

By Lieutenant Colonel Charles Kurz
United States Army
Special Operations Subject Matter Expert
Joint Training Division
Joint Warfare Centre



SPECIAL REPORT

OLRT TRAINING

KEY OBSERVATIONS FROM HIGH PERFORMING OPERATIONAL LIAISON AND RECONNAISSANCE TEAMS

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NATO Allied Command Operations (ACO) Joint Task Force Headquarters Standard Operating Procedure (JTF-SOP) 001 for Operational Liaison and Reconnaissance Team, or OLRT, describes the OLRT as an "ad hoc multinational team held at high readiness state able to operate legally in an area or region that is yet to be designated as a future operating area." The JTF-SOP 001 states that the OLRT is drawn largely from the sending JTF HQ that is being contemplated as the organization that NATO will deploy to engage a given crisis. The mission of the OLRT is described in short as "(...) responsible to liaise and coordinate with the host nation authorities, international organizations/non-governmental organizations (IOs/NGOs), and other stakeholders, in the potential theatre of operations to provide reliable and timely informa-

tion to the Joint Operational Planning Group (JOPG)," adding that OLRT "contributes to gaining early, first-hand situational awareness in theatre, facilitating the rapid establishment of liaison and conducting reconnaissance in a designated area."

Thus, the OLRT is seen as the JTF Commander and the JOPG's tool to both gain information and establish liaison between the command and the foreseen host nation.

JOINT WARFARE CENTRE conducts OLRT training evolutions in conjunction with the Crisis Response Planning phase of its operational level training exercises. I have been privileged to be a part of the JWC OLRT Training Team for the last two years. During that time, we have observed that sending headquarters are preparing for and requiring that OLRT training becomes more realistic and challenging. This





The OLRT deployment to the fictional SOROTAN countries of Lakuta and Tytan (real world Stavanger) for exercise TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15, 8 February 2015. Photograph by Major Stephen Olsen, Norwegian Army, JWC PAO.

has meant that we have seen gains in efficiencies made as various headquarters begin to learn through the JWC training experience how to prepare and send better functioning OLRTs. What follows are my observations of those OLRTs that have performed at the highest level and an effort to provide future headquarters with some ideas to continue that trend.

OLRT preparation

Good initial preparation of the OLRT prior to deployment is imperative in order to allow the OLRT a good chance at success in the typically ambiguous environment in which they will be engaging. A well-prepared OLRT is able to begin to engage "host nation" immediately after arriving in country. Simply put, the OLRT is able to gain rapport quickly with their host nation counterparts if they are well-prepared; and if poorly prepared, there is a significant

chance of damaging that rapport, which could also damage their mission effectiveness.

There are three key areas that must be addressed to ensure that a JTF's OLRT is well-prepared for its mission: team-wide preparation; subject matter area detailed preparation; and command guidance documents. Some information must be clearly understood by the OLRT personnel as a whole in order to ensure that the team speaks with one voice to the host nation. Team-wide preparation is normally accomplished with formal briefings from the JOPG in conjunction with other Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in the sending headquarters. These briefings are important because OLRTs and JOPGs often are just beginning their working relationship with each other due to personnel turnover or ad hoc staffing. This set of formal briefings from the JOPG to the OLRT with command attendance

should describe the areas that the command needs the OLRT to focus on. Normally, two different broad subject areas should be covered: deployment and employment. These two areas can be briefed together or in separate briefs. The deployment part of the brief is normally relatively straightforward and generic. The topics can include deployment times and means; the legal status of the OLRT; weapons carry instructions; living and working arrangements once in country, and general Public Affairs (PA) guidance.

The employment part of the brief should be tailored to the specific items that the JOPG and Command Group need the team writ large to focus on and the background data needed to successfully accomplish this mission. The employment briefing is much more wide open as far as subject matter, but some items that could be included are: key RFIs (Requests for Infor-



Photographs by JWC PAO.



Joint Warfare Centre's White Cell practising NATO's Comprehensive Approach during OLRT deployments and Scripting Conferences.

mation) ranked in importance, existing arrangements between NATO and the host nation, the general size and scope of the foreseen NATO deployment, background data on potential areas of negotiation with the host nation, notes on key personalities that the team will regularly or initially engage with, known details on logistics mechanisms that the JOPG is considering, what multi-national groups the nation is a part of and what those organization's relationship is to NATO and any preparatory work that the JOPG staff members have done together with the host nation authorities and military staffs prior to sending the OLRT.

Specific SMEs should be prepared at a deeper level than the team writ large. There are numerous options here depending on the expected mission parameters delineated by NATO and the sending JTF, but key areas that many JTF OLRTs engage in at operational level exercises have been noted by JWC Training Teams over time. As such, the logistics SMEs need to be thoroughly briefed on the key APODs (Aerial Ports of Debarkation), SPODs (Sea Ports of Debarkation) and logistics hubs as well as the key factors that are affecting the logistics planning. The OLRT commander

could be briefed in detail on the senior leaders in the host nation that he is expected to interface with and a preparatory plan of engagement for the host nation ministries should be considered. The Intelligence SME should be briefed in detail on the Intelligence agencies in country and how they normally interface with each other. Additionally, Intelligence SMEs should be prepped by the J2 section, and potentially the LEGAD, to begin socializing the planned information exchange parameters between the host nation and NATO. The OLRT LEGAD should be prepared with drafts of potential host nation support arrangements, Intelligence-sharing and other documents that he may need to coordinate with the host nation if the JTF headquarters and NATO deem that the OLRT is the best tool to work on these issues.

Pre-deployment documents such as a direction and guidance letter from the commander to his OLRT leader and a letter from the JTF commander to the host nation authorities that delineates to both the OLRT and the host nation what the team is responsible to provide to the command, as well as what the team has authority to negotiate on behalf of the commander, will allow the OLRT to function with much more initiative than if they

deploy without such guidance. This direction and guidance help the OLRT focus on what the commander needs from his OLRT, and if properly promulgated, bounds the mission of the OLRT, so that the JTF staff does not bog down the OLRT with tasks that are outside its mandate. These documents do not obviate the necessity for the commander to meet with and directly address his OLRT. In the best case, the commander will find time in his schedule to personally brief the OLRT on his expectations and give the team the opportunity to ask clarifying and amplifying questions so that his guidance is clearly known to the entire team. The OLRT should feel empowered when they board their aircraft to accomplish their mission with a clear understanding of what the command expects from them, and know that the command stands behind them in the accomplishing of that mission.

Assessment

The OLRT, as the JTF commander's earliest element in country, is charged with gathering information needed by the JOPG and evaluating the information based on their position as the only NATO personnel that are in country at the time. Normally, the topics of the meetings that an OLRT has with various governmental and





WHAT IS COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH?

NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept underlines that lessons learned from NATO operations show that effective crisis management calls for a Comprehensive Approach involving political, civilian and military instruments. Military means, although essential, are not enough on their own to meet the many complex challenges to Euro-Atlantic and international security. The effective implementation of a Comprehensive Approach requires all actors to contribute in a concerted effort, based on a shared sense of responsibility, openness and determination, taking into account their respective strengths, mandates and roles, as well as their decision-making autonomy. The implementation of NATO's contribution to a Comprehensive Approach is a permanent feature of the Alliance's work. (Read more at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_51633.htm)

non-governmental personnel in a host nation are provided by the JTF JOPG as RFIs. These are primarily fact-based and specific. However, in the ambiguous environment that the OLRT often finds itself, it often hears conflicting views from the various host nation personnel that it interacts with. The OLRT's "sense" of the country that they are interacting with is often difficult to pass to their HQs, but it is imperative that they attempt to pass this atmospheric "feel" as best as they can while also answering the specific RFIs generated by the JOPG. The sense or feel of the host nation is best passed in analysis documents and video tele-conference (VTC) meetings.

One of the better tools for driving analysis is the post-meeting minutes that many OLRTs use to describe the various meetings that they attend during the day. The OLRT should develop a template for post-meeting minutes that both answers the detailed questions that the JOPG needs and provides information on the reliability of the personnel that they meet with, while at the same time passes on the atmospherics of the meetings. While the quality of detail about reliability and atmospherics is often variable depending on the experience level of the various OLRT personnel, the discipline of the process that is exerted by

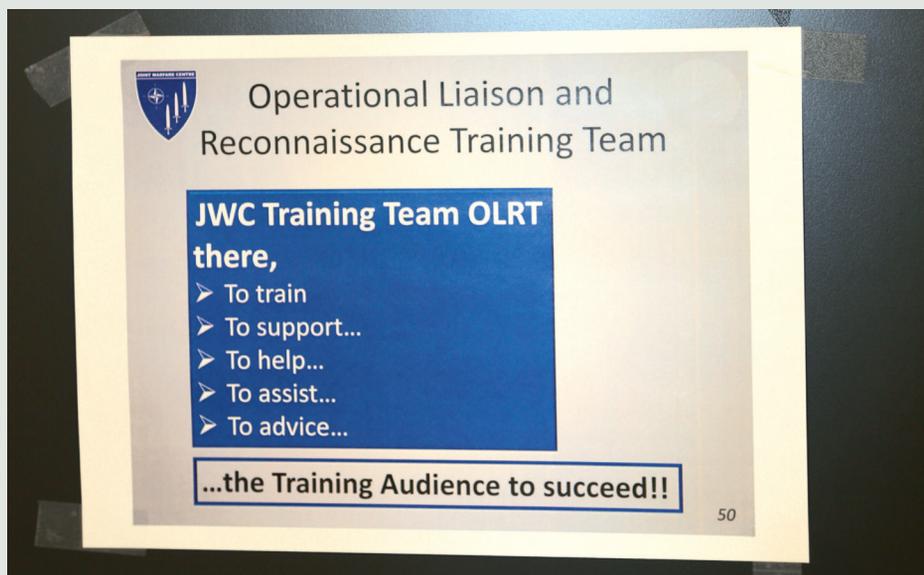
having a formal place in a templated post-meeting minutes document often drives the individual team member to greater analytical output. In fact, we have seen that over the OLRT training phase, team members make gains in analytic quality as well as quantity. Further, the template makes reference by the JOPG or commander much easier when there are questions or follow-up meetings that need to be engaged by the OLRT.

THOSE OLRTs that are best able to communicate their understanding of the host nation that they are engaging go one step further than the micro-analysis that comes out of specific post-meeting minutes. These teams typically conduct recurring macro analysis of the situation and provide it to their JOPG and commanders in their situation reports that are normally provided daily. While many teams use the situation report to collate and report factual data, the best teams use it as primarily an assessment document. Typically, the command has access to the post meeting minutes and therefore does not need a regurgitation of what already has been written, therefore the OLRT can assist their sending headquarters in understanding the operating environment by summarizing the

key facts and presenting their assessment of the overall situation that the team has observed each day in this situation report. The team can also produce a larger weekly analysis document to show how the facts combined with atmospherics are impacting on key JOPG planning factors and command focus areas.

VTC meetings are very useful for the OLRT to pass its understanding to the JOPG and to the Command Group because it allows an opportunity for both the JTF and the OLRT to have a two-way communication that can quickly clear up misunderstandings. It is especially helpful for the Command Group to have regular VTCs with the OLRT leadership to ensure that the commander is well aware of the atmospherics that the OLRT observes in country and to ensure that the OLRT is aware of the commander's focus as the planning process progresses. While ad hoc VTCs can be useful, VTC time is normally a scarce commodity due to communications limitations. And so, formal VTCs with enforced agendas, timeliness, and executive communication is normally better, at least in the beginning of an OLRT deployment when all are unfamiliar with the host nation and processes are new. These VTCs should be attended by as many of the OLRT team





members as daily work will allow, so that SMEs are available to answer the command's questions and allow as many as possible from the OLRT team members to hear directly from the Commander and the JOPG what issues are priority in the planning process.

Daily OLRT preparation during employment

In order to be successful, the OLRT must be prepared to engage the host nation on numerous fronts in both formal and informal formats. In many cases, meetings over coffee or side-bar discussions in hallways are more successful in advancing the OLRT's mission than formal meetings. While OLRTs rightly focus on the formal meeting occasions, the team must develop a mechanism for preparing for both formal and informal types of engagements. The most highly performing OLRTs are those that can leverage the informal meetings by always being prepared with an understanding of the JTF's priorities and an understanding of the host nation's interests. Being able to advance the JTF's priorities through the host nation's interests is part of the art of good OLRT practice and must be prepared for in advance. Efficient use of team-wide expertise to prepare all for both chance and deliberate meetings will go a long way toward ensuring that all are fully prepared to make the team's mission successful.

Normally, OLRTs have one- to two-team meetings a day, set in accordance with the JTF and the host nation battle rhythm. These meetings will cover the basics of internal RFI management, formal meeting schedules,

command guidance, and other necessary team-wide information. While these items must be covered, better performing OLRTs also use these team meetings to cross-level information and atmospheric to ensure that all team members understand as much about their host nation counterparts and analyze in a group setting that information. A good OLRT meeting includes much of the same items as described above about VTCs. The meeting should have an adhered-to agenda. Team members should be prepared to speak on their various engagements and be required to both give facts and analysis of those engagements. If possible, team meetings should begin before deployment, so that team members are familiar with the format and are prepared to discuss key points and analysis without rambling. Additionally, the OLRT key leadership can encourage open and frank discussion of the host nation and identify strategies for engagements in areas that are not going well or ways to exploit the areas of success. Effective utilization of the team meetings to ensure that all members are largely of the same understanding of the situation will significantly enhance the ability of the OLRT to engage in the informal opportunities that present themselves during the OLRT employment phase.

Formal engagements can also be prepared for in a group setting although not normally with a team-wide meeting. Each formal engagement should have a plan that is developed by the primary interlocutor with the host nation. That plan can be staffed with other team members that need to be collaborated along with the OLRT leadership

in order to ensure that priorities are being accomplished and that the best strategy is used for efficient use of engagement time to gain information and conduct liaison. In an ambiguous environment with actors that may have different agendas and different points of view about the involvement of NATO with regards to the host nation, it is sometimes necessary to engage different personalities in different manners. Some individuals may be best approached directly, while others need a more indirect approach while in an extreme circumstance certain personnel may need to be bypassed while finding another path to gaining the information that the OLRT is seeking. Particularly, when analysis has indicated that an individual interlocutor has a specific agenda or bias towards NATO, it may be necessary to have different approaches to that actor. Therefore, after the basic engagement plan has been developed, it is often helpful for the OLRT SMEs that are engaging the host nation to conduct an informal war game of the meeting to attempt to prepare for the personality of the host nation interlocutor.

Strategies for engagement based on the known or believed personality of the host nation personnel and their interests can be refined based on this war game. Due to the varying experience levels of OLRT personnel with host nation engagement, it may be useful for the OLRT leadership or other more experienced personnel to sit in on these preparatory war game sessions to provide hints on ways of engaging the host nation personnel. In the case of very important meetings, or ones that the JOPG is particularly interested in, the war game session can be attended via VTC by JOPG SMEs as well.

Conclusion

While the foregoing observations and ideas have come from various JWC exercises, they should not be taken as the final word on how to conduct OLRT training or execution. The OLRT is an organization that can be tailored to the mission of the JTF headquarters and commanders can be as creative as necessary to build their OLRT organizational procedures to maximize efficiency in gaining information and developing liaison structures needed for mission accomplishment. Hopefully, future OLRT organizations will be able to use some of the thoughts in this article to enhance the training of their teams. †