



HOT BLADE 2014 – MAJOR EU HELICOPTER EXERCISE AT OVAR - PORTUGAL

HOTBLADE 14

HB-14, MULTINATIONAL HELICOPTER MISSIONS TO A BETTER COOPERATION

Hot Blade 2014 (HB-14) at Aerodromo de Manobra no 1 (AM-1) in Ovar Portugal is again an issue which underlines the benefit of international training. In times of limited resources and lots of experience with the participants, one could say take the lessons for gold and understand the beneficial aspect of joining such exercises. Everything is focused on understanding each others routines and fit them together as one oiled machine which in time of need could be activated at once. Very recent developments in the world show how necessary these exercises might be.

TRAINING ON COALITION MISSIONS

During the exercise several participants exposed their objectives to the media, but no one could explain better why everyone is here as Andy Gray. Andy was tasked by the European Defence Agency (EDA) to use his experience as veteran for the Royal Air Force in multinational engagements such as in Afghanistan. As the Helicopter Project Manager of EDA Andy and his planning team do have a full time job and they are doing this in cooperation with the Portugal host which latter earns a big compliment for their professionalism in both military performance and outstanding hospitality. They are doing a great job and I am feeling comfortable as Andy stated.

Still there are a few things to worry about. In his opinion it is still a yes when you ask if everything works out as EDA projected and the exercise suits, but his aim is to achieve interoperability and this could always be improved. It is widely accepted that future engagements will always cooperate in coalition and always with different partners, depending on initiatives of governments. It is because of that reason that it is difficult to create standard European forces, but we could try to create standards of training. We military should provide service to our political masters when we have to and than the military forces should fit together swiftly and effectively to a plug and play level. From his experience it takes a lot of time to understand each other in multinational engagement in war zones as were the findings in Afghanistan. Better to find out in peace time and that is why we exercise.

They always say; 'Train the way we fight and fight the way we train', so why not coalition training when it comes continuing to coalition involvement in war zones. On the question if recent circumstances in the Ukraine inflicted thoughts of the leaders of some countries participating in the exercise he answered with a yes and some countries are changing necessarily and convinced the defence budget this year. Afghanistan is not to be the last operation. There are a lot of pressure points and instabilities in the world and there is a necessity to react whenever wanted.

PLANNING IS COMPLEX

Who would have thought that only helicopter operations is not such a big deal mistakes himself completely. Hot blade is a joint exercise with involvement of army and even navy soldiers and organizing it takes a 12 hours cycle planning a day. Army soldiers of different countries are in the field, with Special Forces of Portugal (Unidade de Protecção da Força = UPF, and Naval Destacamento Ações Especiais = DAE), The Netherlands and Germany together with Forward Air Controllers (FAC) and Joint Tactical Air Controllers (JTAC) of different countries. The planning for FAC and JTAC can be essential for succeeding missions. The difference between a FAC and JTAC is that FAC's are pilots on the ground tours whereas JTACs are all other non-pilots who have attained the same qualification as a TAC (Tactical Air Controller) through one of the various military school houses which train to various TAC related skills based on the community of the attendees.

Scenarios were taken from a wide array of possible circumstances. Being the host Portugal Air Force (Forca Aerea Portuguesa =FAP) deployed the biggest number of assets at Ovar including four EH-101

Merlin helicopters from Esq. 751, a CASA C-295 transport from Esq. 502, some 10 F-16A/B fighters from Esq. 201 & 301 and a P3C+ CUP Orion from Esq. 601. Composite Air Operations are as complex as you can get and Andy had to fit in the fighters for close air support missions and the Orion for Command and Control (C&C) thanks to its state-of-the-art electronic and communications suite. Totally 3000 military personnel were directly involved in this two weeks exercise and some 25 helicopters of Portugal, Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and for the first time the United Kingdom formed the core. Achieving interoperability is one goal, but also some countries do have a dual objectives which suited well in this drill. For example the Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf) tested their working up for their Mali deployment.

Hot Blade 2014 was a follow-up of two previous issues at AM-1. The initiative started in 2009 in France (Gap) and was annually followed on by exercises in Italy, Spain, Belgium and Portugal. Thirteen countries undersigned a 10 years agreement in the Helicopter Exercise Program (HEP) of EDA including both NATO and Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries. Twelve countries (excluding Luxembourg having no helicopters and crews) committed crew and helicopters to enhance European capability and interoperability. Of course the exercise in southern European countries are focused on high and hot and dust conditions including the training on 'brown out' when landing in sandy or dusty areas. The next issue will be in 2015 in Italy and in 2016 in Finland. Participants will have to find out if the environment complies to their objectives and it is likely to see a change of faces.

WE TEACH THEM HOW TO THINK

As Andy Gray said, over 50% of the military in previous issues of this exercise eventually went to war zones and took their experience to the battlefield. The question what Andy really matters is, when you don't join this initiative, since there is in NATO no equivalent counterpart of a multinational helicopter exercise of this size available, what will contribute to your multinational experience? One thing is for sure; the exercise itself is the force multiplier. We are not teaching how to fly, but we are teaching how to think. Teaching crews how to work together about the complete context and take the right decisions will make it all more effective. To help this there is a fully crew trainer in Linton-on-Ouse (U.K.) with general purpose machineguns in the door and in one way ideal for practice of gunners which could be of use in the process to this exercise. Although the participating helicopters are armed with machineguns in the door it was a pity not to have dedicated attack helicopters in the exercise. The Dutch promised Apaches but due to commitment in Mali there were non available at this time. Maybe this is something for next year and for a new level.

Exercise commander is satisfied

Lt. Colonel Lourenço is the Portuguese exercise coordinator (exco) and is confident about the outcome. All depends on how much you complicate your life. The idea to combine all requirements of all nations is not easy to fulfil. We are not talking of just only helicopter aviation but also about mixing with other branches such as army and all movement and missions of them need coordination too. To get an idea of a full up detailed schedule, there are about 60 to 70 helicopter movements a day in morning and afternoon waves and every helicopter is transporting soldiers. They infiltrate on the ground or extract people and sometimes stay one night at the site.

The design of the exercise is a walking approach to a higher level which starts with cross training, is followed by tactic techniques and procedures (TTP's) for close air support and in the progress ends with more complex and challenging missions. There is a tight schedule in the level of planning but safety cannot be compromised. Everyone understands what is going on. Of much importance in joint missions is to understand the complete picture. What will happen on the ground afterwards? Once you have that picture you can prepare better with your flight operations. In that way we are able to learn lessons for next missions.

VOICES FROM THE SOLDIERS

Outside we met Lt. Colonel Rafetseder, commander of the Austrian air force detachment. He stated that keeping up flying hours could be combined with training crews and this is a good opportunity to work in multinational environment. So we can improve our capability. As you know Austria does have a helicopter detachment in Bosnia under EUFOR operation Althea with two Black-Hawks and three Alouette III helicopters. Austria has much experience with 'white out' conditions which is very much the same with 'brown out' conditions and this helps us very much.

Austria confirms that sharing tactics is very useful but on the other hand a Composite Air Operation (COMAO) with 15-20 helicopters from six nations is not a very realistic scenario itself but provides maximum learning cycles for as many crews as possible and that matters. Here we can train to read standard documents and other procedures and we receive a realistic input. With four helicopters and eight crews Austria has every day four crews running the daily operation and four crews in preparation.

Observers of Italy, Hungary, Sweden and Brazil were present at Ovar. The Italians are confident for next year at Viterbo since there has been great process in EDA from 2011 and new Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's) for European crews were written in 2013. There is a great occasion to start a new approach. The Italian Chinook will be part of it as will be the NH-90 and attack helicopters. A German FAC and JTAC walked back on the base after a mission and were eager to tell their story. They were dropped by an RNLAFC Chinook which are called 'Grizzlies' and received enemy fire on the spot. They were extracted by Portuguese and German paratroopers with another 'Grizzly' Chinook. The Chinook was guarded by a Belgian A-109 called 'Duke'. Being a FAC or JTAC is a most challenging job but we are vulnerable and are as no other depending heavily on whatever coalition helicopter.

RAF TESTS ITS PUMA

The next day we are in the preparation zone of the Royal Air Force detachment. Puma pilots with call signs 'Mac' and 'A-C' are willing to give us information. It is great opportunity to train with the European counterparts in hot & high conditions and in dusty areas (some landing sites in Portugal are at 5000 ft.). The Puma Mk. 2 is brand new in RAF service and this is a good test. The Mk.2 kept the original airframe but was re-engined with new Makila's and a new glass cockpit was installed. The new engines are very powerful and avionics features digital control. The full performance under hot & high conditions is noticeable. The Puma Mk.2 is very deployable and has a small logistic footprint. Two examples can be transported within four hours in a sole C-17 worldwide in any environment.

Prior to 'Hot Blade' some instructors were in Beija with exercise 'Dust off' to start initial testing. We try to make it work to get as many crews as much experienced as possible. There is a lot of experience with the other nations and we want medium experienced crews to level with this and so there is a lot of coach work. In the planning process there are mentors of EDA, own instructors, there is coaching during flying and during the debriefing. We encountered complex manoeuvres with escort of Portuguese F-16's and Offensive and Defensive Counter Air missions, Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR), Joint Personnel Recovery (JPR) and COMAO missions and worked with FAC's and JTAC's. We moved Portuguese troops in with our Puma which is called 'Tiger' directed by a German JTAC. You never can predict the difficulty of a mission, so always stay prepared and focussed is our motto.

PORTUGAL TAKES BENEFIT

Portugal Air Force provided both blue and red forces, depending on the mission. As the Commander of the deployed Merlin detachment (which comically is by the way called 'Puma's) stated his role is very integrating with other nations. There has been troop transport and delivery, extraction from combat site, force protection on the ground and missions with Special Forces. We all obey the rules of engagement of the day and those will depend on the risk level of the mission. We all go there and some objectives are concerning the type and others the working capabilities. The learning process is important to Portugal because instructors of our partners have been in war zones and helping us in tactics. Other instructors were at previous Hot Blade exercises. To comply with EDA requirements the Portuguese military did carefully choose and monitor the landings sites prior to the exercise. Including this were sandy or dusty spots to handle brown out in landing approaches to a secured platform which is called a gate. According to our guests, Portugal did a fine job and now it is up to Italy to continue the Hot Blade saga.

Kees Otten, Wim Das & Koos Heemskerk.

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 *Scroll down for participantslist* 

HOTBLADE 2014 PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES:

Austria	4x AB 212	50 pers.
Belgium	4xA-109	55 pers.
Germany	6 x UH-1D	260 pers.
Netherlands	4x CH-47D	314 pers.
Portugal	4x EH-101	2000 pers.
	10x F-16A/B	
	1xC-295	
	1xP-3C+	
UK	3x puma HC.2	50 pers.
Observers	8 pers. Italy	

Countries that signed the agreement:

Austria
Belgium
Czech Republic
Germany
Finland
Greece
Italy
Hungary
Luxembourg
Netherlands
Portugal
Sweden
UK

All nations provide helicopters, except for Luxembourg.