

US forces go to “war” with the Thai and Singaporean Air Forces in an ever more important large-force exercise.



L-r: An F-15C from the Florida Air National Guard, an F-15SG from Singapore’s Air Force, and a Royal Thai Air Force JAS-39 Gripen fly in formation.

Photo courtesy of the Singapore Ministry of Defense

Cope Tiger

By Marc V. Schanz, Senior Editor



Staff photo by Marc V. Schanz

USAF airmen walk to their C-130 on a misty morning during Cope Tiger 2012.



A USAF pilot (r) talks with airmen from Singapore at Korat RTAFB, Thailand, after a simulated air-to-air combat mission.

Korot, Thailand—known to most Thais as Nakhon Ratchasima—is a familiar name to the thousands of US Air Force airmen and civilians who served at the nearby air base during the Vietnam War. The 388th Tactical Fighter Wing, stationed at Korat from 1966 to 1975, launched thousands of F-105 and F-4 sorties against North Vietnam from the airfield.

The Vietnam War-era control tower still looms over Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base on the edge of the Korat Plateau some 160 miles northeast of Bangkok, but aside from a few memorials and static

displays of retired aircraft, the scene has changed dramatically. In March, brand-new fighter aircraft—including Royal Thai Air Force JAS-39 Gripens and Republic of Singapore Air Force F-15SGs—lined the field, alongside veteran US Air Force F-15Cs and squadrons of older fighters. The fighters and the airmen behind them were here for Cope Tiger 2012, the annual large-force multinational air exercise.

During its two weeks, the exercise—including Pacific Air Forces and hosted by the Thais—drew a diverse air armada ranging from fighters, helicopters, and transports to militarized business jets used for airborne command and control. The assembled airmen practiced air-to-air tactics, weapons delivery, coordination

with airborne early warning systems, and simple communications. More than 400 US military personnel traveled to Thailand for the exercise.

Most of the fighters operated from Korat—although transports such as C-17s and C-130s, as well as A-10 attack jets—worked from Udon Thani Royal Thai Air Force Base.

The activity resembled any number of large-force exercises US airmen have participated in during their careers, such as Red Flag. But Cope Tiger offered experiences American airmen can't gain any other way.

"Most crews ... don't get to do [large-force engagements] very often," said USAF Maj. Dixon Croft, a mission commander at Korat whose job entailed monitoring and adjusting the tempo of the exercise.

Large and Foreign

Croft's "day job" as detachment commander of the 497th Combat Training Flight in Singapore—which runs the Commando Sling aerial exercise with the Republic of Singapore Air Force—and his familiarity with one of the participants, this was his first Cope Tiger.

"Commando Sling is just us and the [Singaporeans]," Croft noted. "Here, we're only a third of what's going on; there are language barriers you have to work with, and you're not just doing air to air, it's a range of dissimilar missions." US pilots are "hitting their marks" just like at any other exercise, but they do so in a multilateral venue where they must plan, execute, recover, and debrief in a coalition environment.

From the commanders down to fliers and maintainers, the point was clear: If the call comes to fight in Southeast Asia, chances are good the US will be fighting with these allies.

"Planning every day out here is challenging; it's a process," said Maj. Jeff Yost, one of four mission commanders at Korat. "But this is how multilateral operations work and why they are so important." Croft added, "If there is a conflict, we can't go at it alone."

Cope Tiger is a fast-paced and evolving exercise, with scenarios changing daily. An array of aerial and ground threats pop up across the military ranges of the Korat Plateau, and by Week 2 things get complicated.

At the morning brief on March 19, a Thai intelligence officer, Flight Lt. Suwit Thitong, provided the day's fliers with the status of the campaign against "Redland," the notional enemy.



Above: A Republic of Singapore Air Force F-5S. Right: A G550 airborne early warning aircraft, also belonging to Singapore, at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base.

“Redland information warfare is becoming effective, and nonaligned countries are wavering in support,” he said, adding that the fictional enemy had deployed the bulk of its integrated air defenses and was now on a full war footing. According to the scenario, an F-16 had been shot down the previous day, some damage was done to the enemy’s surface-to-air missile sites, and Redland had now reportedly undertaken a rescue operation for a downed pilot, using special operations forces.

“Redland will use all resources to prevent the use of [their] airspace,” the lieutenant warned. Signals intelligence indicated medium-range ballistic missiles were being readied for deployment.

Cope Tiger threw a range of scenarios at its participants as part of LFEs, or large-force engagements. These entailed the whole spectrum of air operations, including air strikes, rescue missions, disaster response, airdrops, mobile air



gested these continuing developments indicate how operations in this corner of Asia are growing in importance.

The Florida Air National Guard’s 125th Fighter Wing deployed 12 F-15Cs on a world-girdling journey, and all arrived in good condition, ready to fight. It was the first large employment of an ANG unit during the exercise’s 18-year history, said Col. Marc E. Caudill, the Cope Tiger US exercise director.

Practice Makes Perfect

Singapore sent eight factory-fresh F-15SG multirole fighters. (One Air Guardsman joked he could detect that “new car smell” across the flight line.) These new Eagles boast all the options:

active electronically scanned array radars, top-shelf integrated avionics, GE F110 engines, and several other advanced sensors and upgrades. It was the first time the F-15SGs exercised with US forces.

The final day of Cope Tiger featured a massive multinational personnel drop, as USAF C-17s and C-130s ferried more than 240 Royal Thai Air Force, Royal Thai Army, and US airmen to a drop zone at

Lop Buri, Thailand, where they carried out both static line and high-altitude, low-opening jumps. It was the largest such jump in exercise history, and the first to have both Thai Army and Air Force personnel in large numbers in the same operation.

On the morning of the jump, TSgt. Steven Raethel, a survival, evasion, resistance, and escape specialist with the 374th Operations Support Squadron at Yokota AB, Japan, was the jumpmaster aboard one of the C-17s bearing RTAF personnel to the drop zone. Raethel is a Cope Tiger veteran participating in his second iteration. “We try to get [the Thais] to jump whenever we visit,” he said. A past participant of jumps at exercises in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and other locations, he said the joint jump is a rarity. “It’s a great opportunity to get these many guys in this environment. It can be tricky. ... It’s a good thing to practice this sort of operation as much as we can.”

“This is a big deal, a first for the Royal Thai Army and Air Force,” said Capt. Michael Recker, a C-17 operations officer for the exercise based at Udon Thani and pilot from Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam’s 535th Airlift Squadron. Leading up to the jump, both C-17 crews and C-130



Above: A JAS-39D fighter, one of the Swedish Gripen fighters recently acquired by the Royal Thai Air Force. Right: An RTAF Dornier-Dassault Alpha Jet.

defense threats, and more. By the close of the exercise, nearly 2,000 USAF, Thai, and Singaporean airmen generated more than 900 sorties.

This year’s Cope Tiger involved several firsts. Both Thai and US officials sug-





USAF photos by Capt. David Herndon

Capt. Raul Roldan (r), Cope Tiger C-130 liaison officer, discusses Hercules operations with F-16 pilots from Singapore. The Republic of Singapore and Thailand field some of the most modern air assets in the region.

crews had been flying in challenging conditions, facing aggressive aerial and ground threats, he noted.

The other day, “we won one, and we lost one,” he said of an airlift sortie where simulated surface-to-air threats were employed. “We don’t get a chance to do large-force employments from the mobility side very often,” Recker commented. “It’s the first time I’ve done a multinational exercise, and back home, much of our training is over water, so the feel is very different.”

Cope Tiger started out in the 1990s as an event emphasizing air combat, but in recent years has evolved significantly. Now it entails simulated airdrop of humanitarian relief, combat search and rescue, air interdiction, close air support, and deep strike missions. Mobility is an increasingly important part of Cope Tiger.

Thai officials and US officers alike point to the range of operations undertaken in just the last several years, from more airdrop practice to search and rescue to forcible entry into denied airspace.

Cope Tiger “has progressed steadily, both in scope and complexity,” said Col. Tommy Tan Ah Han, the RSAF exercise director. A pilot of F-5s, F-16 Block 52s, and the F-15SG, Tan said the assets exercised are “increasingly advanced, and this has helped to add realism to training, enhancing the training benefits for the participating forces.”

As USAF rearranges its force structure, it’s unlikely the Florida Air Guard will be the last ANG unit to come to Thailand. The dozen F-15s of the 125th FW got the call because PACAF couldn’t spare any of its other air superiority assets, and the unit rose to the challenge, said Caudill.

“We’re really getting a new experience here,” said MSgt. Michael Ramsey, a maintenance first sergeant with the 125th FW. “It’s a smaller world every day. ... If we ever go to fight [in this region], we’re going to do it with our allies.”

First Lt. Jeff Blaufuss, an Eagle driver with the Florida ANG, said that at Cope Tiger his fellow pilots got to stretch operation muscles they rarely get to use at home.

“Sometimes it’s to protect a target; other times we’re clearing airspace for strike packages,” he said. “We want to protect our objectives, and we want to learn from what we do every day.”

Clearing Out the Red Air

US, Thai, and Singaporean pilots and crews were mixed and matched daily—some in blue air, some in red air—and this provided an excellent opportunity to not only push skills but learn from other pilots flying dissimilar aircraft. For the Guard, it offered the opportunity to fly

with and against the latest model of their own F-15s with the visiting Singaporeans.

The Singaporeans “are very well-trained, and they have a great jet,” Blaufuss said. “You wouldn’t be able to tell they’re not our guys. ... [They] have a lot of skilled pilots.”

If missions are executed correctly, blue forces should not be losing, several fliers observed. For first-timers, the experience of flying with the Thais and Singaporeans can be an eye-opener.

“The proficiency of our allies and partners is ... high,” Croft acknowledged. A career F-16 pilot, Croft said he’d long heard USAF conventional wisdom that the F-15 was superior to everything else in air-to-air combat. However, “I’ve sat through debriefs, and sometimes it’s the Thais [F-16s] and the [Singaporeans] who are clearing out the red air off [our] F-15s’ backs,” he said. “That is interesting to see.”

For the Royal Thai Air Force, the event is an enormous undertaking. Cope Tiger’s tabletop command post exercise begins months before the flight training phase; the planning iteration for the March event took place in Singapore last December. Thailand, a designated major non-NATO US ally, has one of the oldest air forces in Asia—this year marks the 100th anniversary of its military aviation branch—and along with Singapore fields some of the most modern air assets in the region.

In airdrops over the Nam Phong range north of Korat, Thai C-130 crews exercise the same procedures used by US aviators, and the Thais have used this training to great benefit, said Group Capt. Thawonwat Chantanakom, the Thai exercise director. He noted that the RTAF mobilized to deliver food and water to wide swaths of the country last fall, bringing relief to areas devastated by deadly floods, even as floodwaters



RTAF and USAF personnel prepare to board a C-17 at Don Muang Arpt., Thailand, on March 22, in preparation for a mass jump.



The final day of the exercise featured Royal Thai Air Force and Royal Thai Army troops conducting a high-altitude, low-opening jump.

encroached up to Bangkok's Don Muang Airport military runway.

On the combat side, Thawonwat said, the Thais were eager to test out their newly acquired Swedish Gripen fighters in a dissimilar combat scenario at Cope Tiger. They wanted to pair the Gripens with and against both USAF F-15s and Singapore's new F-15SGs.

Among the allies, there was a sense there could be broader participation in the event.

"Now, we have just three nations; ... we hope in the future we can expand more. ... This may be looked at," Thawonwat said. Thailand, along with Singapore, is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which has embarked on an effort to bring its 10 members together in a security community in several years. Having observers participate in multilateral events such as Cope Tiger could well serve stability and security in the region.

The same tactics used "to put soldiers in a drop zone, we can easily use those ... to put medicine and medics on target [or] ... relief materials on time and on target," Caudill said.

Two weeks is a lot of time to be flying together, and a great deal of what was learned at Cope Tiger was gained informally among the airmen day in and day out.

"[At] the tactical level, we are all learning from each other," Yost noted, and much happens after the formal debrief. Pilots from all countries talked to each other, and if someone in a flight suit with an instructor patch was talking—regardless of the nationality—others gathered around and hashed out what went right or wrong.

First Lt. Erik Gonsalves, an A-10 pilot from Osan AB, South Korea, took turns planning missions from RTAF's Wing 23 located at Udon Thani, some 200 miles north of Korat, not far from the Laotian border. He said opportunities for train-

ing abounded at the exercise that he'd be hard-pressed to get back in Korea.

"There is a lot less airspace restriction and more room to get a bunch of qualifications," said Gonsalves. Dissimilar strike packages were a regular event, he pointed out; he flew with A-10s and Thai F-5s on his first sortie of the exercise. "It was something I don't get to do very often," he said, noting A-10s would do air intercepts, then have Thai and US forces come through, with the Warthogs swinging around on bomb runs.

Off the Charts

A key part of the exercise for A-10 pilots was the chance to fly forward observation and escort for combat search and rescue sorties. "It's a unique opportunity," Gonsalves said. Several A-10s were paired up with Thai UH-1s and Singaporean Super Puma crews to fly escort and observe the rescuers attempt to swoop in and pick up "survivors" in a drop zone. Gonsalves and other pilots dubbed the endeavor "rescort."

Ideas and tactics were exchanged as the exercise progressed and helped all parties get a better idea of how joint SAR would work in a real fight. "Culturally, we piece together the gaps fairly well. Their English is a lot better than my Thai," Gonsalves quipped. US forces are guests of a long-standing and stalwart regional ally. Like the Philippines, Thailand was a signatory to the 1954 Manila Pact, making them America's only two mutual defense treaty allies in Southeast Asia.

USAF assets were just as often in supporting roles during Cope Tiger operations as they were in the lead. Indeed, of the 79 aircraft taking flight over Thailand in March, fewer than 25 were USAF assets. The Thais and Singaporeans field some of the most well-trained air arms in Asia.

US aircraft sortie counts were relatively low compared to the other two partners in the exercise. "We are in the minority

here, which is certainly not normally what our pilots are used to," said Yost, one of the Korat mission commanders.

The Thais and Singaporeans have their own objectives for the exercise. Cope Tiger "serves as a great platform for exchanges and sharing so that our forces will be able to assist one another should the need arise," the RTAF exercise director, Thawonwat, observed. Led by the Thais, all three countries also participated in civil affairs projects in the communities surrounding Korat and Udon Thani, providing assistance such as school supplies and medical services during the course of the event.

Nearly all participants interviewed believe the exercise will only grow in importance in coming years. America's interests, as stipulated in the newly revised national defense strategy, are closely bonded with those of its treaty allies, especially as the US moves to reassure its commitment to the stability of its allies in light of a changing military balance in the region.

Asked about allied concerns over China's regional ambitions, Caudill said, "This is important because it lets other nations and potential adversaries know that we are prepared, we train together, and we are ready to respond to any challenge or provocation."

"Individually, we're good. Collectively, we're off the charts," said Lt. Gen. Stanley T. Kresge, commander of PACAF's 13th Air Force, who attended Cope Tiger's closing ceremony along with the Singaporean Air Chief Maj. Gen. Ng Chee Meng and RTAF Air Chief Marshal Ittaporn Subhawong. Personal and lasting relationships between allies form at events like this, with the inevitable result that all three get better at coordinating, controlling, and executing air operations.

"If our processes are right, we'll successfully meet any future challenge," Kresge said.

On the exercise's final day, Kresge visited the contingent of Florida Air Guardsmen at Korat to hand out awards and thank them for a job well done. He took a moment to remind them why they were flying in Thailand, thousands of miles from home.

"These F-15s are the most valuable resource in any future fight in this region," Kresge noted. "If we have to go to war, it will be an air war. ... Make no mistake," he stated soberly. "I expect to call you. And some of you might not come back. But you have proven you have the ability and skill to answer the call, should it ever come." ■