



# INSOF

## Relationships Reign Supreme

Above U.S. Army Sgt. Adrien Cox, left, and Staff Sgt. Jake Hankins, right, both assigned to the 717th Ordnance Company, share a fist bump during an operation with Syrian Democratic Forces in the ar-Raqqa region, Syria, Jan. 26, 2023. EOD personnel assist Syrian Democratic Forces in conducting recovery of unexploded ordnance devices in the area, keeping them from endangering the people of Raqqa. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas J. De La Pena)

### AUTHOR

Captian Nicholas Keyes is a United States Army Civil Affairs officer and currently serves as a Team Leader in the 96th CA BN, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He previously served as an Infantry officer with 1-501st IN BN in Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. He deployed to Afghanistan as an Infantry Platoon Leader and to Syria as a Civil Affairs Team Leader. Nicholas is passionate about the integration of SOF units both in garrison and while deployed.

*Published March 16, 2025 -  
The Center for Junior Officers website*

Very seldom are Special Operations Forces (SOF) units the main effort in an operation. However, the current complexities of Syria requires the intricacies and expertise that SOF units bring such as supporting newly occupied land with humanitarian aid and assuring locals of positive progress through public messaging. With the fall of Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad, numerous SOF elements including my Civil Affairs Team (CAT), the Special Forces Operational Detachment Alphas (SF-ODAs), and the Tactical PysOp Teams (TPTs) had to quickly adapt to the daily-changing environment by cultivating our previously established relationships to navigate the period of transitional governance as Syria changed from what we once knew, to the “New Syrian Government.” During my rotation in Syria as the CAT Team Leader, building strong working relationships with the SF-ODAs and TPTs became second nature.

Throughout your Army career, you will hear that relationships are important. In relation, as you make your way through Basic Officer Leadership Course, you will likely find yourself in a new unit within a few months. Some of you may be lucky enough to arrive to a unit with new friends you made, while others may have to build new relationships as well as a reputable name for yourself. Nonetheless, you will often cross paths with someone you know from a training event, Combat Training Center (CTC) rotation, deployment, or Army career development school. It is important to keep this in mind as you never know where you are going to end up. From the day you raise your right hand, relationships reign supreme and will set you up for success throughout your career. The relationships my teammates and I formed in Syria in 2024, were important, if not the most important factor that contributed to our success.

During and even before our deployment to Syria in 2024, my CAT established a strong relationship with the SF-ODAs as well as the TPTs. The strength of our relationship helped enhance our mission beyond expectation. The teams that we replaced worked in their own echo chambers and it was evident they did not build a working relationship during their rotation. Throughout our rotation, we prioritized having a sync every

evening to discuss what we accomplished during the day and what we planned to achieve for the next day. The daily sync was a great time to come up with bets to pawn off Tactical Operations Center (TOC) shifts, or for the Special Forces Medic (18D) to whip out his guitar and play us an original song – but also a time to discuss the work needed to be done in our Area of Operation (AO). At the end of the day, everyone understood the importance of their role in the mission and their relationship with their brothers & sisters in arms to their left and right. The team chemistry we formed was due in part to the way we trained preceding deployment, the way we communicated amongst each other, and the way we worked as one cohesive team of teams.

## TRAIN HOW YOU FIGHT

Before a deployment, SOF units conduct a Pre-Mission Training (PMT). PMT is usually the first time that members from SF-ODAs, CATs, and TPTs meet. Whether we were rehearsing IED lanes or changing truck tires for four hours under nods and limited visibility, we trained on every contingency we could think of. My CAT taught Key Leader Engagements (KLEs) and Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS) classes to the teams, the TPT gave us a rundown of their equipment and systems and other “PsyOps things,” and the ODA Weapons Team (18Bs) ensured everyone knew how to conduct Close Quarters Battle (CQB) and the 18Ds gave Combat Life Saver (CLS) classes. If we were not planning for a mission or key leader engagement, we were rehearsing something to add value to the PMT. The ODA Team Sergeant did a great job identifying skills and hobbies of each individual on the teams and leaned heavily on those people to share their knowledge and skills like mechanic work on our Humvees. As we trained on everything from the way our kits were set-up to the intricacies of CQB, the unquantifiable growing relationships between our teams was a force multiplier.

The fusion of CA's understanding of the local populace through mission analysis and civil engagements, SF's tactical expertise through battle drills and weapons knowledge, and PsyOps' influence capabilities creates a formidable force capable of adapting to dynamic and multifaceted challenges. The relationships we and others built during the yearlong train-up and PMT prior to our deployment paid dividends when our boots landed on the ground overseas. If we had not built a strong relationship with the ODA and TPT during PMT, our mission in Syria would not have been as productive as it was. Every team was tested during our deployment to Syria, and often, events that we never thought would have happen, happened, like the fall of Bashar Al-Assad. It is very common to think “why are we doing this?” when you are participating in a CTC or PMT, but just like we saw with the changing environment in Syria, events played out that no one could have planned for or have expected. Nonetheless, our training and relationships helped us succeed in being adaptable and working together to accomplish our missions.

## COMMUNICATION

In Syria, if you were not consistently communicating with your counterparts or higher leadership, you were probably doing something wrong. Our Area Operating Base (AOB) Commander was available at any time and just a phone call away to provide guidance, share what was on your mind, or just talk. There was one day where the AOB Commander called me at 1 a.m. to talk about a CONOP I submitted the day before. You could hear how tired he was, but he wanted a better understanding to approve the CONOP so we could

continue to get out. The teams worked together 24/7, which ensured everyone had a shared understanding on what the mission was, and what each team was going to do. This culture only existed because all our relationships were centered on consistent communication and trust. Information sharing became second nature, where each team was able to provide immediate feedback through reporting. This was particularly useful in instances where a Distinguished Visitor (DV) showed up to our outstation. Any member of each of the CAT, ODA, or TPT could answer their questions about the current situation that was ongoing – except for the ODA cook, never ask him questions, he was always busy whipping up something delicious in the kitchen for us to eat, although he always knew what was going on as well.

Effective communication is the lifeblood of SOF. Regular briefings, collaborative planning sessions, and after-action reviews (AARs) foster a culture of continuous improvement and mutual respect. It was encouraged throughout the rotation to provide constructive criticism after training events or missions. Being able to provide honest feedback and having a strong enough relationship to understand that everything being said is to breed success and not break down one another was instrumental in all our development throughout the rotation. Having transparent and consistent communication between our teams only made our relationships stronger.

## TEAMWORK

Each SOF unit brings distinct strengths to the table. Civil Affairs personnel excel in building relationships with local communities, understanding cultural nuances, and facilitating humanitarian assistance. Special Forces, with their elite training and operational flexibility, bring unmatched tactical prowess and adaptability. PsyOps, through their expertise in influence operations, can shape perceptions and behaviors to support mission objectives. My CAT benefited from the ODAs tactical ranges and maneuver classes as they had well-developed SOPs built. The ODAs benefited from CA's deeper cultural awareness to navigate complex human terrain and realized not everything needs to be blown up. TPTs robust support to integrate their messaging effectively within broader operational plans could not have worked without the support of the CAT and ODA. By identifying and addressing these gaps, our team became a well-oiled machine.

From as early as the second week of PMT, our teams learned how to best work together. Whether it was team members who shared the same hobbies such as woodworking and welding who built new base improvements, or the medics from the CAT and ODAs who worked together to save the lives of our partner force casualties, teamwork was instrumental and enabled by the relationships we cultivated prior to deployment. There was never any hesitation going out on a mission with anyone from any of the ODAs or TPTs. Everyone knew their role and how to work together to get the job done and return to base safely. With the relationships we established, we were able to align our efforts and become more efficient with targeting, information/intel gathering, bolstering our partner force, and supporting the local populace to increase stability in the region.

## RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships we built and the training, communication, and teamwork we cultivated were the foundations for a successful

deployment. By solidifying our relationships to enhance training, always maintaining transparent communication, and working together as a unified team, our units achieved remarkable results in the changing environment of the “New Syria”. The power of our relationships proved themselves in our ability to adapt, overcome, and ultimately triumph, regardless of the complexities faced in the field or combat environment. At the end of the day, I know that my CAT, the ODA, and the TPT are bonded for life, and that I could rely on any one of them to answer a call in a time of distress. At the end of the day, in our profession, **relationships reign supreme**.

*Note: The articles and other content which appear on the Center for Junior Officers' website are unofficial expressions of opinion. The views expressed are those of the authors, and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.*