

British and French Troops Work Together

The Chief of Defence Staff has expressed his 'confidence' that the British and French militaries are growing closer together as they train for potential future combined operations.

General Sir Nicholas Houghton's comments were made as he joined his French counterpart, Général d'armée Pierre de Villiers, during an inspection of the bi-national military headquarters on exercise in the Champagne region of France on 19 May 2014.

He said: "We've been on the journey to enhance the interoperability of UK and French forces and create a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF). What I have seen today in the Land environment gives me huge encouragement and confidence that we are on track for that."

"I think that there is a particular close arrangement that we have with the French because we are similarly-sized, similarly-orientated countries and in terms of the European pillar of NATO it's France and the United Kingdom that have got to be showing leadership in generating genuine capability."

Build powerful coalitions

Staff officers from the British Army's 3rd (UK) Division and the French army's 'État-major de Force n°1' (EMF 1) have formed the divisional headquarters of the new 'CJEF' during the two-week exercise at Mourmelon-le-Grand in the Champagne region.

In total 3,200 military personnel from 14 different nations are participating in the multinational Exercise 'Rochambeau', conducted entirely in the common language of English. They include the British 12th Mechanized Brigade who have been acting as a lower control or 'LOCON', adding to the exercise realism by receiving and developing the military orders issued by the Anglo-French HQ staff.

The command-and-control exercise is a key milestone in the development of the CJEF, the most tangible demonstration of the Anglo-French defence partnership envisaged by the Lancaster House treaties in 2010.

Held at high readiness and capable of conducting non-enduring complex intervention operations in all operational environments up to and including high intensity operations, the CJEF builds upon the successful bilateral co-operation established in the testing operational

theatres of Libya and Mali, demonstrating the ability of partners of choice to build powerful coalitions to achieve mutual and wider security benefits.

'Similar strategic objectives'

It is the second time the CJEF has trained together as a fully-integrated headquarters and follows the British-led Exercise 'Iron Triangle' at RAF St Mawgan in Cornwall last December.

Captain Jonny Thompson from 3rd (UK) Division explained: "This is a predominantly French headquarters with a 30 per cent inject of British staff officers. It's been about forming relationships, understanding their planning processes and how we might merge business to work with them for common effect."

Major Olivier Volpi of EMF 1 continued: "It's interesting working with the British. Our two nations have been on operations for a long time, so we understand each other, we understand the problem, we understand the issues. But working in English for us is like watching a movie with sunglasses - you get it, but sometimes it's harder than usual."

Major General James Cowan, commander of 3rd (UK) Division, added: "In the centenary of the Great War, it is a particularly good moment to reflect on the long and profitable relationship between our two armies. France and Britain have very similar strategic objectives, military outlooks and force structures.

"Before Christmas, the 3rd Division incorporated a large body of French staff officers into its structures during Exercise Iron Triangle. The success of that exercise was due in large measure to a strong willingness to work together and learn from each other. Now British staff officers from Bulford have returned the favour and incorporated within EMF 1. This exercise allows us to learn about French staff processes within a NATO structure and set the foundations for future exercises in 2015 and 2016 respectively, when our two countries will be able to declare the land element of CJEF at full operating capability.

"It has been an honour for my staff and me to work with such a talented cohort of French officers and to play our part in this important venture." ■

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