fairly few human-domain based obstacles to being considered interoperable with a similarly equipped U.S. force.

The JOTC partners with, and trains, with a number of foreign partner jungle schools and units who are considered to be experts in operations in jungle environments, including those in Indonesia, India, Brazil, Guyana, Malaysia, and many more. The nature of jungle environments in these countries, especially in regions dominated by primary jungles, forces decentralization of maneuver units to a greater degree than less restrictive terrain normally would. Difficulties in establishing and maintaining lines of communication and supplies, as well as in conducting movement and maneuver result in units operating more independently for longer periods of time, a trend that is clearly visible in analysis of

previous American jungle conflicts such as those in Guadalcanal and Vietnam. Due to this unique set of operational constraints, the JOTC and other foreign jungle schools focus heavily on tactics at the Squad and Platoon levels. This ends up being a good thing when looking to assess tactical and procedural interoperability, as it largely levels the playing ground between comparable units in regard to formation size, available assets, and command and control systems. The experience gained in French Guiana in speaking about and observing procedures at this level was similar- it demonstrated a need for forces operating in restrictive environments to decentralize and act independently.

Short of those major similarities, however, there are several major differences that would factor into a consideration of interoperability in the procedural domain. The first, and most clearly observed, is that both of the primary mission sets of the 3 REI are primarily non-combat focused. The defensive nature of the mission at the CSG and lack of violent intention on the part of illegal gold miners means that the TTPs generated in this operating environment differ significantly from those of 25<sup>th</sup> ID units training for near-peer conflicts, despite having similarities in terrain. A lack of necessary reliance on the warfighting functions of Fires and Movement and Maneuver means that sub-unit planning factors such as direct fire control, implementation of communication security, and establishment of supply lines in contested areas, to name a few examples, diminish in importance in favor of factors more beneficial to intelligence acquisition or to maintaining dispersed command and control nodes.

This is certainly not the basis of an incompatible relationship at the tactical level, as there are numerous examples of commonalities in processes and procedures, including common terms and graphics, collaboration, safeguards of secret releasable information, and doctrinal foundations.

There are differences in training, drills, and standard operating procedures (SOPs) that appear to be foundational, but a good portion of training differences arise from both the prevailing mission set, as already discussed, and from the environment. For example, a U.S. unit trained in jungle operations sustaining a casualty in a canopied jungle would likely opt to call in an aeromedical evacuation and employ a jungle penetrator- eliminating the need to move a significant distance with the casualty. A similar unit of the 3 REI would likely choose to move the injured person to one of the many waterways in the region, and perform a hoist from the water onto the rotary-wing platform.

Likewise, air-based personnel insertions in French Guiana is difficult enough from a resourcing perspective to require cooperation and reliance on the civilian aircraft infrastructure, and so there is significant emphasis placed on waterborne insertion - something that the JOTC does not emphasize to the same degree as a platform due to the lack of navigable hydrology in many INDOPACOM jungles. It is this region of differentiation that would lead one to believe that the greatest number of challenges to partner interoperability in this particular instance would be based in procedure rather than in the human or technical domains. Although the scope, both in operational experience and in observational ability at this seminar, is fairly limited in making this assessment. It

would be practical to assume that the same friction points to partner interoperability that have reared their heads before would do so again given similar circumstances.

The technical dimension of Unified Action Partners interoperability, which incorporates the establishment, operation, and maintenance of Mission Command Network hardware and the use of Communication Information Systems to enable increased shared understanding, is probably the domain most associated with lapses in mutual functionality. Even according to AR 34-1, “interoperability is often associated with technical issues”. With that being said, our exposure to technical interoperability as it would exist between the 3 REI in French Guiana and a similar U.S. unit was not particularly indicative of problems that would arise in a joint environment. It is possible that a lack of meaningful access to network systems or information management software created a favorable bias in this regard, but technical priorities seem to be largely the same between the two entities in this instance, to include friendly force tracking, translation, and timely exchanges of operational information. It goes without saying that many of the traditional software-based planning tools that exist outside of exclusively military circles are familiar to both parties, as one would expect when collaborating with any other modernized country.

The technical difficulties faced by the 3 REI seemed to mirror our own in many ways, and the environment-specific considerations such as limited proliferation of technical equipment due to resupply difficulty certainly would apply to both partners in their respective areas of operation. Any lack of existing technical interoperability would, in my assessment, be based on a lack of driving circumstance rather than lack of feasibility. The JOTC typically does not have the opportunity to assess technical interoperability routinely with many of its foreign partners, due to the general scaling of exercises, and as a result the technical interoperability between many foreign partners with regard to jungle-specific considerations has not been assessed in our collective experience.

Altogether, from the vantage point of one jungle school collaborating directly with a foreign jungle school OIC and cadre, both the JOTC and Lightning Academy could quickly and effectively integrate with both French units of the 3 REI and with other nations operating in the Amazonian jungles. It is the author’s opinion that this integration would be successful on the broad interoperability fronts of human, technical, and procedural aspects, but also at a much smaller level due to shared like experiences, commonalities in TTPs, and similar task organization and structure. Although jungles the world over share common characteristics, history shows us that every new jungle-based conflict reveals gaps in knowledge that require addressing and provide further justification to establish strong and interoperable teams with foreign partners before future conflicts arise.

Working together with the French Army at the *CEFE*, the Brazilian Army at the *Centro de Instrucao de Guerra na Selva*, and the Guyanese Army at the Colonel Robert Mitchell Jungle and Amphibious Training School, among many others, has demonstrated to the Lightning Academy cadre that the need for specialization in regional jungles is aptly justified. There would be a massive loss of knowledge in the attempt to consolidate, even

among jungle training centers run by U.S. sister services within similar AORs. This need is predicated, however, by the need for open communication, shared knowledge, and personal relationships. It could be expected that jungle-based interoperability for the United States will continue to face significant challenges the world over, as large proportions of modern foreign jungle conflicts focus on counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, or non-combat operations, and the U.S. must be poised to handle both conflicts at the same level as well as those that are significantly larger in scale.

The easiest way to address these challenges for any schoolhouse or organization that aspires to teach jungle operations will be to continue to develop enduring relationships with individuals, courses, and units, to better facilitate the establishment and maintenance of a global network of interoperable partners, specialized in their particular AORs. This network, which already exists in many areas, allows the flexibility to take and share specific lessons learned across a wide field of invested players, while allowing the ability to focus on terrain-based challenges on a much more microscopic level when that becomes necessary. Through this active and mutually beneficial system of communication and exchange, Soldiers can best prepare themselves for the unique challenges of operating environments in the jungle.