

THE WORLD OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS MEDICINE

An Ongoing Series

Pioneering Collaboration and Innovation in Combat Medicine

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Introduction

The International Special Training Centre (ISTC) (Figure 1) hosted the 2nd annual NSOCM Symposium in Pfullendorf, Germany, from 2 to 4 October 2024. This meeting of distinguished medical minds has underlined improvements in Special Operations medical care and will strengthen international cooperation between Special Operations Combat Medics (SOCMs), surgical teams (SOSTs), and medical consultants. ISTC reaffirmed its commitment to the development of NATO Special Operations Combat Medics (NSOCMs) as leaders in medical readiness and innovation through the promotion of peer-to-peer learning and expertise sharing (Figure 2).



FIGURE 1 ISTC logo.

A total of 71 health professionals from 10 NATO member countries participated, representing a wide range of specialties in both the medical and operational communities. For the second consecutive year, the symposium received scientific support from the Joint Trauma System (JTS), represented this year by COL Stacy Shackelford and COL Jennifer Gurney (Figure 3). The symposium, moderated by Mr. Mike Hetzler, generated communication between SOCMs, SOSTs, and senior medical leaders. Key issues included coordination of training in support of modern operational environments, such as irregular warfare, large-scale combat operations, and strategic competition.

FIGURE 2 ISTC Commander thanks the speakers of the ISTC NSOCM Symposium 2024 at the end of the event.



Highlights from the Symposium

The symposium included new research with related practical case studies that highlighted the changing needs of combat medicine, including:

- **Advancing NATO Accreditation:** Dr. Peter Christensen described the work of NATO's Special Operations Forces Command (SOFCOM) in standardizing NSOCM training and underlined the importance of live tissue training and certification of paramedics in improving medical readiness.
- **Prehospital Interventions:** COL Stacy Shackelford presented compelling evidence on the lifesaving potential of prehospital blood transfusions and recommended their implementation within 36 minutes of injury to provide optimal survival.
- **Lessons From Kabul:** COL David Hardin shared lessons from the Kabul mass casualty (MASCAL) and evacuation

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FIGURE 3 Opening of the event with a welcome from ISTC.



event in Afghanistan (2021) to include teamwork, system integration, and the requirement for rehearsed MASCAL management.

- *Challenges of Combat in Ukraine:* **Michael Turconi** presented an in-depth analysis of the frontline medical reality in Ukraine, including discussion of the misuse of tourniquets and calls for updated evacuation protocols in light of evolving dynamics of warfare and training in tourniquet conversion in modern conflicts.

Medical Instrument and Methodology Development

Innovative approaches to battlefield medicine took center stage, showing once again the importance of adaptability in Special Operations, including:

- *Methoxyflurane for Pain Management:* **OR-4 David Marsland** spoke about this opioid-free, self-administered analgesic, positioning the drug as a useful alternative for SOF units.
- *Combating Opioid Threats:* **LTC Daniel Redmer** spoke about the growing threat of synthetic opioids, such as carfentanil, and the need for better personal protective equipment, naloxone stockpiling, and revised protocols to minimize risks.
- *Orthopedic Interventions in Combat:* **COL Daniel J. Stinner** discussed the high incidence of orthopedic trauma in combat and outlined best practices for the stabilization of fractures and management of compartment syndrome.

Strategic and Legal Considerations

The symposium examined more deeply the systemic barriers facing the NSOCM community, including:

- *Harmonizing Medical-Legal Standards:* **LT Lorenzo Prodan** pointed out the differences among NATO member countries in the recognition of NSOCMs as health professionals and urged harmonized policies for better training and operational uniformity.

- *Improving SOST Execution:* **MAJ Griet Vermeulen** discussed the Belgian SOST framework in the context of its flexibility and success in facilitating Special Operations through damage control surgery and intensive care.

Future Iterations

The 2024 NSOCM Symposium served to recommit the ISTC to continuously improve the capability of the global SOF medical community. The synergy of the event, through an emphasis on collaboration, innovation, and adaptability, has set a benchmark for integrating science and operational excellence in combat medicine.

We are proud to announce that the next NSOCM Symposium will be held from 3 to 7 November 2025 in Pfullendorf, Germany, as part of the ISTC Symposium. It is our assurance that this coming event will continue the tradition of excellence and bring together the brightest minds in the field of Special Operations medicine to tackle emerging challenges head-on and share groundbreaking insights.

We invite all professionals in the field to join us in 2025 and help shape the future of combat medicine. For more information and to register, stay tuned to the ISTC NSOCM Symposium 2025 Signal chat (QR code in Figure 4). Together, we can ensure that NSOCMs will continue to be at the forefront of medical readiness in today's dynamic operational environments.

FIGURE 4 Logo and QR code to stay tuned with the upcoming ISTC NSOCM Symposium 2025.



Acknowledgments

The authors sincerely thank all speakers and participants of the ISTC NSOCM Symposium 2024 for their valuable contributions and engaging discussions. Their expertise and collaboration have greatly enriched the event, advancing innovation in Special Operations medical care.

Author Contributions

OC, JP, AP, SS, JG, JH, MRH and MAB participated in event planning and conduction. OC drafted the manuscript, JP, AP, SS, JG, JH, MRH and MAB revised it.

Disclosures

The authors have nothing to disclose.

Funding

No funding was received for this work.

PMID: 39661464; DOI: 10.55460/Z3SV-E4YW