

FOCUS ON EXERCISE, A DAY AT BEJA

Real Thaw 2017 is the 9th issue of the Real Thaw series and therefore also called RT9. The success of previous Real Thaw exercises brings the former participants together once again. The Portugal-led joint and combined force exercise designed to develop international cooperation and practice of skills in air and land tactical training is contributed by six countries.

PROVEN CONCEPT LEADS TO MORE COMPLEXITY

Between March 5-17, military units of those countries gathered together in Portugal. The training is serious and focussed on several aspects in complex scenario's. Presence in conflicts in countries such as Afghanistan, the actions to free Libya and more recently the war against IS in Syria and Iraq learned involved NATO countries valuable lessons. The participants of RT9 understand those lessons because they contributed in those conflicts themselves. The one thing which make all sense in warfare is to rely on each other. Therefore you must train to understand how you cooperate. The necessity to be current in techniques and to know what your ally in warfare can do or cannot is obvious.

This knowledge is of the same importance as it is to know what your enemy can do or cannot. The Real Thaw exercises coming real close to those theatres. It reflect as much as possible the circumstances necessary to obtain the skills needed for success. The RT exercises in Portugal originally started some years ago as a close air support (CAS) exercise conducted by Portuguese and Danish air force F-16's together. Gradually more units of the Portuguese Air force were involved in the scenario's and in later issues followed by more countries to join. Following the success of Real Thaw, the missions were not anymore dedicated to CAS only and the concept was enlarged to more battlefield missions.

RT9 saw the participation of Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and the United States with troops and flying assets while Denmark took the opportunity to train JTAC's in the field. AWACS airplanes were operating from Beja itself (NATO) or France (French air force). Air Base N°11 in Beja hosts the command headquarters and most aerial and terrestrial facilities are stationed here. The majority of flying actions start from Beja. Most participating countries deployed soldiers on the ground in the training areas at the Santa Margarida training camp at Tancos in the mountains of the Sierra da Estréla, with the nearby municipal aerodrome of Seia transformed in a tactical air base. All countries were on Real Thaw before and so could improve their tactics and practice new scenario's.

OBJECTIVES WERE ACHIEVED

Lt. Col. Joao Rose designed the twelve day's program of RT9 and acted as the exercise coördinator (excon). He has a big smile and wearing a badge with '201 Falcon combat ready' proudly on his suit. Being a F-16 pilot in previous RT exercises he knows exactly which training objectives are interesting. RT9 saw several planning conferences in a six months prelude, in Lisbon and on Beja as well to incorporate all wishes of the participants. The exercise is joint with contribution of army, air force and marine units and the key factor is interoperability. Lt. Col. Rose showed convenience on his face when he says that almost every planned mission was successful.

They do as planned, everyone took off in time and in short period and everything was achieved. The high score was because of the professionalism of the military and only a bird strike and an occasionally bad weather shifted some missions. These actions comprised defensive and offensive counter air (DCA and OCA), air defence, aerial interceptions, CAS missions, convoy protection for the fighter crews and tactical transport (TAT), Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR), assault missions, medevac, personnel recovery, droppings of load and paratroopers for transport planes and some helicopters, the latter operating nearby the training grounds far from Beja. On the ground special forces and JTAC's were active to direct aircraft and lead their ground attack operations into the ground theatre without collateral damage, called air-land-integration. Several participating countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands

and the United States especially focussed on training the skills of JTAC's. In Lt. Col. Rose's words: 'people don't realize that so few people can do for so many' referring to the fact that three of them putting it all together while thousands soldiers submit in the exercise. The success of the RT series since 2009 shows that it is an ideal venue for NATO allies do develop and hone flexible capabilities for current and future challenges. The joint training environment for the tactical level In Portugal takes profit of the favourable meteorological conditions.

CAT- AND- MOUSE BY PORTUGAL AND SPANISH AIR FORCE

A typical package of aircraft starts from Beja. Six F-16's from Portugal Air Force (Monte Real), three Spanish F-18's, two Portuguese Alpha jets, four C-130's (from Belgium, the Netherlands and the United States) one Portuguese air force CN295, one Spanish Aviocar and a British Falcon DA-20 Electronic warfare aircraft take off. The AWACS is in the air for C3 and a Portuguese Navy P-3C Orion is tasked with vigilance. Specified tasks are escort missions and protection of the slow movers (transport planes) who will drop paratroopers on Santa Margarida training area.

The Spanish F-18's take escort and the Portuguese F-16's try to intercept, but this role will be reversed in the next day. Even one time the F-18 and F-16 acted in the same role together. The CN295 lands on Seia for a medevac mission. Together with medical troopers JTAC's aboard the aircraft will protect during the recovery of a 'dummy'. Although not every mission saw dropping of paratroopers, the four C-130 could together deliver almost 200 soldiers on a parachute. The Aviocar brings only a few or deliver special forces. All transport aircraft practised the dropping of cargo loads. On other moments the package was contributed by two MV22 Osprey aircraft bringing special forces directly on the ground. Alpha jets although not incorporated every day provided air to ground missions such as close air support.

TACTICAL AIR TO LAND OPERATIONS WITH DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES

High priority was given to how soldiers could benefit from training with other airplanes, working with airmen from other countries and getting to know what other kind of routines are being used by the counterparts. Portuguese paratroopers from the 1st Airborne brigade, Dutch paratroopers from the 11th Air Mobile Brigade (11 AMB), Dutch marines, Dutch commandos of the Korps Commando Troepen (KCT) and U.S. Army paratroopers from 1st Squadron, 91st Cavalry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade shuffled to other aircraft stepping out of their 'comfort zone'.

They took off in a Royal Belgian Air force 15 Wing C-130H, a Royal Netherlands Air Force 336 Squadron C-130H and two C-130J from the 37th AS USAF from Ramstein. However the same kind of aircraft, the troopers were surprised to see that the counterparts operate by using completely different techniques. Having the opportunity to see how other nations operate their aircraft presented possible solutions to improve upon their capabilities. From how the pilots fly their aircraft to how paratroopers jump out of them it is a valuable experience to see how they do the job. To reach full interoperability they even used each other's parachutes and a competition in striving to be the best started. Portuguese para's with American parachutes in a Dutch Hercules. A Portuguese jumpmaster, an American who inspects the correct way of going out and a Dutch loadmaster in the back working as one force.

New elements were involved such as the use of Air Mobile Protection Teams in the Hercules airplanes by Belgium and Portugal, useful in case of extraction operations. Droppings were conducted in both day- and night circumstances, but not only troopers. Airlift is essential to army soldiers on the ground. Once you are dropped in warzones, or even behind enemy Lines, it is essential to be supplied with resources. The 336 squadron Royal Netherlands Air Force flew sorties with high altitude droppings and using Container Delivery System (CDS)-drops, JPAD drops and also practised NVG operations. JPADS are in use with the USAF too and are precision guided pallets using GPS making precision landings possible. In this way water, food and ammunition supplies up to a 850 kilo on a pallet can be dropped at a requested point from high altitude.

SAFETY FIRST

Lt. Col. Rose explained that everyone understand the meaning of 'safety first' whether it is following the exercise rules or using your skill to prevent collateral damage, it always matters. Special attention can be given to the ground personnel who are indispensable to do the job successfully. A Spanish maintenance officer told me that three of four F-18 aircraft were fully capable with one in reserve. They flew every day twice, even when the weather was not okay and completed every sortie, most of them escort missions.

To keep up the aircraft in good condition is a challenge because they are almost 30 years old. Exchange was even reached in the maintenance for example by Belgians looking in the hangar of the Spanish air force with F-18 maintenance. Real Thaw is designed to prepare NATO military forces for international missions with training of challenging realistic scenarios in a multinational joint live-fly exercise. Every aspect considered as important deserves attention. That is what Real Thaw is all about. To deliver a good performance you must be back upped by other branches and they deserve also the best exercise possibilities. Real Thaw guarantees full attention for this.

PARTICIPANTS:

5 x F16M	Portuguese air force	Esq 201/301 Monte Real
2 x Alpha jet A	Portuguese air force	Esq 103 Beja
1 x C295M	Portuguese air force	Esq 502 Montillo
2 x P-3C cup+	Portuguese air force	Esq 601 Beja
3 x Alouette III	Portuguese air force	Esq 552 Beja (operating from Seia)
3 x F/A-18A+	Spanish Air Force	Ala-46
1 x C-212 Aviocar	Spanish Air force	721 Esc.
1 x C-130H	Belgium Air Force	15 Wing
1 x C-130H	RNLAF Air Force	336 Squadron
2 x C-130J	USAF	37 th AS
2 x MV-22 Osprey	USAF	7 th SOS
1 x NATO AWACS	NATO	
1 x AWACS	French Air Force	
1 x Falcon DA-20	Cobham	

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