

BLACK SCORPION, FALCON FROSTFIRE AND SHARPENING THE SKILLS

Wherever the mission will be, the involved military can expect success if the circumstances match the training they have done to master the situations which are expected to show up in your mission. Obtained skills are necessary to be practiced to see where you are and to see where improvements are needed. More and more we see interactions between totally different units of Airforce, Army, and Navy depending on each other and therefore they also train together.

This as well between several different countries. Nowadays it is more likely to be deployed in far regions in areas of tension and being sent on demand of the politicians. But of course it can be fighting terror nearby as well. You are better to be prepared for that and train scenarios in live exercises.

STAYING IN THE RIGHT MIND SET

These thoughts are very much actual within the Dutch Military, as well as the Belgian. There may be jokes between both friendly countries like: 'The Belgians are the spare Dutch', as the Belgians claim The Netherlands being a 'province' of Belgium, but they gained a lot of experience in foreign missions and do know how important it is to keep it current. More and more countries are working on this awareness in the international context. For the Dutch it is not a matter in the past because they are still looking to an ongoing mission in Mali. This however is not the only item, one should always be keen not to neglect the home-defence and put your military organisation and its power against the political atmosphere and military balances where unwanted developments could threaten you. When you have to stand for your country it is more convenient when you know what your capability is and what capability is to expect from other involved parties. Today's military warfare shows crystal clear the importance of joint operations, as the Belgians and Dutch participated in a series of short joint consecutive exercises.

DHC AND 11^E AMB TOGETHER IN TEST

The Dutch military command initiated exercises with a joint character and the focus was on helicopters and army units to be deployed on the ground. During exercise 'Falcon Frostfire' helicopters from the Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf) organized within the 'Defensie Helikopter Commando' (DHC) being the air force's central helicopter unit practised air assaults in Belgium. Some 250 soldiers of the '11^e luchtmobiele brigade' (11^e Air Manoeuvre Brigade or 11^e AMB) took part in the exercises. Part of them would be paradropped by C-130 Hercules transport planes. Despite the wind the 298 Sqn. RNLAf Chinooks escorted by 300 Sqn. Cougars delivered part of the 11^e AMB in assault actions on the Zutendaal military complex just in the approach of a small airstrip. Their mission was to conquer the airfield on opposing forces. The operation started with a private hired aircraft resembling a drone circling around to survey the area and soon after that two 301 Sqn. Apaches from DHC began to observe and protect the landing site. With their sensors they searched for Anti-Aircraft Artillery (triple A) and when found they would have destroyed them. The Chinooks performed an insertion with 11th AMB soldiers in the area and this was later on repeated in a second wave. Also some small vehicles were put on the ground with a sling. The soldiers immediately were engaged in the conflict and under fire. They took enough firepower with them and used bazookas and mortars. There were no tanks in the area, but if this would have been the case they would have faced the Apache tank

killers who provided close air support (CAS) during the insertion and the period immediate after. Also a Belgian A-109 landed in the area for a short while, to deliver a high ranked officer who partly coordinated the operation on the ground.

CORE BUSINESS

Totally some 700 soldiers were involved including Belgian para-commando's and a fairly large Belgian military engineering unit. The exercise was conducted in a large area in the Belgian provinces Limburg, Luik and Antwerpen. Small groups of soldiers were to be found in the village area. Opposing groups resembled Russian Spetznaz forces. Special operations such as conquer bridges and even a barrage were in the scenario. The exercise evolves in 'stepping stone' strategy depending on achievements. Soldiers are carrying equipment sensing if you have been shot and then you get out. As already mentioned the joint character comprised air mobile operations with army soldiers and Air Force helicopter crews. Falcon Frostfire however not only applied the ability to test joint operations but have put it also on an international level with the Netherlands and Belgium as cooperating partners. This was even going as far as an exchange with parts of the military staff. They have to be trained in this as well. Exercises on this level provide excellent opportunities even to staff members it is a must. Also the planners of this kind of complex scenario's are challenged. Prior to the exercise there were planning conferences, and following on the exercise debriefing and a scoop on lessons learned. DHC and 11th AMB find each other as partners with much experience in this type of actions. Both saw wartime conditions being the latest in Aghanistan and for DHC currently in Mali. The Netherlands were under pressure to fulfill there commitments such as being until December 2015 attached as stand by to the Immediate Response Force (IRF) which is part of NATO's Response Force(NRF). This also comprised a year of working up and a year of stand down. In this proces the 11^e AMB is part of the 'German Division Schnelle Kräfte' (DSK). If not supported with helicopters in Assault action the soldiers are just infantry. Today we exercise in the way we fits the most, let's say our core business as the communication officer of DHC stated. To DHC, acting in an offensive mission it is important to train under different rules of engagement from the Mali mission or just some average transport or trooping missions.

AND WHAT ABOUT MALI?

Other important type of actions between helicopters and the 'man on the ground' are the missions of the Special Forces. This is a hot issue to the Dutch military. Army special units called Special Operations Land Task Group (SOLTG) are deployed in Mali under UN flag and they are tasked to gather information and observe the actual situation as reflected by the several parties if this is correct. The Dutch special forces were asked into the mission because of their excellent skills and reputation. While starting the mission the peace proces had not really began but in the meanwhile it has processed to an improved situation now with a kind of agreement between important parties in the region. However there are also groups in the area recognized as terrorist ones, who are connected to Al Qaeda or even IS. Those are excluded from peace talks, but continue to perform terrorist attacks, sometimes with succes as we have seen recently. The presence of foreign forces to keep up stability is still needed, and among them are soldiers of Royal Netherlands Army and Air Force together with three Chinook- and four Apache helicopters.

BLACK SCORPION AS FINAL TEST

Units are on rotation every 4,5 months. This means that prior to send on a Mali mission units are going to a 'work up' phase. This phase ends with a final exercise called 'Black Scorpion'. For this training a special 'village' (some containers) has been constructed on the shooting range 'Harskamp' to resemble Mali situations as much as possible. All common types of actions are to be trained. There is an operation in the village where members of the SOLTG are going to talk with local 'leaders' to get 'intel'. Simulations also include civilians. The intelligence profile of the area is shared with the force commander in nearby Nieuw Milligen (Air force air traffic

control site) acting as Camp 'Castor' in Mali. The SOLTG consists of commando's of the 'Korps Commando Troepen' and is surrounded by what they call 'enablers', altogether some 200 soldiers. The enablers can be a JISTARC unit (Joint Intelligence Surveillance Targeting Acquisition and Reconnaissance Commando) which is a combined intelligence unit of Air Force, Army, Navy and Marechaussee. It could also be the case that the enablers are from a unit to dismantle an improvised explosive device (IED) or an engineering unit (Genie), whatever is needed. During Black Scorpion February 2016 special forces are waiting on an open field near the edge of a forest. They wait with their Fennecs, Bushmaster and Mercedes Benz (MB) G280CDI. The Fennec is a tactical vehicle used by the JISTARC enablers and is fitted with a retractable Forward looking Infra Red (FLIR) device. During night operations they can see people in the desert by their Infra Red signature. This is a very useful device in an environment where an ambush can be set up easily. Also the Chinook F model (CH-47F) in use with the RNLAf is equipped with FLIR which enables night operations more accurate thanks to a better profile of the surroundings. Above the Harskamp area two Chinooks are approaching the landing site and do a fast reconnaissance search of the terrain first. Because of fresh snow the Chinooks have to practice a 'white out' caused by the strong downwash. The blowing of fine snow particles is very similar to the dust conditions they will meet in Mali. After two perfect landings, one by one, both Chinooks deliver commando's with quads. They are joining the others in operation already on the ground. The communication officer notes that later on the evening a dropping of commando's will be conducted from high altitude. With a technique of high altitude jumping and low altitude opening of the chute (HALO) some eight special forces will infiltrate in a selected area. The se commando's can jump either from a few kilometers altitude, and even to ensure that their plane is not seen or heard, from 10 kilometers (!) altitude by using oxygen masks to reach the height where extra oxygen is no longer needed. With their special steerable 'square- parachute' models they can land very effectively as a group on a very small strip on the ground. Every aspect which can occur in Mali will be trained. The cooperation with air force and army stays tight. Nothing seems to stop the 'declare ready' of these units, and experience can be shared later on again with others.

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