

# Perspectives On Saber Junction-1



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By LTC Curtis D. Taylor

*Above, Bulgarian army soldiers from the 61st Mechanized Infantry Brigade return simulated fire from behind a BMP-1 tracked vehicle during a decisive action training environment Exercise Saber Junction 2012, at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, last October. Opposite, a Stryker armored vehicle provides cover for a halted convoy.*

In October 2012, the 2nd Cavalry Regiment (2CR) rolled out of its motor pools near Vilseck, Germany, crossed the line of departure and attacked into the German countryside. So began Exercise Saber Junction 2012, the largest, most complex U.S. Army training event seen on the European continent in more than 20 years. Partnered with military forces from 18 other nations, ranging from British

# A New Level of Complexity In the Decisive Action Training Environment

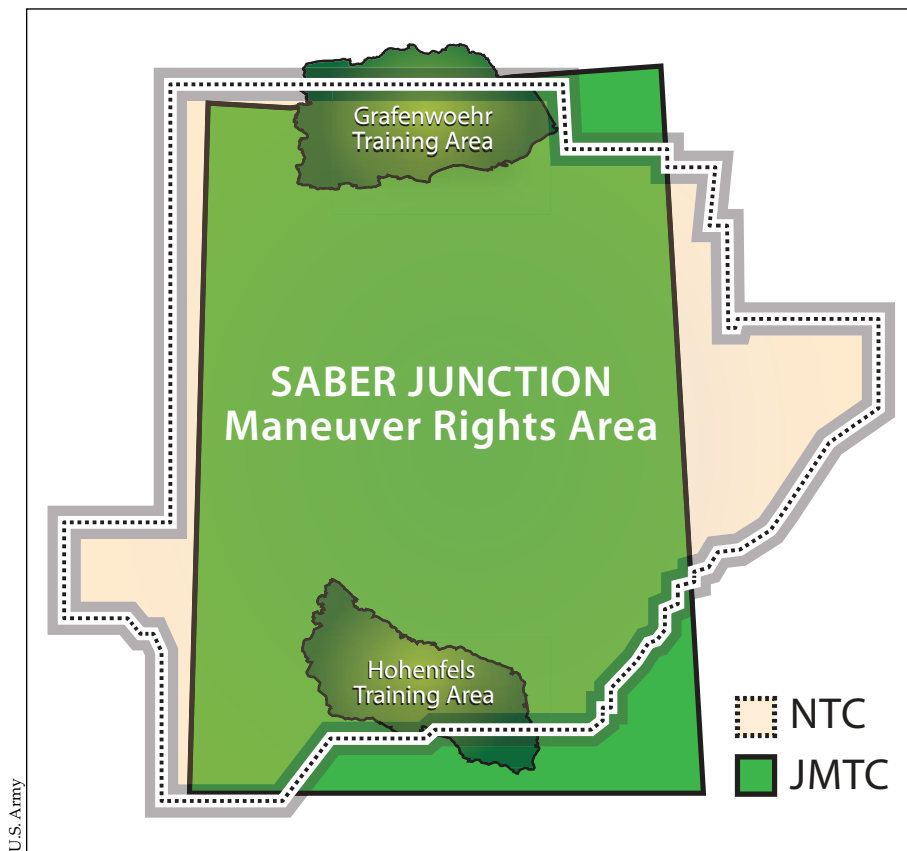
mechanized infantry to Serbian military police, the Regiment faced a multinational opposing force (OPFOR) led by the professional OPFOR of 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, supported by German Panzers, Czech artillery and Slovenian aircraft. For the first five days of the rotation, the blue force objective was to fight its way across 80 kilometers of rolling countryside and villages of southern Bavaria through a region known as the Maneuver Rights Area and seize critical river crossing points into the Hohenfels Training Area. At more than 1,000 square miles, this region is roughly the same size as the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, Calif., and represents the most complex, integrated training environment currently available to the U.S. Army.

Saber Junction 2012 marked the fourth decisive action training rotation executed by the Army over the past 18 months, but this exercise was unprecedented in many ways. Operating among German towns over extended distances and dealing with a real host-nation population and real multinational partners on a complex battlefield that forced the simultaneous execution of offensive, defensive and stability tasks, 2CR was presented with a level of realism and operational complexity that cannot be replicated anywhere else on the globe.

Operation Saber Junction differed from previous decisive action rotations in three fundamental ways: It featured sustained offensive operations over extended distances, multinational integration and operations among



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The Seventh Army Joint Multinational Training Command's (JMTC) Saber Junction Maneuver Rights Area in Bavaria is comparable in size to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., roughly 1,000 square miles.

condition in any future war. This event brought to light many great lessons for our Army regarding our ability to sustain our forces and communicate on the move across large distances. Specifically, it highlighted both the urgency and importance of the ongoing work at Fort Bliss, Texas, to field and test Capability Set 13 networks that can operate on the move in a highly fluid, fast-moving battlefield.

Operation Saber Junction was the first decisive action rotation to see the extensive employment of multinational partners in both the training unit and the opposing force. Nineteen different nations participated in the rotation. The 2nd Cavalry fought as a true coalition with a Romanian infantry battalion, British and Slovenian mechanized forces, Italian airborne infantry, Slovenian engineers and air defense, and Serbian military police—all supported by French special forces and Ukrainian Hind D attack helicopters. The Regiment's higher headquarters for the exercise included a contingent from the First German-Netherlands Corps to replicate a multinational headquarters.

a live host-nation population. When 2CR crossed the line of departure early on the morning of October 13, 2012, their ultimate objective was a fictitious city named Kibirli in the Hohenfels Training Area, more than 50 kilometers away. Between them and their objective were several major German towns, more than 100,000 German citizens, an *autobahn*, rivers and, most importantly, a hybrid enemy threat consisting of near-peer conventional forces and insurgents who moved freely among the real German population. The 2nd Cavalry attacked for 148 hours without interruption before their forces finally closed around Kibirli. During that time, the regimental main command post jumped three times with squadron command posts in nearly continuous movement in order to keep up with the forward line of troops.

This attack represented the longest sustained advance against organized enemy forces that our Army has conducted since the 3rd Infantry Division fought its way to Baghdad in 2003. The ability to conduct continuous offensive operations over long distances remains one of the great asymmetrical advantages of the U.S. military and a likely

**W**e will likely never fight another conflict without substantial involvement from coalition partners on our flanks, in our higher headquarters, and within our own formations. With more than 1,800 foreign soldiers involved in the exercise, Operation Saber Junction afforded the ideal opportunity to test our ability to integrate formations from multiple nations in a fast-developing tactical situation. The list of potential friction points is long and detailed. Rules of engagement, national caveats, fuel and ammunition compatibility, night vision capability, and doctrinal differences all affected the rapid integration of multinational formations in the Regiment during this exercise. The lack of compatible radio systems and the ever-present language barrier also hampered true integration at the tactical level.

While 2CR did an impressive job working through these many challenges, it is clear that the task of integrating coalition partners requires sound doctrine and continual training at every echelon. President Rosen Plevneliev of the Republic of Bulgaria visited his troops during the exercise. He observed how the interface challenges were similar to the struggles he faced as a software developer building compatibility among various platforms and operating systems. "Compatibility is essential in the multinational environment," he said. Ultimately, the exercise demonstrated that the decisive point in successful multinational operations

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*Right, Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev addresses his troops participating in Operation Saber Junction during a visit to JMTC last October. Below, a U.S. Army Europe fighting vehicle assigned to 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment moves into a fighting position during Saber Junction 2012.*



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lies in finding creative ways to bridge the cultural and doctrinal divide. This is a skill too difficult and too important not to include in future decisive action training exercises.

**S**aber Junction 2012 is the first U.S. brigade-level training exercise to take place in the midst of a real host-nation population in 23 years. The complexity of this environment added a level of realism unobtainable anywhere else in the world. Military operations in the future will almost certainly occur against the backdrop of the homes and businesses of an indigenous population, and this exercise truly tested our ability to operate in that context.

Throughout the 21-day rotation, the Regiment never occupied a traditional forward operating base. Units moved constantly in response to a dynamic enemy. While there were many lessons learned about the basics of field craft—the use of white light, field sanitation, digging of fighting positions—our soldiers proved surprisingly adaptive. Sergeants who in multiple combat tours had never spent more than three continuous days outside of a secured perimeter went up to three weeks in open terrain, surrounded by an ever-present enemy threat. This



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highlights a critical but often overlooked advantage that is resident in our young soldiers, noncommissioned officers and junior officers. Our battle-tested force is surprisingly resilient and can adapt rapidly to a changing environment. As we move into a very uncertain future, in which so many

*A Romanian battalion commander and a British mechanized company commander discuss their scheme of maneuver as the main effort for the regimental attack while the regimental operations officer, MAJ Andy Watson (arms folded), 2nd Cavalry Regiment, looks on.*



U.S. Army/LTC Jeremy Wilson

threats to American security are completely unknown to us today, it is that adaptability that will be our greatest core competency.

**F**our decades ago our Army found itself in a period of great transition, not unlike our current one. In the early 1970s, Generals Creighton W. Abrams and William E. DePuy recognized that a decade of counterinsurgency operations in the jungles of Vietnam had resulted in atrophy of the skills necessary to synchronize complex operations at the brigade and battalion levels. Accustomed to years of supporting what was essentially a platoon-and-company fight from small firebases, our brigade headquarters had lost the art of synchronization and served primarily as a resource-providing headquarters. Abrams and DePuy, both World War II veterans, knew that in order to succeed against Soviet land armies pouring through the Fulda Gap, our brigades had to learn to plan and synchronize complex operations. The nature of the mission itself demanded a much more centralized approach and a different set of behaviors from our tactical headquarters. The result was the creation of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and the birth of the combat training centers a decade later. Our leadership at the time recognized that if we could accurately replicate the conditions our soldiers might expect on the battlefield in a live environment, then they would adapt, and the doctrine and training necessary for success would emerge as a generation of soldiers grew into leadership with experience in this environment. The key to success was replicating the environment as accurately as possible. The trans-

formation of our Army in the 18 years between the birth of TRADOC in 1973 and Operation Desert Storm in 1991 is now viewed as one of the most productive periods in the history of our military.

Our challenges today are different but reminiscent of those we faced after Vietnam. A decade of counterinsurgency has taught us great lessons about understanding the operational environment and built great initiative and autonomy into our company-level formations. While we should seek to retain those strengths, there are instances when old lessons must be adapted to the new environment and relearned. The decisive action training environment presents a new challenge to brigade and battalion staffs accustomed to decentralized company-level operations. Simultaneously faced with a near-peer conventional threat and a stability challenge across a broad operational environment, staffs must have the tools to manage both while they synchronize a growing variety of battlefield enablers, including significant contributions from our allied and host-nation partners.

The first step in building a tactical Army that can handle this level of complexity is to accurately replicate it at our combat training centers. If we can continue to do this well, with scenarios that force extended operations over large distances in complex terrain and integrate our coalition partners, then the American soldier will adapt, as he has done so well in the past. Then the Army will succeed, as our predecessors did four decades ago, in building a new generation of warfighters who are prepared for the challenges of a new century. ★