



Paratroopers assigned to the 4th Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, land in Grafenwoehr, Germany, during a heavy equipment drop on Oct. 18, 2016, as part of Peacemaster Unity training. The Soldiers jumped from a C-17 Globemaster III flown by a crew assigned to the Heavy Air Lift Wing in Papa Air Base, Hungary. (Photo by Spc. Emily Houderschildt)

Determining the Purpose of an ISB for Airborne Operations

■ By Lt. Col. Joel P. Gleason and Lt. Col. Gary Brock

Airborne joint forcible-entry (JFE) operations exist as a strategic option to defeat anti-access/area-denial threats, provide a rapid response capability, and potentially open the area of operations (AO) for heavier follow-on forces. Conducting airborne JFE directly from home station to the drop zone remains a viable option, but it requires unilateral action,

which no NATO nation is likely to undertake in the current joint operational environment.

It is far more likely that crisis response forces will assemble a coalition outside of the contingency operations location and stage forces for the coming fight. To accomplish this, the crisis response coalition is likely to employ one or more intermediate staging bases (ISBs).

Crisis response forces must train to establish ISBs in order to ensure their ability to leverage existing organizations and infrastructure. This will enable speed of assembly and increased operational reach when a crisis arises.

Crisis response force commanders and staffs must understand and train the ISB tasks of forward staging and operational support as well as the key

ISB purposes of building capacity, conducting intermodal transfer, and disaggregating and aggregating forces en route. These tasks and purposes can shape training objectives in order to quickly assemble and deliver an airborne multinational brigade combat team (MNBCT) and employ an ISB to support the mission.

Crisis Response Considerations

During crisis response operations, strategic leaders will seek formations and infrastructure that crisis response forces have already trained to employ.

In order to deploy combined crisis response forces effectively, the allied, joint force must constantly train on how to establish ISBs and how to facilitate joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (JRSOI). In the context of ISB operations, the acronym JRSOI is preferred over the NATO doctrinal term RSOM [reception, staging, and onward movement] because the NATO term does not include the integration step, which is critical to coalition formation at an ISB.

Employing an ISB within a combat training center (CTC)-sized exercise carries the added restriction that ISB training objectives must not degrade other training.

ISB Doctrine

U.S. doctrine for ISB establishment and utilization is limited and requires further definition and development. Recent changes to Army publications sought to reduce unnecessary information while recognizing that the side effect of this shift eliminated a significant amount of guidance. Additionally, NATO doctrine does not cover ISB establishment.

In 2003, the Army briefly released and then rescinded Department of the Army Pamphlet 700-33, Intermediate Staging Base Handbook. Likewise, doctrine writers removed nine pages of ISB discussion from doctrine between the 2009 publication of FM 4-0, Sustainment, and the 2012 release of Army Doctrine Reference Publication 4-0, Sustainment. Some

relevant information still remains in Joint Publication 3-35, Deployment and Redeployment Operations, but the discussion of ISBs is limited. Although this sounds like an information drought, it liberates planners to develop the concepts asserted in this article.

According to current doctrine, ISBs exist to accomplish the two tasks of forward staging forces and providing operations support from a location closer to the contingency operation. In order to best use ISBs for airborne operations, planners can pair those two tasks with these three purposes: build capacity, conduct intermodal transfer, and disaggregate and aggregate forces.

Considering these purposes should aid airborne and theater planners in conducting mission analysis and help commanders and their staffs determine the requirements and purposes for the ISB.

Building Capacity

The most widely understood purpose for an ISB across the JFE community is to build capacity in a situation without time constraints. An ISB with the task to forward stage and the purpose to build capacity uses a location closer to the objective to build combat power.

Using a closer location allows combined forces to plan, train, and rehearse, reduces the time from decision to action, and shortens airdrop missions. It also makes it easier to stage follow-on forces (forces that will land instead of airdrop) and forward stage contingency enablers. This task and purpose pair is the most obvious for training airborne forces at CTCs.

A task to conduct operations support in order to build capacity at an ISB allows for the pre-positioning of logistics stocks, reduces the range for mission command elements that do not need to be in the AO, and reduces the response time for urgent support requests. This task and purpose also enables military aircraft to conduct ground refuel en route without reconfiguring loads of per-

sonnel or equipment.

No matter which task is designated, an ISB with a purpose to build capacity can accomplish any subtask separately.

Conducting Intermodal Transfer

Another commonly understood ISB purpose, conduct intermodal transfer, increases efficiency and operational effectiveness. Intermodal transfer can effectively increase momentum while allowing Soldiers to maintain both endurance and protection for greater operational reach.

When using an ISB in order to conduct intermodal transfer, follow-on forces deploy to the ISB by one mode (commercial air, strategic airlift, or fast surface ship) and continue on from the ISB to the AO by another mode that fits the capability of the seized airhead in the contingency AO. Often at least one mode is a joint capability. While a second echelon organizes at the ISB, initial-entry forces may directly airdrop into the contingency AO from home station or use another ISB concept.

Conducting intermodal transfer at an ISB allows sustainment forces and the joint distribution enterprise to reconfigure strategic stocks and equipment into usable packages, such as containerized delivery system bundles, in order to meet the supported commander's requirements. This is the most common employment of an ISB, but it is often operated by echelons above brigade (EAB). Therefore, employing this ISB concept at a CTC would require an EAB training audience or enabler.

Disaggregating and Aggregating

The least understood and least trained ISB purpose is to deploy airborne forces to forward stage in order to disaggregate and aggregate en route. This practice increases speed and operational reach through existing forward basing.

This ISB task and purpose is most likely to occur in a large-scale high-speed deployment. The airborne force must forward stage at



Spc. Katrina Saddler, a human resources technician with the 82nd Airborne Division Sustainment Brigade, works with 16th Sustainment Brigade counterparts on June 7, 2016, at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, to record on a manifest the 82nd Airborne Division and United Kingdom paratroopers preparing to jump into Poland during exercise Swift Response 16. (Photo by Sgt. Daniel Schroeder)

multiple ISBs or pre-existing forward bases in order to disaggregate when the initial-entry force requires an air package too large for a single airbase to support.

To accomplish this, a large air fleet transports forces from home station to multiple ISBs that together meet the required capacity for all of the aircraft. Forces at disaggregated locations synchronize their deployment in order to deliver an aggregated force over the drop zone that is in excess of any single ISB's capacity.

The disaggregate and aggregate force ISB concept provides an opportunity for greater mass and increases the probability of surprise on the objective. The initial-entry force can use this method to put more combat power on the drop zone than a single airfield could support. This concept also takes advantage of operations security by dispersing the signature

of a sizable force over several basing locations, although social media may render this obsolete.

Replicating the infrastructure required for disaggregating and aggregating forces in training is very resource intensive. The most likely way to replicate a scenario similar to this would be to coordinate between allied airborne forces for delivery of units from multiple home stations into a training exercise.

JMRC Training

Units training at the Joint Multi-national Readiness Center (JMRC) have the opportunity to conduct the full deployment process, including operating an ISB that replicates contingency operations. Recent JMRC airborne training exercises have primarily trained to build capacity through staging an airborne MN-BCT at an ISB. Exercise Anakonda

16 successfully resourced and replicated the disaggregate and aggregate concept by converging forces from three points of origin.

In most cases, airborne forces training at the JMRC have not had the resources to conduct any of the other ISB concepts. All of these ISB task and purpose sets can be used for training, but their usefulness varies depending on the training audience.

Conducting intermodal transfers in order to stage or support could be prohibitively expensive unless an EAB training audience or enabler exists. Without an EAB sustainment participant, it would be better to use the existing pre-exercise surface and rail deployments as training opportunities. Deploying any element to the JMRC will involve some intermodal transfer unless it is a direct airdrop or airlift from home station.

The touch-and-go nature of dis-

aggregate and aggregate ISBs makes this concept less critical to train but important for planners to comprehend. The disaggregate and aggregate purpose for ISBs is also not a preferred concept for the task to provide operations support, so that training is less vital to the airborne JFE community. An airborne force gains no advantage by attempting to establish multiple ISB mission command nodes.

The most critical function of the airborne ISB in JMRC training is to allow the coalition and joint services to execute the formation of an airborne MNBCT through JRSOI activities. Conducting the ISB task and purpose sets of forward staging and operations support in order to build capacity during training will make the integration of high-readiness forces a real possibility for future contingencies.

JRSOI at the ISB

In training or during contingency operations, the forward-deploying organization must form, train, plan, and communicate as a single unified organization. JRSOI at the ISB generates human, procedural, and technical interoperability training opportunities across the airborne MNBCT.

Reception and staging of forces is the initial occasion for testing established command and support relationships within the task organization. This is also when the airborne MNBCT commander and his staff ensure they fully comprehend the capabilities and capacities existing within their task organization.

Although the integration of the airborne force will likely occur before the actual onward movement from the ISB, the detailed planning for onward movement must occur simultaneously with the integration activities. Airborne commanders use a prioritized vehicle listing (PVL) to detail the deployment of combat power across their organizations.

The PVL should include spaces for personnel as well as critical sup-

plies and should detail the air-drop and follow-on echelons. Any prioritization for the movement of organic forces made at home station or during the initial operational planning must be recertified with the actual forces available (not promised) to the MNBCT staged in the ISB.

If a portion of the force is designated to move into the AO after a ground line of communication is secured, then these forces should also receive priority designation on a PVL. Even if a preliminary PVL is set before arrival into the ISB, the introduction of allied formations, capabilities, and lift assets generates a PVL mission analysis review.

Part of the PVL mission analysis must occur within the airborne MNBCT during integration; integration is when interoperability occurs. A staff planning exercise in the ISB is one way to give the MNBCT commander and his staff time to understand, visualize, and describe the newly organized formation and to prepare all elements for the operation.

It is critical that both a mission command validation exercise and a communication exercise occur to test systems and procedures before the JFE occurs.

ISB Mission Command

Before onward movement can occur, forces stand up an ISB mission command (ISB-MC) node. This ISB-MC node is a small element responsible for ensuring critical-support coordination, including intelligence, joint fires, and sustainment. The ISB-MC node also facilitates forward staging and onward movement and maintains positive mission command with the higher headquarters and the forward command post.

The ISB-MC node should be led by someone with the authority to make both execution and adjustment decisions about the PVL and any support coordinated from the ISB. Manning for this element can initially come from the deploying unit (depending on how long it has been and will continue to be around).

If the ISB-MC node is necessary after the PVL has been fully executed, it is best staffed by EAB elements, including higher headquarters and adjacent sustainment units, in order to allow the deploying commander to focus on the forward fight.

Crisis response forces must understand and train ISB tasks of forward staging and operations support as well as the purposes of an airborne ISB to build capacity, conduct intermodal transfer, and disaggregate and aggregate forces en route. Airborne commanders must know how to assemble and deliver an airborne MNBCT in a short time. They must also visualize how to employ an ISB to support the mission.

JRSOI doctrine allows planners, commanders, and their staffs to develop training for ISB employment that replicates an ISB's role in crisis-response conditions. Ensuring crisis response forces understand how the ISB experience relates to readiness will ensure they know how to tap resources to speed assembly and increase operational reach in a crisis.

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