



# Collaborative technology in action: Exercise FLANDRES

The UK MOD is no stranger to partnership working and joint operations with allied nations. A recent example of this was Exercise FLANDRES, an Anglo-French collaboration in which British troops deployed alongside their counterparts in the French Army to examine how the two armies could interoperate in a digital environment. Ian Smart, Lead Interoperability Consultant from Systematic, explains the outcome and the next steps.

Exercise FLANDRES stemmed from the bilateral treaty signed by UK Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicholas Sarkozy in November 2010. This agreement gave fresh impetus to the two countries cooperating much more closely on future military operations and set out the vision for the formation of a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF), expected in 2014.

Both British and French commanders agree that digitisation gives them significant tactical advantages in modern combat

FLANDRES, co-located at Mailly-le-Camp in France. Exercise FLANDRES was designed to examine the effectiveness of a UK Brigade and a French Brigade working as part of a French Division operating within a digitised environment utilising the breadth of real C4I and ISTAR capabilities on contingent operations.

### Complex connectivity

The challenge to achieving interoperability is to facilitate the accurate exchange of Command and Control (C2) information

often been adapted to meet the operational needs of that particular nation. Even where common standards such as those specified through NATO STANAGs are used, different countries often implement different versions and have adapted and evolved tailored exchange standards for C2 and military messaging, thereby increasing the interoperability challenge.

In the case of Anglo-French interoperability at Brigade and Division level, the French operate the SICF system developed by Thales, while the British Forces use BCIP, developed by General Dynamics. Both use NATO and Multilateral Interoperability Programme (MIP) standards to increase interoperability through unambiguous, language-independent information exchange but there are differences in implementations which can prejudice common understanding.

### MIP

Systematic's SitaWare C2 software was used within the UK MIP Gateway so that the SICF and BCIP systems could exchange data using the MIP data model and replication mechanism, in this case using the MIP Baseline (or Block) 2 standards.

The MIP data model is the most widely agreed military information exchange standard currently available. Ratified by 27 nations and organisations, the current baseline is aimed at supporting the wide spectrum of joint military operations.

operations not only by improving situational awareness and the sharing of information, but also by enhancing cohesion, cooperation and the battle rhythm. Interoperability of the two armies is of paramount importance if the CJEF is to be effective, and it is vital that multinationalisation does not 'dilute' the current capabilities of the individual components.

So with interoperability as the key focus, some 1500 military personnel, including 450 British troops, participated in Exercise

using the various military exchange standards connecting the different national systems. Getting this right enables the force to build and maintain an up-to-date, common Recognised Ground Picture (RGP) and to exchange related information, such as orders and reports, within and between the various headquarters.

The common difficulty in achieving interoperability between coalition partners is that different nations operate C2 and information exchange systems which have

Exercise FLANDRES was the first time that SICF and BCIP had been connected through the UK MIP Gateway and it was successfully used to provide, initially, a common RGP. The detail presented within the RGP was developed and improved throughout the exercise to match the emerging user requirement and, following the exercise, there is now confidence that the information exchange can be further extended using the existing systems to meet wider user needs including the exchange of high-resolution overlays and logistic information.

### Military messaging

The difficulty faced by the armies in exchanging military message text formats is that, while SICF and BCIP both implement NATO's ADatP-3 standard, each system currently supports different versions of the individual message formats themselves. Since this complicated information exchange through formatted messages during Exercise FLANDRES, a work-around was decided upon and implemented by the operational staff.

The process involved the use of 'word processor' document templates and an 'Information Transfer Cell' but was found to be both labour-intensive and time-consuming, and is unlikely to support the required operational tempo.

Systematic's IRIS Forms application is already used by both armies for both NATO



and national MTFs, and a major recommendation from the exercise analysis was to exploit this capability for future information exchange. IRIS Forms simplifies and structures the inputting and transfer of military information, including orders and reports, through a user-friendly interface. It ensures consistent data entry and transfer as the basis for rapid, reliable and often automated distribution of key text-based information throughout the command structure.

### Next step

Exercise FLANDRES was the first major event in the preparations for the formation of the British-French Combined Joint Expeditionary Force. Designed to create an inventory of bi-national interoperability,

it highlighted many successes and some areas where improvements can be made.

The next opportunity for the armies to evaluate and improve their interoperability will come during Exercise CITADEL GUIBERT in late November/early December 2011. This exercise will be similar to Exercise FLANDRES with UK and French Brigades working as part of a French Division, but this time a Belgian Division will also operate under the Land Component Command.

### Further Information

For further information, visit:  
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