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“A superb training and learning platform for understanding modern warfare. This is the Cadillac of training.”

Editor’s Note: This interview was conducted on 14 March 2017, during the execution of the first iteration of TRJR17.

BELOW: Colonel Alex Brennan, Commander 37 Canadian Brigade Group Headquarters. Photo by JWC PAO



THE ABOVE QUOTE is from Colonel Alex Brennan, Commander of the 37 Canadian Brigade Group Headquarters and a 21-year veteran Police Sergeant of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary. Brennan came to the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) to participate in exercise TRIDENT JAGUAR 2017 (TRJR17). *The Cadillac* is one of the most iconic car makes over the last 100 years—its aura was so formidable that the phrase “*the Cadillac of x*” was coined, meaning that something is considered a flagship in its category, or simply the best. This is exactly where the JWC stands when it comes to training, according to Brennan. “The training here prepares us for a myriad of contingencies by delivering operational level challenges through simulated scenarios. This is as realistic as it gets,” he says.

Brennan sits down to talk to us in the JWC Bunker where the exercise takes place,

which is a cross between a Cold War era bomb shelter and a modern-day military headquarters building. He begins by pointing out that the key objective of training is to ensure all elements of NATO’s Order of Battle (ORBAT) remain proficient in their warfighting skills and stay prepared to face any threat.

“My team here all comes from the 5th Canadian Division in Atlantic Canada,” he explains. “In this exercise, I am responsible for the command and control aspects of kinetic and non-kinetic operations of the 4th Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group within the Rapid Reaction Corps France (RRC FR) when NATO is called upon to respond to a crisis in the fictitious country of Arnland.”

The RRC FR’s ability to operate as a Joint Task Force Headquarters (JTF HQ) was tested during the first iteration of TRJR17, which was a distributed Command Post/Computer Assisted exercise. It kicked off on 3 March with





The 4th Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group participating in TRIDENT JAGUAR 2017 at JWC. Photo by Maj. Stephen Olsen, JWC PAO

the Exercise Control (EXCON) training, and ran through 16 March. Approximately 1,000 soldiers from the RRC FR, 5th Canadian Division, 4th French Airmobile Brigade and 6th French Light Armoured Brigade, as well as the Joint Logistic Support Group, were deployed to Novo Selo, a Bulgarian military facility, to carry out a simulated crisis response mission, dubbed as Operation Arnish Resolve—a mission based on a fictitious training scenario created by the Scenario Subject Matter Experts at JWC. The bulk of the EXCON organization remained in Stavanger.

“The TRJR17 is a superb training vehicle that many Canadians will not get access to,” Brennan goes on to say. “To be able to come over to this exercise and apply the warfighting skills that we get from the Army Staff College and the Canadian Forces College is a very rare opportunity, indeed. What’s happening for us here is that we are spending a fair bit of time educating our people, training them as they go along, whilst taking the principles of coaching, mentoring and tutoring and developing them to work within a fighting Brigade HQ. As

such, we are using this exercise as a learning development tool.”

For Brennan, its expertise, knowledge and advanced in-house Communication and Information Systems all together make the Centre NATO’s premier training facility. “As a matter of fact, the learning here is a bit like a hockey stick graph that starts off a little bit flat, picks up and just goes right up. This is an incredible training opportunity and we are making the most of it to actively enhance the warfighting skills required for our contemporary operational environment.”

Brennan says that the main challenge is fitting a Canadian Brigade into a JTF HQ context. “It’s a very fluid environment and for much of the exercise, there has been a lot of cross-component interaction, which allows us to rehearse for war gaming and conduct run-throughs. A couple of the members of my team have never attended a Commander’s Update brief, let alone the Operational Planning Process. In addition to that, there is the aspect of working with other components, Air and Maritime, and quite literally executing the

Arnland mission as the exercise unfolds.”

Drawing from his own experience, Brennan observes that whatever the challenge, it is important for NATO forces to be prepared. Until recently, he headed the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary’s ‘kickass’ undercover squad. Under the motto “Proactive, Not Reactive”, the squad focuses on catching hard-core criminals. The approach to multifaceted threats is the same for both the law enforcement and the military, Brennan explains, adding: “Both crime and warfare are always evolving. One needs to be alert to the changes. It’s like a cat-and-mouse game. Every time the cat figures out what the mouse has done, the mouse tries new tricks, and it’s just like that in warfare. We always need to be one step ahead of the next crime and remain alert.”

“In essence, this is like the OODA loop—the decision cycle of Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act—which is a quintessential battle procedure,” continues Brennan. “We have to move faster than what the opponent does in terms of from the time when we sense what’s going on, analyse it and plan, and then develop a mission.”



EXCON staff briefing on the details of the ongoing mission regarding their specialised areas. Photo by Maj. Stephen Olsen, JWC PAO



The exercise is the final step in the process of certifying the RRC FR as a JTF HQ. It will place the RRC FR on alert status, starting in the summer of 2017 for a period of one year. Directed by Major General Andrzej Reudowicz, Commander JWC, the TRJR17 has allowed all participating NATO Force Structure headquarters to exercise and work through a comprehensive set of operational and tactical level dilemmas, as one team, and be prepared for their potential outcomes.

“In this exercise we are replicating a JTF HQ, which deploys quickly to perform a complex mission. Effective command and control is the key of success for the assigned mission. In dealing with asymmetrical warfare we need drills; we need long and short lead planning, and we need processes, innovation and new concepts. The TRJR17 is one example. We exercise at two levels, conducting a land-heavy NATO Non-Article 5 battle, integrating Air and Maritime assets, whilst simultaneously practising Comprehensive Approach with a Host Nation and dealing with Strategic Communications. This is very impressive. The JWC

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team is basically exposing the JTF HQ to every contingency it should be prepared for.”

Although JWC is a renowned virtualization centre in NATO, the exercise “Map Room”, sometimes called the “War Room”, has nothing virtual inside. No touch screen displays, no digital maps. Rather, it’s a simple room with a 5x5 metre map on the floor, where staff from different Response Cells, the Opposing Force and the Main Events List/Main Incidents List, Intelligence, media and Higher Control (HI-CON) provide blow-by-blow assessments of the

proceeding war in Arnlund, involving the Blue, Red and Green Forces, from their point of view, every day. This setting might feel old-fashioned compared to the Joint Operations Centre one floor down. Brennan, however, claims this style of technology-free briefings refuse to die. “It also reminds me that we have to build some redundant capacities,” he notes, adding: “We don’t always need fancy equipment to do our work; we have to look at where we come from before we look into the future. You are going to lose power and batteries do die. And then you are left with a map and a compass.”

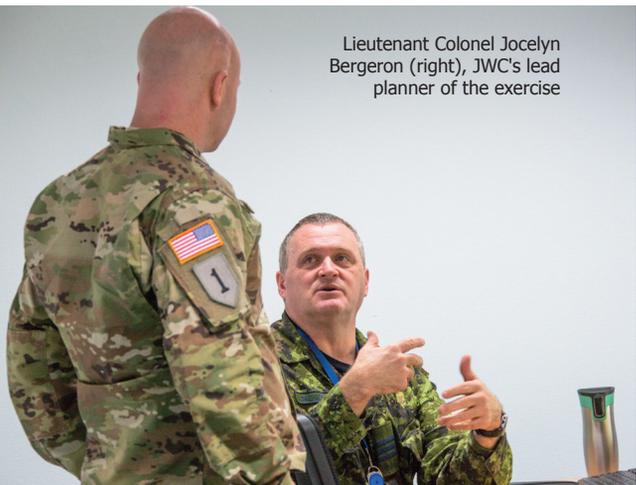
According to Brennan, within the Canadian team supporting the TRJR17, there is a 50 per cent ratio of active duty and reserve soldiers, who, for the vast majority, have operational experience overseas, and some belong to a company or a platoon. He also underlines that, as a whole, they have tried to integrate women soldiers into the team as much as possible because mission success is achieved regardless of gender.

Brennan also describes the military experience of reserve officers as added value for civilian career enhancement and that





A view of the JWC Situation Centre



Lieutenant Colonel Jocelyn Bergeron (right), JWC's lead planner of the exercise



Rear Admiral Brad Skillman, JWC Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff and the exercise Deputy Director

could be further utilized in exercises such as the TRJR17. Giving the example of Canada's new Minister of National Defence, Mr Harjit Sajjan, who is a combat veteran, police officer, and, until recently, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army Reserves, Brennan stresses an important point: "There is so much to learn from each other. This cross pollination will lead to incredible effects in the battlespace. It's not just about the preparation and the training. What is equally important is testing our ability to work as a team," he adds.

"I think everybody knows that, regardless of whether they have been on multiple missions, or whether they have worked in a Corps headquarters or a Brigade, there are big challenges out there; and what we will do is that we will work together, as a team. So, this is a superb training and learning platform for

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understanding warfare and NATO's operational environment. I can say that this is the Cadillac of training so to speak in terms of our ability to come together and be able to operate. I hope to see more Canadians benefit from future exercises."

Brennan then highlights the essentials for success in a multinational environment: "In my career as an Army Colonel and police officer, I have realized that an individual's ability to build a relationship depends on how friendly

and perceptive he/she is and his/her ability to communicate. That relationship transcends all barriers of language, race, religion and politics. It's just a matter of bonding through training to get that sense of camaraderie, purpose and level of commitment. Once people have got that, we can work our way through any challenge that may be waiting for us. This will establish the standard for us."

Ultimately, when asked about his thoughts on how NATO best adapts its response to emerging and unexpected contingencies, Brennan concludes: "I believe that NATO is well positioned to move forward to that next generation of warfighting. You don't always need real guns hitting real targets to keep the combat edge. NATO exercises are more than live fire performances. The JWC ensures that we also adapt and innovate along the way." ✦