

QRA SCRAMBLES AT MALBORK POLAND

Some 10 years ago the 'Baltic Air Policing Mission' (BAP) was created because the Baltic States themselves do not have an own air force and while being NATO member. When there was little tension and the mission was carried out for years at a low level. Now times have changed and Poland does not feel at ease with the policy of Vladimir Putin to the surrounding countries around him. Reason for NATO to give them some military and mental support. Today this is brought by Portugal, Canada, Germany and The Netherlands, the latter at Malbork airbase where we visited the Dutch who are flying now in Poland.

BALTIC AIR POLICING

Actually the normal volume of the BAP had already been doubled since the annexation of the Crimea by Russia. The BAP mission is fulfilled by rotation of NATO members, and it is from Siauliai in Lithuania where now two NATO countries stationed a detachment. Currently these are Portugal with six F-16s (Portugal is on the lead) and it carries along with four Canadian CF-18's. They relieved Polish MiG-29s and British Typhoons off their 'tour of duty, these planes had been there for their three months turn. Since the crisis in Ukraine the mission has further increased now. A second base near Tallinn in Estonia, Amari has recently been completed and there are stationed now five German Typhoons. But that is not enough because especially Poland and Romania feel vulnerable But that is not enough because especially Poland and Romania feel vulnerable as NATO outposts, so still more reinforcements were desired and granted. Currently Malbork in eastern Poland which is about 60 kilometers from the Russian border hosts for three months four Dutch F-16's, two for QRA (Quick Reaction Alert) and two for training purposes together with the Polish MIG-29's.

ROYAL NETHERLANDS AIRFORCE ON QRA

The RNLAf is now present at Malbork since september 3, and will be relieved in December. The deployment serves a binary purpose. Not only the presence is important, but actually there is a participation in the Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) and in addition is a jointly training with the Polish Air Force because it gives a nice chance to train in a different environment and also a chance to learn from each other. It's not really the intention to carry out patrols over the Baltic states as there are after all allies present, but if needed and requested it can be done. This will (in case) demand much more logistic facilities. The QRA participation of the RNLAf is especially of psychological value. Malbork can host a complete squadron of MIG-29 Fulcrums which – although - a small proportion (5 planes) on QRA, but this can be complemented quite fast.

THE RUSSIANS ARE ACTIVE

Aeronautica & Difesa was at Malbork end of september and had an interview with Lt. Col. Marcel, commander of the RNLAf at Malbork. He says his people are highly motivated for the QRA task and have enough activities going on because the Polish training partner is present on the same field every day and a rhythm of daily training is what the men are used to. On the question whether QRA means that you fly fully armed into the air he answers in the affirmative. In case of a QRA flight the guns are ready and all hardpoints are filled up ! There appears to be a realistic threat, and then you can not afford a 'sitting duck' position in the 'consensus role' for not irritating the opponent. QRA is QRA, and that requires a full armament. The time for politeness and appropriate performances is over. The RNLAf did not have a QRA contact with the Russians by the time of our interview-moment, but contacts of that kind are definitely there (with allies above the Baltic states) in an average of about once a week.

The Russians will appear unannounced and even on the wrong places. They do violate the Baltic airspace into a kind of cat and mouse game. The NATO QRA planes - in case such a proximity – are always scrambled to perform immediately, and fulfill their interception task as quickly as possible. There is of course also just regular traffic whose flight plans are known, that will not lead to incidents. The

Russians are closely monitored and supervised after interception. So they know it's not a game on our side ! In recent years, The Netherlands have again gained experience again in intercepting the 'Bear flights', resumed a few years ago by Vladimir Putin. His 'war-horses' are a regular appearance once more over Northern-Europe. Though for the Dutch this procedure and rules by intercepting are quite the same as with others, still it gives a total other experience in Poland instead as above the North-Sea. As Lt.Col. Marcel describes: you fly in a scene of green and over land, mountains and villages. This generates a totally other view, as the threat is larger and the responsibility is higher since people live 'down there below'. A totally different scene. The pilots react as they are trained according to the Rules of Engagement (ROE) for which no further announcements will be made. It is a very professional manner, and there is no situation of stress, most feel 'that it is in real life now' and things are happening now. You know that you are trained well all the time to cope with it and make the right decisions. That means you want to do it 100% well.

INFO BY AWACS

Approaching Russian aircraft are directly noticed by AWACS aircraft. These planes fly quite 'left' in the scene which is to say that looking at the map, not too close to the border of eastern-Poland and furthermore over the Baltic Sea. At the moment there is also involvement a KDC-10 tanker, active since march 2014 and it was flying some 180 hrs already air-to-air. In such a scenery it may be so that the situation deteriorates, and these 'High Valuable Asset' planes will be protected according special procedures adequately.

POLAND COMPROMISED

Poland likes to see the RNLAf coming. With the annexation of the Crimea and the rumble in eastern Ukraine Poland feels threatened somewhat to properly. The Poles are now happy and feel very much relieved by the arrival of NATO reinforcements is what Base-commander Blach also states. Moreover, NATO took the cost of upgrading the Malbork runway into its account. This implicates that Malbork as a military base will continue to exist. This sure is good for the feeling of safety, the Poles feel taken seriously, it strengthens (indirectly) the employment in the area and certainly the trust in NATO. Make no mistake, here in Poland they look quite different at the term 'security', the distance to Kaliningrad is not quite far (80km's). With Ukraine in mind, it is sometimes quite frightening that it may spread to these (Polish / Baltic) region. It lives! After all the short-range missiles from the Russians have always been very good and accurate. The experience is characterized by the degree of threat ... Kaliningrad is a Russian enclave between northeastern Poland and the Baltic States and Russia - in military terms - called the Kaliningrad 'Oblast'.

You would not suspect that in this relatively small part of Russia one of the six main headquarters of the Russian forces are established. Lately rearmament with modern systems identified as S-400 air defense systems and Iskander-M ballistic missiles are perceived. While during a large reorganization since 2008 many units have been divested, also new much more effective bases were added such as a modern helicopter base near the Baltic states and new is also the stationing of a Russian squadron Sukhoi Flankers in Belarus. Of course, the number of NATO aircraft currently applied is quite modest compared to the Russian units as reinforcement but it is a clear signal and lets notwithstanding that there is no questioning about the solidarity between the 28 Member States. The message is cristal-clear, according to Article 5, an attack on one is an attack on all, and Russia is testing our determination in the Baltic and Eastern European region.

EXERCISING AGAINST MIG-29'S

Besides the two QRA 'Fighting Falcons' is trained with the other two planes frequently against the Poles. Above Malbork dogfights take place with all kinds of tactics, tricks, flares etc. The objectives are to learn from each other, each other's techniques and test tactics, and that (for the RNLAf) in a totally different environment. Also the nightly air-exercises create another dimension as well because of the 'space' over Poland. Usually (but not always) the Mig's are outclassed by the F-16s that are much more updated than the older MIG's. Lt.Col. Marcel states: We now have the opportunity to fight against real MIG-29's, quite different to an F-16 simulating it is a Mig. The Fulcrum is a heavy machine equipped with two engines and it gives 9 just a an F-15) a totally different experience. You notice that the procedures of the Poles are also applied 'NATO', but there are also some differences noticed. Night missions are also trained, less as daytime courses since the schedule needs to be adjusted, and as a result the pilots later on have to get back in their normal day-rhythm to come again. But it is certainly trained alternately by the pilots and crews of airbase 'Volkel' and those of airbase 'Leeuwarden'. A crewchief (Rob) indicates that there is

a "pretty healthy rivalry' between the personell of both bases, which dominates the atmosphere affects in a positive, and thus keeping the level high ! It is the night missions that are a challenge for the Dutch. Also 'CAS' (Close Air Support) provides a good cooperation with Poland. The Dutch are slightly depending on the flight-schedules of Poland, which sometimes requires some extra adjustment, a challenge for the planners. During CAS targeting pods are also included in the exercise. It is in a circumferential pattern flown with the Poles. One time the F-16's fly 'alone together' and the other time F-16's fly together with the MIG's. The MiG-29's are much less digital, so they can be faster in the air because they have fewer checks to finish.

The QRA F-16's however are ready to depart any time. Disadvantage for the MIG-29's in a dogfight is that the pilots can not see what happens behind them, and they can hardly see left and right next to them because they are sitting quite low in their cockpit. For the 'Readiness', preparing all between flights everything is present at your fingertips at the base. The QRA MIG-29's are positioned on one side of the airfield, the F-16's on the other. For the QRA flights a small building is available for pilots and crew, the other personell stays in hotels near the base, with a distance restriction depending on importancy. The structure and organization of compounds department on the basis took some time, but the start of the mission did not have any delays.

FOCUS ON CURRENT JOB

Logistically it is important to have visibility on the platform. Transport by road was possible and reasonably close in distance from the Netherlands so the many containers are all transported to Malbork via road. The Dutch camp features an MSK or Mobile Satellite Kitchen, and above-atmosphere guaranteeing: own (aircraft) microwave meals! No sweat, and though less atmospheric as a three-starr restaurant as reporters we can say that outside the base the meals / pizza's are appetizing as well ! While the mission still will take some time, there was quite some tension when it was announced that The Netherlands will start their contribution to the fight against IS, and the RNLAf guys here realize that they are really going to take part in the action soon. For now the focus is on Russia and protecting the external borders of the NATO area.

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