

HUNGARY BRINGS NEW LEVELS IN EXERCISE FIRE BLADE 2017

The European Defence Agency (EDA) organized this year another helicopter exercise for contributing Member States (CMS) called 'Fire blade' (FB17). This time the setting was in Hungary and as EDA promised, an operationally realistic framework in a demanding environment, it probably could never come so close to this reality as it did in Hungary where some of the most sophisticated training areas of Europe were offered.

MEMBER STATES WORK TOGETHER

This time, as the name 'Fire Blade' suggested, live firing exercises formed an integral part. The Blade exercises are ambitious as ever but success depends on in what way the CMS will participate individual. Money, other commitments, or lack of means caused by deployments else where in the World will influence the ability to participate. From 1-12 May 2017 five Member States contributed to FB17 conducted from Papa air base involving some 14 helicopters and around 500 man and woman personnel. A total input which could be considered as moderate, where EDA could have hoped for more.

The exercise program was developed from previous 'blade exercise' experiences but updates in warfare provided from recent international led campaigns involving one or more of EDA's Member States were also incorporated. Tactical awareness is indeed growing in the settings on the 'Blade exercises' which are coordinated in EDA's Helicopter Exercise Programme (HEP) and this developing attractiveness could lead to increasing future participation, for instance in Portugal 2018, Czech Republic 2019 and the Netherlands and Belgium in 2020.

SHORT PREPARING TIME AS A LEARNING GOAL.

The ultimate warfare capability might be a goal to participants, but EDA as organizing instrument must focus on the whole of abilities and so, working with several countries as one instrument and creating a high level of interoperability is an ever returning obligation in the 'blade exercises'. The most complex setting on this is the Combined Air Operations (COMAO) exercise including all participating countries acting in a package with a specific task. One of the most fascinating elements is the period the Air Tasking Order, and Fragmentary Order (ATO and FRAGO) which are given shortly before must be worked out. The short time and 'to see how you can coop with it' is a learning goal itself. Even the press was ordered not to circulate information which could conflict this learning goal.

EDA could not always predict how the COMAO would develop at the spot and wouldn't go no further as the description 'most likely' about what would happen. Participants were urged to make a plan A, B and C following the options which occurred and be responsive on whatever might happen. Everything would be discussed later in the debriefing and commented by one of the five mentors from Austria, Germany, Sweden and the UK. The mentors are trained helicopter tactics instructors coming out of the EDA Helicopter Tactics Instructors Course (HTIC). And so the exercise leaders and mentors showed curiosity too where the COMAO would lead to success or showed pitfalls. As they say sometimes; 'no plan survives the first contact with the enemy '.

COMAO REQUIRES ONE LANGUAGE

About the COMAO are different thoughts, although everybody likes to act in a COMAO and some do consider it as the ultimate top level in helicopter operations, others are more up to the flying part instead of long preparation times and feel more freely in separate training flights. Because the COMAO lets contribute very routined participants mixed with less experienced nations or crews, the COMAO must be worked out carefully and earmarked with safety first. One of the main issues is the language barrier.

To some countries the English language is still a challenge when going further than a limited knowledge necessary for simple flying. Under stress everybody tends to return to the mother language, just two weeks only speaking English can be already stressful to them. Therefore EDA offers an English language course in the prelude and two weeks before the exercise everybody read the same book about the flying ops written in English by a pilot. Another situation causing stress is the different radio and communications suites making communication sometimes demanding. The Belgian A-109's are well equipped with radio's (four radio's including VHF/UHF) and therefore a preference for the Air Mission Commander (ACM).

THE HARDEST JOBS ARE GIVEN TO THE MOST EXPERIENCED 'BLADERS'

The COMAO's are the main topic of EDA which has led the aim upon itself to create an enhanced cooperating helicopter force of European nations. Also the COMAO's require input of every participating country to make it a common operation including switching of roles. Of course everybody applies his training objectives and everybody is doing the best to make it work. The HEP Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) provides standard formats for mission planning, load plans, communication cards etc. What you see is that less experienced countries show some hesitation to adopt the role of Air Mission Commander which in their thoughts might be too much responsibility.

However they are encouraged to act in this and to try to fit in on this level. Some have more developed skills and leaders give the hardest roles to the most experienced 'bladers'. A total of eight COMAO's were scheduled and not for common importance only but also serves national interests, for example Austria has only the Blade exercises to meet international exercises on this scale. In the morning separate training flights were followed by COMAO's in the afternoon and again training flights during sunset and the darkness of the evening or night to train operations with Night Vision Goggles.

VÁRPALOTA IN THE CENTER

The live firing exercises were performed day and night at the huge Várpalota range with it's "0" point in the center, mostly with NATO standard 7.62 mm machineguns. The possibility was given to the press to watch this closely on board of a helicopter. During a 2,5 hours Hungarian Air Force Mil MI-17 flight four gunners were keeping up their currency with shooting during continuous flying rounds above the range and to be completed with rocket firing with 57 mm S-5 rockets from UB-32A-57 rocket pods. All participating nations shot together over 40.000 bullets/rockets including 27.350 fire rounds and 480 fired non-guided rockets in 9 flying day's.

Várpalota's "0" point also was the main spot for one of the most complicated COMAO's, this time with a counter-terrorism setting. Bringing many special forces to the ground (SOF) underlined the joint character. The helicopter branche is flying for the army which is seen as the customer. Air and ground operations must be streamlined to teamwork. Different countries take the role of SOF and the Joint Tactical Air Controller (JTAC) which is a learning goal as well and for example Hungary is expanding itself in these roles. Everything is set in EDA's Techniques, Tactics and Procedures (TTP's) and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's), however planning with different countries is a challenge. Some have different way's to solve the problem,

but the result must be the same. According an Austrian pilot: 'We have to learn to trust each other and to obtain knowledge from others to do the job'. In his words what is exciting he answered; 'Being in the lead of a package'. The whole planning of the mission was completed shortly before. There were six hours to play out all the angles. New elements were introduced, marking the level evolution and for the first time the Blade exercises saw jet fighters (two Gripens) and a T-72 main battle tank at the spot (operated by the terrorists).

Belgian A-109's, one with the Air Mission Commander (AMC) and one with the deputy AMC circling around with machineguns in the doors and after securing the situation an Austrian Black Hawk took the 'Blocking position' to a terrorist jeep while Austrian and Slovenian Bells and a Hungarian Mi-8 (ex Finnish air force) put soldiers on the ground with a Slovenian Cougar in reserve somewhere in the distance. Suddenly the helicopters had to pull back when a T-72 appears. A smoke curtain was created instantaneously by the ground forces.

The groundforce commander operating with a JTAC besides him called in a Gripen fighter for Close Air Support (CAS) and the tank was taken out fast and effective. Staying on high altitude the Gripen uses precision weapons. The JTAC deconflicts jets and helicopters and gives information to the attacking jet about the position of the tank. After enemy fire has seized the helicopters come back for the 'extraction phase'. This includes the capture of terrorists, recovery of material and soldiers and medevac in case of casualties.

RUIN CITY, AN ALLEGED RUSSIAN HERITAGE

The second COMAO to be witnessed was the one in Újdörögd called 'Ruin city' training range, a place created during the cold war and composed of different buildings resembling a village and an excellent spot for training in urban warfare. Helicopters can land on the roofs of buildings making it an ultimate dynamic spectacle. Two Belgian A-109 and one Hungarian Mi-8 are circling in the air. The A-109 is opening the way as a 'sniffing guy' as Major Nicolas of the Belgian air force describes it and the 7.62 mm machinegun can be used by immediate danger. Radar Warning Receivers (RWR) and flares will defend the A-109 against missiles.

This threat is likely while a highly mobile GBAD NIIP/Vympel 2K12 'Kub' (SA-6) mobile radar guided surface-to-air missile was deployed in the field somewhere as a new item in EDA's warfare concept and this requires RWR and Flares as obligatory countermeasures. The A-109 will act as a C2-bird (Command & Control) and will seek a spot in the air out of reach of small arms fire but closely enough to oversee the operation. This time a Slovenian Cougar is landing on one of the roofs and SOF go out and search in the buildings for enemy forces. In the meanwhile two German CH-53GA's deliver troops on the ground and fly away followed by Austrian and Slovenian Bell helicopters.

The helicopters performed trainingflights before with the highly mobile 'Kub' SAM system as a threat but however the position is hidden it seemed not the threat of that day. From the other side of the village a BTR-80 appears suddenly which enables a 14 mm gun with 360° traverse and an elevation of 60° for improved effectiveness in air defence and started to create difficulties for the COMAO package. Once again the AMC, deputy AMC and land force commander in charge to lead the joint task force orchestrate how to react and once again the JTAC calls in a Gripen to eliminate the enemy asset. With the extraction of the SOF and captured enemy the whole process takes some 20-25 minutes.

EDA'S NEXT STEP

The primary objective is to train and practice SOP's of HEP with the common goal to bring everybody to the same page. Also national goals can be established and during FB17 according to Lt. Col. Frank, commander of a German CH-53GA, the training facilities were 'more than good'. In his opinion also the exercise was effective for Germany with a result of

one aircraft commander and one pilot instructor declared 'mission ready' for Afghanistan. The assisting employee of EDA's core planning team (CPT), the Dutch Lt. Col. Roel Cuppes expressed that the exercises reached a satisfying level and that during the exercise FB17 EDA was very pleased with the Hungarian Host National Support.

He and his Hungarian colleagues will try to mobilize participation for future blade exercises and probably the next one in Portugal with other training possibilities such as COMAO's in 'high, dust and hot' environment will attract more nations. Attempts were undertaken to interest other European nations as newcomers such as Poland, Serbia and Croatia. First there will be a good view about lessons learned from FB-17 followed by planning conferences for the new exercise. EDA's work is complicated and challenging but in the same time satisfying and it increases in effectiveness.

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