



**SET SAIL** U.S. Navy and Republic of Korea Navy ships move into formation during exercise Foal Eagle 2013. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Declan Barnes.

# FOAL EAGLE 2013:

## Combined Unconventional Warfare

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### Introduction

In March-April 2013, SOTF-13 deployed to the Korean Theater of Operations to conduct combined unconventional warfare full mission profiles with 7th and 11th Republic of Korea Special Forces Brigades as part of Joint Chiefs of Staff Exercise Foal Eagle. The 253 personnel of Special Operations Task Force-13, including the Headquarters, two Advanced Operating Bases and 12 Operational Detachments-Alpha, conducted combined UW operations with more than 800 ROK SF soldiers in five locations throughout the country. SOTF-13 exercised its core capability to execute real-world UW initial entry operations in a denied area: austere living, non-standard communications and auxiliary supply operations.

The North Korean political and military response to the UN Security Council Resolutions and Key Resolve-Foal Eagle-13, and its increased belligerence showed just how real and relevant the threat is on the Korean peninsula and this training and scenario could not have been better timed. At its core, this exercise broke the paradigm of the last 10 years of SF operations in a desert environment, and served to refresh younger generations of SF operators who have all framed their perspectives on repeat combat rotations in mature theaters. Replicating the challenging terrain, limited resupply and human environment during Foal Eagle tailored combat hardened SF operators to the operational environment in the KTO. The lack of secure forward-operating bases or village-stability platforms; lack of immediate quick-reaction force, medical evacuation, air support; and limited logistical supply challenged ODAs as they “re-learned” much about initial entry UW operations into denied areas.

The objectives of the exercise were to:

- Conduct U.S. Army Special Forces Command UW Certification to develop SOTF, AOB and ODA proficiency in UW operations
- Integrate joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational elements into combined UW planning and operations
- Exercise real-world CONPLAN to enable joint force commander’s flexibility
- Validate SOTF 13 deployment order to enable deployment globally

The purpose of the exercise was to enhance SOTF-13’s UW capabilities, and increase capacity and flexibility for the Special Forces Regiment and theater special operations command commanders. The exercise enabled SOTF-13 to complete U.S. Army Special Forces Command UW Certification in accordance with the commanding general’s certification tasks. Execution within the U.S. Forces Korea joint force commander’s over arching Foal Eagle framework ensured the SOTF’s UW operations served to expand the joint force commander’s options to implement regional mechanisms and enable innovative campaign design. Combined full mission profiles executed during Foal Eagle refined the SOTF’s ability to infiltrate ODAs discreetly, conduct precise operations to shape the environment, and ensure scalable capability through advisory of ROK SF and/or partisans in the enemy rear areas in the KTO, Pacific Command or as directed globally.

SOTF-13 lessons learned during Foal Eagle are captured in three focus areas: preparation, execution and the transition staff exercise. Preparation covers the revolutionary manner in which SOTF-13 prepared the scenario based on real world intelligence, a preparatory cyber pilot-team exercise and incorporated combined, joint, inter-

agency and enablers. The execution section covers UW infiltration methods and highlights of UW tactics, techniques and procedures employed during the training. Lastly, the combined joint transition staff exercise covered planning considerations for UW operations post-conflict to deter insurgencies and enable stability operations.

## Tension on the Peninsula

Foal Eagle played out against the backdrop of an increasingly hostile and belligerent North Korean regime under the leadership of Kim Jong-Un. KJU received control of the hermetic, authoritarian government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in December 2012, at a time when the country was suffering from the worst drought in 100 years.<sup>1</sup> In order to avoid famine, North Korea relies heavily on food aid from the international community, which it receives through a coercive cycle of provocation. Examples of the inflammatory rhetoric and actions by the DPRK that drive this cycle range from defiant underground nuclear tests, to the alleged sinking of a ROK Corvette (a craft used by the ROK Navy) to the shelling of Yeonpyong Island. In February 2012, the U.S. offered 240,000 metric tons of aid to the country as an olive branch to the new leader, but promptly rescinded the offer after North Korea attempted to launch a rocket in violation of UN Security Council Resolutions.<sup>2</sup> KJU's actions may seem out of place to the international community, but he needs to maintain a balance between providing for his people, and retaining the support of the ruling Korean Workers Party as a strong and confident leader, while maintaining control of the country in the face of a looming famine. This balancing act causes KJU to play to his internal audience, perpetuating the perception that there is an impending threat from a U.S.-led invasion, and that it is the sacred duty of North Korea to liberate South Korea from its western oppressors. To the rest of the world, this appears to be lunacy, but internally, it supports the *Juche* ideology (absolute support of the supreme leader) and dedication to the "final victory" that results in a reunified Korea.

South Korea, understandably, is not comfortable with these types of provocative actions and rhetoric, but in the recent past has taken them in stride. However, with the December 2012 election of the conservative president, Park Geun-Hye, the dynamics have changed. Following the most recent cycle of provocation by North Korea, Park addressed a joint meeting of Congress in May stating the "Republic of Korea will never accept a nuclear armed North Korea. Pyongyang's provocations will be met decisively."<sup>3</sup> Given the height of tensions on the peninsula, Foal Eagle could not have been better timed. Despite the fact that it is an annual exercise, the deterrent effect can be directly correlated to decreased rhetoric by North Korea. On March 11, 2013, at the start of Exercise Key Resolve, North Korea declared that they would unilaterally invalidate the 1953 Armistice. However, by the time Foal Eagle was in full swing, they changed their position to say that Armistice should be replaced by a peace treaty.<sup>4</sup>

## The Long Road to War

SOTF-13 took a methodical nine-month approach to ensure that units were prepared to operate in denied areas with limited support. To reorient the force, the battalion hosted two UW-focused mobile training teams from the 6th Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Groups (Airborne): the Network Development Course and Unconventional Warfare Operational Design Course. In addition to the MTTs, the battalion conducted several leader professional-development sessions

and in-depth area studies. Prior to the SOTF deployment, two ODAs conducted joint combined exchange training events with the ROK SF BDEs that eventually participated in Foal Eagle. This ensured that the ROK units had a good understanding of UW and were prepared to execute the demanding and dynamic training in the exercise.

SOTF 13 elected to establish HQ and operations at five locations across the ROK. Though difficult to support and communicate, the decision for dispersed disposition was intentional to replicate dispersion in a UW environment and to partner with two ROK SF BDEs. SOTF-13 HQs was established on Kunsan Airbase to ensure airfield access. The location enabled rigging operations, supply operations, movement of personnel and reliable power sources. The AOBs co-located with ROK brigade and battalion headquarters to maximize situational awareness on the employment of ROK-ODAs adjacent to combined ODAs and to advise ROK forces on UW operations. ODAs were infiltrated into two different UW operations areas. Dispersed locations simulate ODAs operating in denied areas. The dispersed locations created a constrained communications environment to wean units off of reliable high bandwidth data flow and instant access to information.

SOTF-13 requested Military Information Support Operations, Civil Affairs and chemical reconnaissance detachment planners and teams six months prior to execution. These enablers were involved with the scenario development, which directly contributed to the development of exercise injects to test the ODA and enabler teams. The planners helped ensure themes were connected in each UWOA and exercised the coordination of the whole area command. The result was a complex scenario that integrated joint special operations capabilities with actions that stimulated all echelons in the combined UW task force command and control.

## Combined Task Organization

SOTF-13 integrated with ROK SF at all levels and capacities: SOTF, AOB, Exercise Support Group and ODA. Combined task organization created a synergistic confluence of ROK cultural expertise with U.S. UW expertise. The SOTF aligned with the ROK BDE headquarters by integrating liaisons into the SOTF-13 Combined Operations Center at Kunsan Airbase. The SF companies established advanced operational bases and co-located with the ROK BNs. The ODAs combined at the team level in ratios from 1:1 to 1:6 based on combined mission analysis. The exercise called for two exercise support groups comprised SOTF-13 HSC, U.S. ODAs, ROK battalions and ROK ODAs to serve as auxiliary, role players, advised partisans and operational force.

ROK interest and willingness to support Foal Eagle and the UW scenarios was greater than expected. The level of integration highlighted above with 7th and 11th ROK SF BDEs during future exercises will continue to shift the ROK SF mindset away from surgical strike and more towards special warfare. From the SOTF- to ODA-level, U.S. SOF mentored ROK counterparts on mission-command style commander's intent versus a directive approach, which was terrain focused and geographically constrained freedom of movement. Transition to commander's intent is essential for survival and mission accomplishment in the fluid nature of UW environment with limited communications. Conversely, ROK SF's deep understanding of how to tactically leverage terrain and culture aided training U.S. Special Forces operating in rugged terrain while being pursued in a denied environment. This shared learning helped to revalidate critical UW skills in a combined atmosphere.



**INFILTRATE** ROK and U.S. Special Forces conduct a fast rope insertion and extraction system training exercise. *U.S. Army photo.*

## Infiltration Without a Rotator Flight

Infiltration into denied areas presents an immediate challenge to UW operations due to the presence of an effective integrated air-defense system. Taking advantage of the unique skill sets possessed by SF, the teams used four methods of infiltration for the exercise: fast-rope insertion and extraction system; deep penetration rotary wing; high-altitude high opening; and rat-line to train infiltration into denied areas. All three methods focused on low-signature methods of entry to allow the teams to enter a rear area without compromise. The teams infiltrated without vehicles or dedicated lift assets; therefore, once they were inside the exercise “play box” all movements were locally or internally sourced. The exercise support group acting as the role players had vehicles available that the teams could coordinate through their networks.

ODA 1334 and 1234 conducted 54 HAHO operations including rehearsals and during the night of infiltration. The HAHO detachments navigated in the air under night-vision goggles to a suitable dropzone. This capability allows ODAs to discreetly enter, clear a dropzone, confirm resistance linkup before calling in follow-on ROK SF static-line jumpers. SOTF-13 and ROK partners conducted 381 static-line infiltrations and five combined bundle drops. These operations validate our combined ability to saturate critical areas or targets to shape or disrupt on behalf of the JTF commander’s plan.

SOTF-13 conducted 109 FRIES insertions during March. FRIES provides a precise and rapid infiltration capability that allows SF to interdict or seize key terrain or complete the counter-proliferation mission anywhere in the KTO. While FRIES successfully enabled combined detachments to rapidly seize objectives, the method and

initial direct action mission does not facilitate follow-on UW due to the absence of supplies inserted during infiltration.

SOTF-13 utilized rotary-wing air landings with MH-47s to conduct deep insertion of ODAs and large quantities of supplies. The insertion established an initial base of logistics in rough-terrain sanctuary that allowed ODAs to move more rapidly through the UWOA, while retaining a contingency stock of supplies.

SOTF-13 ODAs conducted more than 146 kilometers of foot movement in the mountainous areas of central ROK. By “training like you fight,” ODAs were able to recognize the added difficulty of terrain into a UW campaign in the Korean Theater of Operations. Many teams quickly learned that maneuvering in challenging terrain quickly depletes energy and critical resources. The resulting challenges forced teams to conduct emergency resupply operations by resistance auxiliary and slow movement in order to preserve combat power.

## Combined Unconventional Warfare

Teams entered the play box to link up with various resistance movements. None of the organizations had all three components of underground, auxiliary and guerrilla force. This forced teams to organize and train their forces to meet the requirements of their specific mission and coordinate through the AOB to secure assistance from adjacent unit’s surrogate forces. During the employment phase teams worked through and with their ROK ODA counterparts and their surrogate forces to conduct operations.

As outlined in *ARSOF 2022*, the SOTF exercised the two mutually supporting forms of special operations, special warfare and surgical strike, in its UW fight. In the surgical-strike role and using the find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze and disseminate model, teams conducted intelligence driven-direct action raids in order to exploit key personnel associated with programs of strategic value. The resulting exploitation presented teams with intelligence for driving future operations. With these operations, the force applied their skills honed during OEF/OIF, such as time-sensitive target direct-action raids, sensitive-site exploitation and tactical questioning to UW operations in denied areas.

Through the exercise, U.S. and ROK forces have developed an enhanced understanding and appreciation for logistics in a denied area. Scenarios involving initial entry into a denied area do not generally have the benefit U.S. air superiority; consequently, only one containerized-delivery system pass was allocated for one ODA in each area. Over reliance on CDS and air resupply during the last 10 years caused ODAs to assume that supplies would be administratively infiltrated via the auxiliary — some ODAs were sorely mistaken. Each ODA auxiliary had a preponderance of one type of resource, which required the AOB to coordinate the area complex while ODAs were required to develop ratlines. While some detachments performed better than others, all detachments learned about the complexity of planning ratlines to cross-level supplies in a UWOA.

## Transition from a JIIM Perspective

Drawing from the lessons of both Iraq and Afghanistan, it is apparent that transition needs to be planned and prepared prior to invasion. In this exercise, SOTF-13 integrated all of its “themes” to support transition and took the lead in beginning the planning for a joint, combined and interagency working group to plan for the transition of surrogate forces and post-regime leadership.

In order to set the stage for transition, SOTF-13 began with a template of government-support mechanisms titled “pillars of support.” This concept highlights key groups within societies that give government institutions power. From this template, the transition working group highlighted its view of a society and how the pillars of support were affected by UW operations. From this foundation, the working group went further highlighting the state of resistance organizations in their respective UWOAs at the transition phase.

The working group briefed SOCKOR SOJ5 and the ROK Civil Military Operations Directorate on their findings and recommendations. ROK officers were immediately impressed with the pillars of support concept and quickly recognized how critical early planning and coordination is during UW operations. The meeting resulted in promises for follow on discussions and a better understanding of how UW can support stability operations.

## Conclusion

ARSOE 2022 guidance highlighted the two mutually supporting special operations: surgical strike and special warfare. In this training, both were exercised. Up front, teams “re-learned” what it took to operate in austere, denied environments separate from the extensive support mechanisms available today. The lack of these support methods forced teams to address the physically and mentally draining challenges of survivability and sustainability in denied environments.

The immense challenges faced in the KTO problem set were immediately apparent as SF and SF support personnel studied the operational environment. Bringing a fresh look to these challenges provided innovative approaches to UW and focused the SOTF away from an OEF/OIF mindset. Cyber pilot team operations, clandestine communication methods and the modern MISO operations were all products of this focus and fresh look. Combined operations with sister services and multinational partners leveraged the strengths of each organization and enabled a shared learning environment.

Lessons learned during the execution of this exercise focused on rebuilding the capability to conduct initial-entry UW in a denied area. This required, from the start, a fundamental change in thinking and relooking at SF operations from defining the problem set, to rucksack rigging, to infiltration methods. The painful adjustment from operating in areas with an abundance of support assets to low-signature operations in a denied territory was apparent throughout the exercise. Logistical operations shifted to a survival and sustainability focus using non-standard resupply methods.

Overall, feedback from AOBs and ODAs was extremely positive. Junior Green Berets were challenged to recall skills trained during the school house, while senior members of the unit were able to pass down UW and survival tradecraft that has been nearly lost during the last 10 years of counterinsurgency operations. ODAs indicated that they will ensure the 24-month training plan is more balanced, carefully weighing special warfare COIN and UW with surgical-strike capabilities.

During the U.S. Forces Korea commander’s visit, he stressed readiness training and the ability to “fight tonight.”<sup>5</sup> Forces from the 3rd Bn., 1SFG(A) addressed these key tenets during Foal Eagle by replicating the terrain, human environment and operational challenges in the training scenario. Partnered operations at all levels resulted in combined ODAs facing these challenges together and learning UW as a U.S.-ROK team. **SW**

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## Notes

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