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▲ Staff Sgt. Shaun LaRue, a loadmaster at the 1st Special Operations Squadron, rigs the static line for an air drop July 26 on an MC-130H Combat Talon II at Ohakea Air Base, New Zealand during Exercise Balance Net.



▲ A member of the New Zealand Defense Force observes as Master Sgt. Jeremy Bilodeau, a flight engineer with the 1st Special Operations Squadron, adjusts the aircraft pressurization on an MC-130H Combat Talon II July 18 during Exercise Balance Net in New Zealand.

By Tech. Sgt. Kristine Dreyer

353rd Special Operations Group
Public Affairs

8/14/2014 - WHENUAPAI AIR BASE, New Zealand — Members from the 353rd Special Operations Group and the New Zealand Defense Force participated in Exercise Balance Net from July 17 until July 31 in Whenuapai, New Zealand.

"This exercise marks the first time in almost three decades that the 353rd SOG has come to New Zealand to train side by side with our counterparts in the New Zealand Defense Force," said Lt. Col. Shane Vesely, 1st Special Operations Squadron Commander. "From the U.S. and New Zealand maintainers coming together to keep the planes in the air to our loadmasters and riggers sharing new techniques on preparing and executing air drops, we leave New Zealand knowing that we have created lasting bonds that will enhance our interoperability in both future more complex exercises and real-world full-spectrum operations."

During the 2-week exercise, MC-130H Combat Talon II aircrews from the 1st Special

Operations Squadron worked with their counterparts from the 40th Squadron, the Royal New Zealand Air Force C-130H and Boeing 757 squadron. Whether dropping personnel and cargo or flying low-level missions through the south island terrain, pilots, loadmasters, maintainers and riggers took every opportunity to learn from one another.

"I've worked with Americans all over the world, but never have I actually worked with them in New Zealand," said Sgt. Rodrigo Arriagada, a Royal New Zealand Air Force C-130H Hercules air loadmaster. "Most of the time, the Americans show us how they do things, but this time we also got to show them our procedures and techniques. It's nice to hear that they are taking some different ideas back and implementing them."

While there are differences between the two militaries, there are also similarities that the maintainers used to save time and money.

When a second propeller change was needed on the U.S. aircraft, the New Zealand maintainers stepped up to provide backshop repair capabilities needed to aid our maintainers

New Zealand



A crew from the 1st Special Operations Squadron conducts air drops over a drop zone in New Zealand July 27 during Exercise Balance Net. During the exercise, members from both the New Zealand Defense Force and U.S. Air Forces worked together to conduct personnel and equipment air drops while exchanging new techniques. This was the first time in almost three decades the group has deployed to New Zealand.

(U.S. Air Force photos by Tech. Sgt. Kristine Dreyer)



◀ Staff Sgt. Cody Medsker, 353rd Special Operations Support Squadron, and a member from the New Zealand Defense Force recover a container delivery system bundle after it was air dropped from an MC-130H Combat Talon II July 27 at a drop zone in New Zealand. Members from the 353rd Special Operations Group participated in Exercise Balance Net July 17 through July 31 in Whenuapai, New Zealand.

eliminating the need to replace the prop. Together the two countries were able to provide a quick-turn repair fixing the prop in a matter of hours as opposed to days.

“Because we have the same H model aircraft and our books are based on the U.S. technical orders, there is a universal language,” said Leading Craftsman Mike West, aircraft technician with the Royal

New Zealand Air Force.

“The New Zealand maintainers were extremely helpful,” said Staff Sgt. Bryson Asato, 353rd SOMXS, aerospace propulsion craftsman. “They stayed late to help us out. They helped us fix the prop, so we didn’t have to request another one or send the prop to Yokota for repair.”

While the mission was completed over the course of

the two-week exercise, lasting friendships were also created demonstrating the importance of joint and combined exercises.

“New Zealand is a small country. We enjoy the opportunity to meet new people,” said Arriagada. “It’s also about showing our appreciation to the Americans. They have always been really friendly showing us around when we are in America, so it’s nice to return the favor.”