

TOGETHER WE ARE STRONGER !

'Hot Blade' is more than just the name of an exercise. It tells you exactly what this is all about and that is helicopter flying. The scope however is much more than that. Cooperation with other branches in the military and exercising with other participating countries creates a growing enhanced common capability.

PORTUGAL IN THE LEAD

Once this is said the next focus could be on how this is achieved. Participants are members of EDA's (European Defence Agency) Helicopter Exercise Programme (HEP) which organization applies an annual international exercise of quite a big proportion. Of course participating countries go in voluntary and the mix of countries varies in every new edition, but they have common interests and sometimes specific interests to join such an exercise. Hot Blade 2018 (HB18) was settled on Beja air base in Portugal and participated by Belgium, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovenia.

Portugal provides excellent training environment which could be elsewhere in Europe very restricted. Focusing on hot climate Portugal somehow resembles conditions which could be encountered in global tension areas like Afghanistan or Mali. This is very much recognized by countries which are or were deployed in such areas. It is all keeping up skills and currencies. Therefore you have to train and exercise. However common goals are more related to the European continent itself. If Europe wants to offer a credible defense force it is vital to use common procedures starting with speaking the same language to more developed and complex routines.

INTEROPERABILITY HAS MANY FACES

The exercise commander (Excon) Lt. Col. João Roça of the Portuguese air force listening to call sign 'Jedi' explains; "together we are stronger" means all faces of interoperability including knowing what are the strong and the weak points of each other and the different point of view to the same subject. In the exercise initially some ice had to be broken but soon the comfort level was going up and the progress became clear in view. Halfway the exercise some 80% of accuracy was reached. Learning every day again brings you to a higher level of routine. During HB18, likewise previous HB exercises in Portugal, fast jets were involved. For air force jet pilots it is different to act in support of helicopter operations, but very meaningful to both. Rotary wing pilots learn the advantages of jets and to be able to fight some of their fights and F16 pilots learn how important every part of every section is in warfare.

Both fixed and rotary wing aircraft pilots designate common objectives, communicate on the same frequencies and brief and debrief together. The involvement from fast jets is one of the reasons for some participants to feel attracted and to come to Portugal and join HB18. F16's were not only flying from Monte Real but also availability of two F16's on Beja itself was realized. Jedi likes the challenge of intercultural work but 'the hard part is to make them a team at the end of the day'. That is all what matters. Since no air force in the world can succeed without boots on the ground, interaction with army units characterized most of the settings in this exercise.

GROUND SUPPORT AND EFFICIENCY

Likewise comments of satisfactory were heard from other levels. The responsible logistic officer in ground support on Beja (MOC) first did not exactly know what to expect but took his job well. Everyone performs their own flight line maintenance itself. Whenever necessary we provide coordination and means like fuel supply, ammunition storage, towing of helicopters and special requests like an extra air compressor or hangar capability for structural repairs. Each nation declares itself ready or not and briefs itself. Mission accomplished in the end gives us a good feeling, but your own position becomes really convincing when a Dutch guy say's it is even better than in the Netherlands.

>>

IMPORTANCE AT ALL LEVELS

The Dutch took part with two CH-47 Chinook and two AS532 Cougar helicopters and are together with Germany leading in experience. Some participants hardly fly tactical missions and their goal is to obtain tactics. Another gap can be lack of knowledge of regulations. The boots on the ground consisted mainly of Portuguese soldiers. Their special forces were drawn from different branches including army commandoes and army Esperaçoos Especiais (SOF), Paraquedistas paratroopers and air force Núcleo de Operações Táticas de Projeção (NOTP), the latter providing force protection in forward operations. Some missions ask a lot. According a Dutch loadmaster, the real job is intense and our position for example is equally important. To fly two hours requires 10 hours of planning. The terrain picture is based on Google Earth details, but is the picture correct? Yes, we have an inflight guide but we really have to go out there and check landing zones (LZ). Real hazards are cables and wiring. Once you know that it summits not above 100 feet, you stick at 200 feet to avoid collision. 'In Portugal it is dark, and I mean real dark compared with the Netherlands during night' and HB18 included a lot of night operations.

The Portugal soldiers on the ground called 'Pathfinders' were doing a fine job on the spot, sometimes assisted by a Dutch loadmaster or MAOT to connect load to Chinooks. Scenarios were sometimes fixed on this such as the recovery of vital parts after a supposed F16 crash. Four German NH-90 inject 'Pathfinders' on the LZ and they secure the site. Once the first Chinook is taking the load in a sling a second one picks up the 'Pathfinders'. Such operations were typical in HB18 although everything had to be planned and discussed very well, especially when flying with soldiers from other countries. For example pilots admit they could not do it without the great help of liaison officers. Communication has to be trained as well. Valuable to the Dutch is flying above strange territory, the combination with fast jets in an exercise and practicing COMAO (Combined Air Operations) flights with other nations in other procedures. In the spectrum of missions were all kind of close air support including Urban CAS and Emergency CAS, Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) and Combat Service Support (CSS), MEDEVAC and CASEVAC (Slovenia and Portugal providing flight medics), military/non-military extractions (NEO ops), Personnel Recovery (PR), air assault, convoy helicopter escort and Special Operations.

TACTICS AND AWARENESS, DISCOVER YOUR PITFALLS

Germany and the Netherlands are familiar with each other in Division Schnelle Krafte (DSK) and cooperation has become a natural process. The same level exists with Belgium, but interaction with Portuguese soldiers was new. English was good understood and they were adaptive and assertive. A general scenario implicated one country invaded another. Smaller scenarios as part of the whole concept were chosen to meet national interest and EDA interest. Starting uncomplicated and working up to more complex missions it soon had reached the level of COMAO and several waves a day with extension to night ops (with NVG) became daily routine. For every COMAO we asked ourselves; which nation wants to train and on what schedule? Interesting is to take a look on the planning and briefing. In the COMAO called 'Operation Vodka' two different packages (one with 2x Dutch CH-47 and 4 x German NH-90 and one with Slovenian Cougar, Portuguese EH-101 and two wild cat Dutch Cougars) acting in the BLUE AIR envelope are asked by the air boss can you do it?

As he waits for confirmation, special EDA mentors can interact if he asks for any objection. After the confirmation special groups will work out the plan to air task orders (ATO). Lt. Col. Roel Cuppes of EDA's core planning team shows us some details. Helicopter crews are listening to 4 T's. The ground plan is leading and helicopters follow the setting. T1 is task including risk and capability. T2 is target; what does the ground commander ask from you and in what time frame? T3 is threat and T4 is tactics. All concerned people are asked to think about this in full transparency and to describe what might be the case. This is different for ingress, at the spot itself and egress situation. Creating awareness is to formulate solutions yourself. The threat of RED AIR (provided by Portuguese F16's), SAM sites (Sa-6, 7&8 emulators), RPG or small arms is obvious but a new element is called 'dicker'.

A civilian is spotting you and uses a mobile phone to reveal your position. How to avoid danger is a question of forward thinking. What about an IED on the landing spot? What about red air is using QRF? Solutions might be Pathfinders to find a safe landing site and BLUE AIR respond with QRF too. New developments are for example GPS-Jam which was very much used in the Ukrainian conflict. Counter this by using maps was suggested. Some dangers are to be faced, when acting in a threat band, tactical climbing procedures can be used to decrease the threat. Reduce you signature when the radar warning receiver (RWR) receive radar recognition and expose the enemy radar to chaff. You can do things

yourself like 'being unpredictable' which is all in the process of awareness. The ultimate test in these matters is the exposing to Mallina, a simulation system recognized by the helicopter self defence system as a SAM missile. How far can you go? How can your tactics help you? What happens when ignoring first and counter this when activated? All questions can only be answered by actually practice your tactics.

COMMITMENT AND LEARNING GOALS

To reach Portugal was sometimes an adventure too. Hungary for example flew 2900 km and 14 hours to Portugal with their Mi-17 helicopters. Still they were among the most productive flying elements and did a lot of SOF exercises with fast roping and jumping above the water. In the Hungarian point of view; to connect with EDA standard operating procedures and practice them with others improves our interoperability as Hungary already joined a blade exercise for the third time. Germany deployed six NH90 helicopters and was quite satisfied about the operational ability. The exercise was used to build up the new helicopter group. In the group is much experience on the UH-1D and together with several young crewmembers they are in the process to gain skills. According a German officer; we slowly get them in the whole process with the aim to make them an aircraft commander in the end. One of the learning goals was strategic transport and the NH-90's arrived by civilian Antonov AN-124 in special cocoons.

Other goals were mission qualifications such as sling load or door gunner practice. A pilot has to describe to the door gunner what he must aim on. This is a standard procedure which has to be trained. Typical four-ship operations called 'swarm' were conducted. In Mali which is a current deployment area to Germany the ground troops delivered by Tchad or Niger were not at expected level. 'Here we can train this with our own men in EDA's exercise which is using standardize NATO and also own developed procedures. To standardize as much as possible makes it easier. Portugal offers possibilities in the exercise we do not have in Germany and provided well, exact as we expected. In general we have to accept we only can be strong in working together'. This is also the case for Portugal. Their EH-101 unit, primarily used in SAR operations is in the process of learning tactical missions with Special Forces. HB18 was an occasion with much to win for both EH-101 crews and SOF but in the main picture it proved Portugal and the other participants understood the theme.

'Special thanks to the Portugese Airforce and European Defence Agency Brussels'.

Kees Otten & Wim Das

Epilogue:

During such a large exercise you cannot be on all spots at the same time. For that reason we were happy that we were provided with some images of the Portugese Airforce media-office, as well as some other persons, allowed by the Portugese Airforce-media. We wish to thank all contributors, as well as all persons who helped us in hospitality, facilities and in all other aspects the week we were hosted !