LEARNING FROM TRIDENT

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AFTER A GRUELING YEAR WITH ONE TRIDENT series exercise after the other, the JWC finally closed its 2015 Programme of Work (PoW) in December with TRIDENT JET. The 2015 PoW, regarding exercises, started with TRIDENT LANCE in 2014 and continued into 2015 with TRIDENT JEWEL, two iterations of TRIDENT JAGUAR and JFC Brunssum’s TRIDENT JUNCTURE—NATO’s largest exercise in more than a decade with Training Audiences (TAs) from Canada, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Belgium. Each exercise brought with
it unique Exercise Control (EXCON) challenges, different TA approaches, and increasing ambition for the next exercise. One benefit of the rapid-fire output for JWC has been the opportunity to observe trends and patterns of the TAs. Additionally, the JWC has, during this busy time, reconfigured and optimized its structure to provide a scalable, responsive exercise delivery capability and new exercise settings, baselines and scenarios to continue to challenge our TAs. These changes have put pressure not just on our Scenario Branch but on the entire exercise delivery community to understand what these developing scenarios require to be supported, including Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (JISR) requirements, computer simulation (CAX), concept validation, doctrine testing, and incorporation of Comprehensive Approach actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Subsequently, the lessons we have identified have not just been external, in relation to our Allied Command Operations (ACO) stakeholders, but also internal, in some cases helping to re-write our processes as we go. So, what lessons were identified in 2015?

One outcome was, as Observer/Trainer of the TA, the JWC was provided with rich insights into the application of operational art. In other words, we witnessed commendable agility, interaction with subordinate and superior headquarters, staff integration and synchronization both within the Joint Task Force (JTF) headquarters and to supporting headquarters as well as the application of effective battle rhythm to support the requirements of the planning horizons within the headquarters’ and commanders’ decision-making.

Inevitably, we also saw potential areas for improvement. One recurring theme of technical lessons identified across every TRIDENT exercise was the need for a more effective Information and Knowledge Management (IKM); this is always a challenge for joint headquarters dealing with multiple levels of command, multiple locations and different CIS systems, particularly when deployed. As information becomes increasingly available, along with technical solutions to collect and display it, so does the need to manage and align it with the principles of IKM. Similarly, leveraging corporate knowledge and exploiting the full breadth of our collective tacit knowledge and experience must be a commander’s priority.

Strategic Communications (StratCom) was also identified across all exercises as a new discipline requiring urgent mastery by headquarters. As one of the Secretary General’s priorities, StratCom is an area of specific interest for Allied Command Transformation and for JWC. JWC’s scenario team has incorporated StratCom as a key element in its preparation and development of the “Skolkan” and “Soroten” scenarios, and the creation of JWC’s in-house exercise social media platforms “Facepage” and “Chatter” continue to challenge and test our commanders. Last but not least, the trainers also identified that NATO doctrine should be consolidated for StratCom.

TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15 was notable for the scale of the inclusion of non-NATO entities, in keeping with our drive to test a Comprehensive Approach. From this exercise we learned the importance, and value, of having robust engagement strategies, and the means to execute them, with non-NATO entities. There are, of course, security, access, technical and ethical considerations to conducting this activity, and these need to be clarified in doctrine, prepared in scenarios, tested in exercises and mastered in execution.
Battlespace Management is another capability where we observed some real challenges for the joint headquarters. While creating and managing the technical tools for this capability alone constitutes a significant challenge, leveraging and exploiting the capability in the joint realm is an art. The commander’s ability to dominate his Boyd cycle, that is, to observe multiple planning horizons, orient his staff, decide on Courses of Action, and coordinate subordinate actions, determines mission success. With increasingly adept adversaries who can set the pace with asymmetric levers such as Social Media, commanders increasingly require adept staff support. Managing time, space, forces and effects in a realistic and achievable manner is, again, an art. To support this, the JWC needs to build increasingly demanding exercises with real attention to the detail of realism. And, for this, we often need external support.

Closely related to both Battlespace Management and Knowledge Management are the issues of JISR, and the Targeting process. At the JWC, we have worked hard to present commanders with tough challenges and complex dilemmas in hybrid warfare environments. TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15 with its “Sorotan” scenario is a very good example. The demands of modern warfare highlight our strengths, and sometimes expose our weaknesses, in the areas of intelligence management, surveillance exploitation and agility of our Targeting processes. The JTF headquarters serves as a hub and a focus for the absorption and, most importantly, for the allocation of resources and the timely dissemination of intelligence and decisions. This requires highly effective communication across a suite of systems, a mastery of the available assets and their capabilities, and an agile, responsive and scalable Targeting cycle bound together with a clear and unambiguous purpose. These are three areas recently scrutinized by JALLC analysis projects, and hopefully they remain high on ACT’s Prioritised Analysis Requirements List.

The integration of national CIS and NATO technology is another area for scrutiny. Binding 28 Nations and Partners technically into exercises and operations is a formidable challenge. The success of ISAF and its Federated Mission Network (FMN) demonstrates what is possible: we must ensure that developing technology does not outstrip interoperability, both technically and doctrinally. At the JWC, we are familiar with connectivity challenges: TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15 required the interconnection of 3,100 personnel at eight TA locations and two EXCON locations, Stavanger and Ottawa. This illustrates the critical need for maintaining the agility, flexibility, scalability, security and interoperability of our CIS.

The efforts of JWC’s newly re-configured Quality Assurance Branch are focused on observing and analyzing lessons from exercises for internal action. With JWC as the action body and lesson “owner”, the lessons collected through our in-house lessons management tool, and insights gained from our EXCON augmeeetee surveys, hot wash-ups, After Action Reviews (AARs) and post-exercise discussions provide us with a rich picture of how the exercise unfolded and where we can sustain, improve, adapt or focus our efforts the next time around.

A recent internal analysis requirement was on the subject of Response Cell (RC) manning. Following the PENTA J meeting in Lisbon in January 2015, and a supportive letter from the Chief of Staff HQ SACT, we have seen
really positive results in the population of the EXCON RCs. Bi-SC Directive 075-003 proposes that RC coordination begins at the Exercise Specification (EXSPEC) stage. However, with the requirements for the JTF HQ structure—including the RC structure—being addressed and developed later in the exercise cycle, the actual manning of the RC can be a planning after-thought. A robust, fully manned and experienced RC will enhance any exercise, and TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15 was no exception, with a great performance by the EXCON team. What we hope to see in the progressing revision of Directive 75-3 is a clear mandate early in the exercise planning process for the finalization of the Response Cell’s structure and the manning requirements.

THE PRESSURE ON HQs to exercise and mutually support other headquarters during exercises has never been greater. We must remember that RC staffs are critically important during the MEL/MIL Incident Development Workshop and the Scripting Workshop; not just during the execution: overall, a growing bill for NATO and Nations to bear. That being said, the benefits of such commitment are clear; the quality of the exercise remains high. Also, we have found that RC officers find the experience very useful in developing their professional skill-sets, so time spent in an RC is by no means wasted.

Since TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15, JWC has seen a variety of configurations for a JTF headquarters and its supporting headquarters. These multi-level exercises provide another formidable challenge for everyone involved in the exercise. Early consideration of the RC laydown is critical to a robust EXCON, but the complexity of these exercises resonates through the Training Objectives, Command and Control (C2) laydown, CIS requirements, scenario adjustments, intelligence requirements, non-NATO actors’ involvement, real-life support capacity, and of course how the outside world sees us. We hope to see in future iterations of Directive 75-3 the familiar unitary planning process, one which promotes scalability and adaptability within realistic planning timelines providing both JWC and the TAs with adequate time to prepare. Key deliverables based on sound thinking of the full array of implications on C2, for instance, must be analyzed, decided, defined and delivered early in the planning process.

Other lessons from a 75-3 perspective focus on Phase IV, Analysis, and have to do with, among others, IKM and Battlespace Management. It would be good to see a tighter Boyd cycle or OODA loop between exercise headquarters and more engagement post exercise to ensure that we derive the best benefit quickly. We need to be more agile at turning around lessons identified to lessons truly learned, which can be achieved by exploiting our available corporate knowledge, coordinating our analysis efforts and focusing our efforts on specific areas of interest or concern.

During TRIDENT JAGUAR 15, a Concept Integration, Experimentation Coordination Cell in EXCON, Stavanger, brought together colleagues from JWC, the JALLC, the NATO Command and Control Centre of Excellence and the ARRC, with close cooperation with the co-located JWC Training Team. This cell was able to coordinate their analysis efforts and together provide some rich insights into the exercise. TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15 pulled together no fewer than nine Centres of Excellence, and JWC looks forward to this continued close cooperation, facilitated by the ExTRA portal, before, during and, most importantly, after exercises for increased analysis value.

THE RESTRUCTURING of the JWC, executed on 6 August 2015, transformed us from a traditional line organization to a more flexible and scalable matrix organization. With it came the need to re-evaluate our processes and revise our SOP 800 for exercises. The timing could not be better for reviewing Bi-SC Directive 075-003, too, hoping that these two key documents will complement each other well. Lessons Learned is a discipline often associated with past practice, but which actually arms us to better face the future.

A busy 2016 already started with TRIDENT JAGUAR 16, which saw NRDC-Turkey conducting high-tempo operations within the “Skolkan 2.0” setting. Both JWC, as Officer Directing the Exercise (ODE) and NRDC-TUR, as the Training Audience, benefitted from the refinements of the exercise methodology, allowing these exercises to become well-suited to the unique requirements of the Graduated-Readiness Force (GRF) land headquarters taking on the responsibilities of a JTF HQ.

In 2017, we will undertake TRIDENT JAVELIN, a seriously ambitious undertaking with a new setting, “Skolkan 3.0”, and no fewer than three Primary Training Audiences: JFC Brunssum, HQ LANDCOM and HQ MARCOM. Now is the time for the exercise community to gear itself for this challenge, and to make the most of our collective experience to ensure its success. ✪

Editor’s Note: This article first appeared as Major General Wolski’s briefing to the NATO Lessons Learned Conference held in Lisbon, Portugal, in November 2015.