



TRANSCRIPT

Inside USEUCOM, Episode 4: Ready, Set, Exercise

April 26, 2021

Host: Jeff Curtin, EUCOM Public Affairs

Guest: Douglas Engelke, Deputy Division Chief for the Joint Training, Readiness and Exercise Division (J7)

MSgt JEFF CURTIN: Welcome to episode four of Inside USEUCOM. I'm Master Sergeant Jeff Curtin from EUCOM public affairs. And today we are talking with Douglas Engelke from the J-7 team. He is the Deputy Division Chief for the Joint Training, Readiness and Exercise Division. That is quite the mouthful and that's one of the reasons why just call it J-7.

Mr. Engelke, it is a pleasure to have you here today.

DOUGLAS ENGELKE: Thank you, glad to be here.

MSgt. CURTIN: All right, sir, for those of us that don't speak the J language can you tell me what the purpose of J-7 is?

MR. ENGELKE: The J-7 has two primary functions; assessments and exercises that's organized into three broad organizations within the J-7 and the one that I'm involved with is the Joint Training Readiness and Exercise Division. So we're responsible for both headquarters exercises and also working with our partners and allies in terms of exercises that improve our interoperability and capabilities together as an alliance.

MSgt. CURTIN: How many people are on your team there in the J-7 that are all working on this together?

MR. ENGELKE: We have approximately 50 people. Most of them are contractors, about two-thirds are JTREX or Joint Training Readiness Exercise division workforce is contractor, four G.S.s and the rest are military whether it be Guard or Reserve or Active.

MSgt. CURTIN: Wow, that's a pretty sizable unit or group there if you think about it. Does it -- does it feel like a large unit or do you feel like you're too small?

MR. ENGELKE: Well honestly at times it feels like it's small because the growth in the exercise program over the past seven years, truthfully, has been astronomical. Ever since 2014, we've gone from a theater security cooperation command where we were working to help build

allies and partners and their capacity to one going towards a potential war fight readiness footing. And that's a lot more work and a lot more exercises.

MSgt. CURTIN: Yes, it sounds like it. And it sounds like you need all those people that are in there.

MR. ENGELKE: We do.

MSgt. CURTIN: Yes, so just can you describe for me USEUCOM's exercise program? What goes into the actual program itself?

MR. ENGELKE: Well it has three broad categories. But first let me just start with its roughly 200 events annually that execute here within the theater across the components that lower levels plus our larger headquarter exercises. In the J-7 we own a particular slice of that. We track about 30 to 40 exercises a year and we're responsible for executing five to six of those, in terms of our planning, our execution here at the headquarters. And then we also help with the components also execute some very high level joint exercises both among the components, which is the -- was the big J joint as well as with our partners and allies and in terms of improving our interoperability.

So at the headquarters level that's where we see all the headquarters staff get together with the component headquarter staffs, with the other combatant commands, with the whole of government interagency to do several large, they're called tier one exercises. But what that really means is they're the biggest and the most time intensive to plan and execute from our perspective.

And then we also then support, like I said, roughly 20 exercises annually with the components that are very large, very significant and involve our partners and allies heavily.

MSgt. CURTIN: Okay. You said that they're really -- they take a while to plan and execute.

MR. ENGELKE: Yes.

MSgt. CURTIN: How long are we talking to actually plan an exercise --

MR. ENGELKE: To truly --

MSgt. CURTIN: -- is it a week or two, or?

MR. ENGELKE: No, actually -- actually this yearly -- a year to a year and a half process minimum. NATO takes a little bit longer because they have many more nations that they're working with. They're on about a two-year process to plan a large exercise.

But when you think that it takes all these different forces coming from different nations, different skill sets, different capabilities and you're blending them in an environment where you're trying to bring together a joint and interoperable capability from a coalition environment.

That takes quite a lot of work to make sure you're going to design the exercise correctly, to get after everyone's training objectives as well as then have all the systems in place to be able to talk to each other and do it right when you actually execute.

MSgt. CURTIN: That's really interesting. So why is this exercise program even important? Why -- what does it actually give to the mission if it's just the exercise --

MR. ENGELKE: Right.

MSgt. CURTIN: -- how does it apply to the actual operations?

MR. ENGELKE: It gives three things basically. The first is it makes sure that we, the EUCOM headquarters and the component headquarters are ready to execute our key war plans. That's its first and most important driving imperative. That we practice and we're ready to execute in time of war, deter hopefully in times and actually deter in times of peace but be ready to fight and win if necessary.

The second thing it also gives us is a true interoperable capability with our partners and allies. It's a key operational activity that the commander directs in terms of NATO convergence, for example, aligning with NATO and also with our key partners to make sure that we can get together at both the operational level as well as at the tactical level to execute our war fighting functions.

MSgt. CURTIN: You keep mentioning partners and allies, how important are those partners and allies to our actual exercise process?

MR. ENGELKE: They are a driving function. Their training objectives are in-line and synchronized with our training objectives. Ultimately we will never fight in this theater by ourselves. We will be here and also fight with and alongside and even under at times NATO command just like we did with Odyssey Dawn, for example, back with the Libyan conflict many years ago.

We are ready and we're postured and that's what the exercises give us is the ability to fight with, alongside our partners and allies.

MSgt. CURTIN: So you've got some pretty good relationships there, then?

MR. ENGELKE: Fantastic. We have a core team that has been doing this for a long time who have been reaching out and we have some people who have been doing the same job, same mission in our organization for over 14 to 15 years. That's the beauty of some of the GS and contractors that we have on-board that they have these -- literally individual personal relationships with senior leadership across the NATO AOR.

MSgt. CURTIN: So as far as partners and allies go, do you guys just have someone in your office that just happens to know a lot about the country? Or do you have actual people from those nations that are involved with your team there in order to communicate with?

MR. ENGELKE: We do not have any foreign liaisons right now in JTREX itself. However at EUCOM we do have a large foreign liaison core and we work hand-in-hand with that via the J-5 who owns our partner nation relationships. But we have people full-time at EUCOM from various nations around the AOR and we work with them regularly both in terms of getting their inputs for exercise program. But they also play in our exercise programs.

So, for example, there's something called the multinational coordination cell which is a process by which they are involved and brought in to real world operations but also our exercises. And so they literally play themselves and give feedback and inputs to the design but also when we're executing and carrying out these high level exercises at the operational and strategic level they represent their country's opinions and their inputs and their requirements so that we can realistically train, realistically be prepared to fight.

MSgt. CURTIN: So you said -- you mentioned that the J-5 works directly with the foreign liaison officers. So they're a different section than you then?

MR. ENGELKE: Right --

MSgt. CURTIN: So what's the J-5 exactly?

MR. ENGELKE: The J-5 actually is a very large directorate at EUCOM that is responsible for policy, for plans and also direct engagement with our partners and allies. So, for example, they have actually military members at the embassies around the AOR that actually work and work with the State Department, work with the foreign partners and allies actually at the embassies. And so they have that direct relationship in country. They bring that experience back here as well as having some of the foreign members work here at EUCOM and so they're an integrating function for bringing that kind of participation into planning, operations and exercises.

MSgt. CURTIN: Got it, okay. So you work with the J-5, I would assume you work with several of the other J directorates in order to do a lot of these exercises --

MR. ENGELKE: Correct. Correct.

MSgt. CURTIN: So is the full -- you would say that there's the full headquarters involvement really in this process of planning exercises?

MR. ENGELKE: Correct. We touch every single directorate, we touch every component. So in the design of an exercise we, the J-7, are not experts, for example, and what the J-4 needs to exercise or be ready to execute its key war plans or what its objectives might be with -- actually with NATO or certain key partners. So thing with the J-2 and in terms of intelligence sharing, we aren't expert in that.

So we bring these different groups and organizations together in the planning process and we take it through a long planning cycle where we bring in their training objectives and desires,

their capabilities come to bear too in terms of planning the scenario, planning the exercise design.

And then of course they're also fully integrated in the execution. So the way that sort of pans out is you have somebody called a trusted agent in each of these directorates. And what they do is they get to see behind the curtain. So they get to see behind all the exercise design, understand what's going to come in the exercise because they've helped design it.

And so they're the expert in -- form their own organization who helps design a training scenario that will make sure that they are being effectively tasked and challenged.

MSgt. CURTIN: Sounds complicated.

MR. ENGELKE: It is.

MSgt. CURTIN: It's a good thing you've got a large -- a large directorate there to help you take care of that right. So you talked about the -- you've talked with foreign liaison officers in order to work with the different nations in the area. And you've talked with -- about the different components within the -- within the regions as well, the Air Force, the Navy, the Marines, the Army.

MR. ENGELKE: Yes.

MSgt. CURTIN: As well as Special Operations.

MR. ENGELKE: Correct.

MSgt. CURTIN: So let's go a little bit wider than that even. So outside of our region, how do you work with the combatant commands of -- of the other locations, whether they be geographic or they be operational.

MR. ENGELKE: Each year we participate in as well as lead several exercises that reach globally. In fact, there's a thing called the globally integrated exercise, which is led by the joint staff. We participate, as do our different organizations here at EUCOM, the different directors participate.

And that is a process that looks at, no kidding, giving the best military advice to the chairman and SecDef based upon worldwide problem sets. We also have other exercises like Austere Challenge, which is our biggest headquarters exercise where other combatant commands all play in that exercise.

So they might play as a full -- full blown training audience where they're actually exercising their own staff at the same time or they'll provide a response cell or some type of augmentation to make sure we're getting realistic inputs.

So for example, Austere Challenge that goes in '22, not only will it involve NATO, not only will it involve key partners and allies but it will also involve every combatant command in the world will have participation, functional and combatant command, including State Department, including actually the whole of government presence.

MSgt. CURTIN: Wow. So it's safe to say at this point that you basically work with just about everyone in the world in order to get these up and going right?

MR. ENGELKE: For our large headquarters' exercises they are truly complex beasts.

MSgt. CURTIN: So the concept is put our people in these situations so that they can understand --

MR. ENGELKE: Correct.

MSgt. CURTIN: -- how to operate when they actually come about.

MR. ENGELKE: They can understand the environment, the operational environment, the strategy that's going into it, how our plans related, how NATO's plans are actually in alignment and synchronized and how we synchronize with theirs. So it gives us that broad perspective as a headquarters how to operate within this AOR.

MSgt. CURTIN: Awesome. Okay, what are some major component exercises that are coming up that the headquarters can oversee?

MR. ENGELKE: Well, I'm actually glad you asked because we're not the only dog in town. In fact, in some ways the exercises at the components are larger particularly in terms of manpower material that come to bear.

That headquarters exercises involve a few thousand people but it's really being done on the backbone of a model and simulation system and a lot of laptops and a lot of desktop systems.

When you talk at the large component exercises, this is when you're actually seeing forces in the field from all these different nations, from all these different components coming together to operate in the field.

So for example, USAREUR has one of the largest series, it's called Defender. Defender is a large reinforcement in place where we try to deploy a large amount of forces from the U.S. AOR here in theater.

And we work with our partners and allies who also then synchronize some of their exercises to leverage those same forces, to leverage some of the same command and control exercises that would be over that to come together to receive the forces, supply them and then conduct and practice plans and operations in the field as a combined force with our allies.

MSgt. CURTIN: How many -- so Defender exercise is -- is kind of like an overarching exercise with many smaller exercises inside of it?

MR. ENGELKE: Not inside of it but linked. So for example, actually Defender is that big movement and resupply and also command post exercise in supporting that. That links up, for example, with NATO's Steadfast Defender, similarly named for the same purpose because they then exercise all the NATO logistics and requirements in terms of receiving forces here in the theater and AOR.

It's also linked to a series of other exercises which then take those forces that arrive and they then use those forces to actually conduct certain types of operations, whether it be naval or whether it be air or whether it be ground based.

MSgt. CURTIN: Okay. So how many exercises are there connected to Defender?

MR. ENGELKE: Currently we have eight and -- and so -- and also now there's some partner nations who also do some exercises during the same kind of time period. Ultimately it all comes down to we -- when you have these types of forces and this amount of forces in the field, you leverage them for multiple purposes.

But ultimately Defender in its inception was designed to demonstrate the U.S. capability to quickly and rapidly bring large amounts of men and material out here to the theater in case of crisis to demonstrate our ability to actually operate quickly and reassure our allies as well as deter potential adversaries.

MSgt. CURTIN: And I imagine our partners and allies are an important part of that process of bringing them over as well, right?

MR. ENGELKE: We really can't move them by ourselves. Actually the moment that they actually get off the ship or get off the plane, that now is a host nation providing that rail network, that train network, the truck and transportation network to a large degree, contracts here within the host nation all supported by our NATO allies as well as our key partners.

NATO even has a command that it's doing -- I actually did stand up recently, the Joint -- the Joint Support Logistics Group, which works heavily with our U.S. exercises and the Defender series to basically help execute those -- those logistics as well as other NATO logistics.

MSgt. CURTIN: Okay. And so I mean Defender '21 is supposed to be starting here in a couple days. How much -- how much touch do you have on that now that it's about to start. I mean as far as the exercise, you're pretty much off -- hands off at this point, I would hope, right?

MR. ENGELKE: For the component lead exercises, correct. Those headquarters exercises like Austere Challenge that I mentioned before, that's -- we -- we run it. We execute it. We stand with a huge group and we're in charge. But we help plan and resource -- basically plan, program, direct, and assess these big field exercises that the components are doing but they execute them.

They are -- they are the actual office -- the actual officer conducting that event. Whereas they're in charge of everything from force protection to how the forces are moving in the field. We are now in a support role and a monitoring role and also a messaging role really when it comes down to the field exercises.

MSgt. CURTIN: So there's a lot of different phases and parts --

MR. ENGELKE: Correct.

MSgt. CURTIN: -- to these -- to planning all of these. So what would you say is the most important part?

MR. ENGELKE: Truthfully you can't -- you actually really can't say one is more important because it all collapses if one doesn't go well. If you do not plan and program effectively, and that's three to five years out by the way.

This starts three to five years out when you start requesting forces and funds because we do try to get certain key forces that are very hard to come by sometimes. That are very low density and in high demand.

These -- these really capable high-end joint entities. Whether it be F-22s or whether it be some other kind of system that you want to bring in. Because those have a lot of real-world commitments and other exercise commitments.

So, you start the funding process and the force requests many years out. Then about two years out, you get down to the brass tacks of planning and that's when you're going to these conferences with your partners and allies and the components, and you're laying out, hey these are my training objectives.

Oh, this is the logistics requirement. We need a contract and support in place to do this. We need this much range space to be able to drop this many bombs on this range. We need this much support from, actually from this country to do this. And then they -- those other countries bring those same requirements.

Hey, I'm trying to train this battalion in this, and I want it to integrate with the U.S. forces here. So, all that happens starting around two years out. And then you get down to then the actual execution phase.

And that's when things actually start moving in the field. So, you've already done all your planning, you've built all these -- these -- these force deployment plans, now you're actually executing them in the field.

So, now you have your commander out there trying to make sure people have the right place, the right time, doing the right thing safely to get after their wartime readiness. And so then, the last phase, which people sometimes forget about is the assessment phase.

So, when you finish doing all of this you have to back because we don't just do exercise for the sake of just doing the exercise. We do the exercise not only to reassure allies, not only to execute -- execute key war plans. But to inform our plans, to inform how well prepared we are to actually fight if we need to.

So, then we take the post-end assessment and then it feeds into the next exercise series but it also feeds back into the plans. Hey, this didn't work well, so now suddenly we've got to redo this or do it better in a certain way. So, it's a end-to-end process, it really is a cycle and without doing every one of those phases you are wasting time and effort.

MSgt. CURTIN: Wow. There's a lot that goes into this, a lot of different parts.

MR. ENGELKE: Yes.

MSgt. CURTIN: Sounds like synchronization may be the keyword of your team there.

MR. ENGELKE: It is, honestly we -- we have an incredible team, actually, within the J7. Like I said, some people have been doing this same job for 14/15 years and the people who have come in and swap out every two or three years like -- I -- actually, being military members are just hard-charging.

They're out here just doing incredible work, taking advantage of a really strong and experienced team, and making true difference in our commands warfighting readiness.

MSgt. CURTIN: There's -- there's a lot of parts in there that I really appreciate the fact that your team is working so hard to put on those exercises, and really planning them long-term, and really figuring out what we need years down the road, right.

MR. ENGELKE: Right, I think we have one of the funnest jobs on staff. We actually get to work in all phases of long-range -- the tyranny of long-range planning to the crisis of now. And so it's -- it is rewarding but we actually see the result, we actually see our impact on warfighting readiness.

MSgt. CURTIN: Yes, absolutely. And speaking of, you know, the -- the stuff that comes up on -- on the fly. How has COVID actually played a role in your planning process?

MR. ENGELKE: COVID has been a major impact. Unfortunately, this last year we did see a -- most of our exercises actually were impacted by COVID in some way. Some were canceled by host nations just due to things they had going on within their borders when it first came out last year.

We lost most of our exercise program to cancellation or to postponement. But we did, however, manage to save quite a bit. For example, Defender last year was going to -- going to be the first large Defender here in theater.

And we actually did deploy over half the forces and half the troops here to theater, which also then did get some training in with partners and allies based upon certain local conditions allowing that.

But we did have other exercises postponed, for example, we had Astral Knight, which is one of our major -- major integrated air and missile defense exercises that USAFE leads with partners and allies. And so they postponed that, put that into a window where it could be supported last fall.

So, unfortunately, some of our partner nations and actually their exercises did cancel just based upon the realities of COVID. But now what we're trying to do is maximize FY22 -- calendar year '22 in ensuring that we make up for some of those losses. So, what you're seeing is one of the largest exercise programs ever put together in -- in this next year.

MSgt. CURTIN: Wow. So, it's safe to say that regardless of what happens we're going to continue to operate, we're going to continue to exercise, and we're going to continue to plan to -- to do all the things that we do on a regular basis. And it sounds like the J7 and your -- your whole team there. They're ready to -- to take that on regardless of the situation.

MR. ENGELKE: One of the things I'm actually really proud of in terms of us working in the COVID environment was that we really were groundbreaking in -- in and actually really within -- within DOD and our ability to plan virtually.

So, we -- we actually leveraged multiple systems, classified and unclassified systems to include joint staff systems, to include ones that are on the unclassified systems both virtually in terms of visual technology, as well as just large speakerphone systems that we were -- enabled us to continue planning.

So, even for those events that -- that were impacted, the planning still went on. So, we still had benefit even when an exercise might get postponed or actually downscaled, we still planned, and we coordinated with the components, with our partners, and our allies because of the virtual advances we made this year. And we'll continue to use those in years out.

MSgt. CURTIN: Yes. And it's -- kind've made us all kind of more better for it in the long run.

MR. ENGELKE: Thanks.

MSgt. CURTIN: Yes, so I'm looking forward to watching one of these exercises play out and seeing all the things that everybody learns from these particular exercises.

So, Mr. Engelke, it's been a pleasure speaking with you about this. And we really -- we really talked about a whole lot of stuff today. This has been Inside USEUCOM and I am here with Deputy Division Chief for the Joint Training Readiness and Exercise Division, Mr. Engelke.

MR. ENGELKE: Thank you.

MSgt. CURTIN: And I appreciate having you here today, and we look forward to hearing more from you in the future.

MR. ENGELKE: Anytime, glad to come back.

-END-