

### TOGETHER FOR A STRONGER EUROPE

*Another helicopter exercise in EDA's Helicopter Exercise Programme (HEP) blade series called 'BLACK BLADE' (BB16) was hosted in Belgium during 14th November till 2nd of December marking Belgium's recurrent commitment as a Member State (MS) and this time completes a decade of blade exercises with a 10th edition ! Helicopters to interfere in warfare in all possible ways is the turning element but also the cooperation between countries is fundamental to the EU capability development process in warfare.*

### BELGIUM HAS EXPERIENCE

The participation in this kind of exercises can be huge (Italian Blade /IB15) but also quite modest (Cold Blade / CB16) and depends on the exercising needs of the participators. BLACK BLADE concerned a Special Operations Forces (SOF) tactical course which was the second time in Belgium as they did the same thing in 2012 during Green Blade at Kleine Brogel. This time the exercise area's were situated not far from the Florennes Air base in special low flying zones. The framework was set during a december 2015 planning conference in Budapest and developed in the settings until a Final Coordination Conference at Florennes Air base during early october.

### POLITICAL VALUE

EDA Chief Executive Jorge Domecq commented: 'The 10th edition of the Helicopter Training Exercise Programme, comes at a moment when European defense is high on the political agenda. The 10th edition is a milestone for this programme, the EDA and the Member States involved. Exercise BLACK BLADE is European Defense cooperation in action. It represents a dynamic and tangible example of what cooperation among Member States can achieve. It also highlights the importance of joint training as a prerequisite to enhance interoperability and a key enabler to ensure readiness to deploy. A positive step forward for European defense'

### SPECIAL FORCES

Over 400 personnel contributed in this exercise and a total of 14 air assets of four Member States (13 helicopters from Belgium, Slovenia and Austria and one Falcon aircraft from the U.K.) were announced by EDA to join the exercise. BLACK BLADE was also a three weeks tactical course for ground operations with a primary focus on Special Forces. Belgian SOF from the Special Forces Group were working together with Austrian jagtcommando's in the field. These activities were concentrated in the exercise area's at Aarlen, Marche-en-Famenne and Eisenborn between the hilly slopes of the Ardennes in the region of Eupen. Airborne operations concerned also Arendonk and Gierle in the Antwerpen region and the helicopters were operating from Florennes air base.

### PACKAGE OPERATIONS

Key-element in the exercise was to form a combined air operations (COMAO) package and to support the special forces in their task. On an area near Eisenborn, at the edge of a former airfield there was a high official (on the level of minister of foreign affairs) captured and held hostage in a building. The SOF was supposed to free this person alive. After landing in a zone seven kilometers on the south the helicopters took off again to enter airspace above the

Elsenborn location to appear there as package including transport helicopters, escort helicopters and a command and control (C&C) helicopter . Belgian A-109BA and Austrian AB-212 helicopters were overflying the area to observe potential anti aircraft armory or triple A. After giving clear for that they start to fly in circles above the landing spot in front of the building where the VIP was held. With open doors and equipped with heavy machine guns they provided a well guarded and defended portal to the other part of the COMAO package with Belgian NH-90 'Caiman', A-109BA, Austrian AB-212 and S-70A-42 Black Hawk helicopters. The first wave bringing in the special forces on the ground (insertion) starting immediately with securing the operation area surrounding the landing zone. The first task then is to take out potential snipers especially from the building and to create a provisional observation post on something like for instance a big container.

The SOF could free the VIP and secured him, immediately he was flown to a safe area. Helicopters landed again (NH-90 and Black Hawk) to recover their people from the ground in this hit and run action. This were also medevac purposed helicopters (AB212 and A-109BA) to give medical care and extract possible wounded from the operation as quick as possible. A Belgian Command and Control helicopter (A-109) with the air mission commander was in the holding on a certain distance. He decides if a Quick Reaction Force is needed and more assistance or in the case of lacking a safe landing zone to use the Black Hawks for fast roping. The operation ended when the last escort helicopter seized overflying the area. The mission commander Capt. Oversteijns, call sign 'Dany' was afterwards interviewed for television before leaving with his helicopter.

## HIGH REPRESENTATIVE

On the last day of the exercise EU high representative Mrs. Federica Mogherini visited Florennes Airbase, to get some impressions in a last demonstration of the several tasks that



were shown, such as the mentioned fighting terrorists, medevac operation, taking a large site and special techniques such as fast roping and evacuating troopers on a spot where they cannot 'just hop in' the helicopters. This kind of international cooperation is a must, but has what so ever nothing to do with the UK Brexit, neither developments in the USA. It takes a whole year to prepare an exercise such as this one, we learn from this in various ways. Many more European countries are invited to joint he 'Blade' exercises, Member States will need to move towards defence cooperation as the norm' she stated. Head of Uni Education Training Tom Bennington declares: It is an objective to upgradenew member-states to a high standard level. If they are not yet on this level, extensive trainings will see that they get to that level and if they have to learn still, they can

participate anyway, but perhaps on a less higher standard such as only Medevac for instance. Porcesses do take time and money, but we're working on 'fixed wing' exercises to be held in future as well.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons will be learned, but it is quite impressive to see international army's working together as one in a coalition operation and from view of the observers the job was 'well done'. Nevertheless the evaluation will show shortcomings and mentors of very experienced units of EDA's Member States within the HEP will help to give advise. At planning conferences also information of debriefings and tactical lessons from other engagements such as the running

operations in Mali with Dutch SOF in the key role will be discussed to conduct new exercises even better. After presentation such a conference provides time and space for panel discussions for both attack and support helicopter operators. Not on this set observed by media but practised for sure during the exercise period were night operations in the fields and to train with night vision goggles in helicopter cockpits and landing zone tactics in the dark. Crews are as much as possible allowed to gain experience on these matters. A secondary focus was on Medevac. By pooling and sharing of means in an exercise of this scale it helps to improve the personal skills and to conduct in a cost-effectively way. To increase interoperability and fly in different environments helps to be better prepared in future European crisis management. Next year the HEP exercise will be in Hungary and a new blade exercise will return to Belgium in 2020.

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