

THUNDER IN BULGARIA

For quite some years the United States Air Force deploys assets in Bulgaria for joint training flights with the Bulgarian air force. This year A-10's of 74th Squadron USAF were part of the drill called "Thracian Thunder 16" and so the classic opponents of the cold war met each other in the same exercise. But there is more than that. Thracian Thunder 16 is just one issue in the Bulgarian-American preparation and drills of 2016.

BULGARIAN-U.S. COMMITMENT

Who wants to oversee the greater importance of the cooperation between the Bulgarian air force and the US forces has to look back in history. When things were just not so complicated in the post cold war period, NATO welcomed new members from Eastern Europe. Following their own choice and respected by other NATO members, this was quite a natural step in that days, however Russia was not to enthusiastic about that and felt that earlier agreements with NATO were violated or at least under tension. Bulgaria was at that time completely depending for its military on Russia. All weapon systems were under maintenance with Russian companies and supplies were only to get from them. Vice president Medvedev from Russia mentioned not lang ago that one move of his hand could cripple the Bulgarian Air Force. Bulgaria understood from the beginning that a fully integration with NATO would require a strong presence of member states in its area. It was that aspect and the interest of the U.S. to gain training area in the eastern part of Europe which lead to a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in 2006 signed by Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ivaylo Kalfin and U.S. Secretary of state Condoleezza Rice. Bulgarian-American joint military facilities were established and provides training capability to U.S. Forces and Bulgaria but remain under Bulgarian Command and under Bulgarian Flag.

MULTIPLE COOPERATION

The agreement builds on the NATO Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Bulgaria retains the right to exercise its jurisdiction when necessary and U.S. jurisdiction will then be secondary. The U.S. has also signed a similar agreement with Romania. Military units from the U.S. deployed to Bulgaria or Romania are known under Joint Task Force East (JTF-East). JTF-East is a United States European Command (USEUCOM) initiative to strengthen relationships between the U.S. and Eastern Europe allies. U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) and U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) are actively involved in establishing JTF-East. The Bulgarian facilities including Graf Ignatievo Air Base at Plovdiv and Bezmer Air base at Yambol, the Aitos Logistics center in the Burgas province and the Novo Selo training Range in the Sliven province. Since the agreement a continuous training program has been set up and several U.S. units have been here to exercise. Not only air force units have seen training but also U.S. Army units were sent to the Novo Selo Training Range which is suited with computer based training capability and training grounds for army, including tanks. It is considered to be one of Europe's premier training areas. Under the agreement no more than 2.500 military personnel will be located at the joint military facilities at one moment. Therefore most training rotations will have small numbers and will be of short period. However the Black Sea Rotational Force exercises are conducted almost continuously from Novo Selo and involves NATO participants but also countries like Azerbaidjan and Serbia joined the training grounds. The 5-by-12 mile shooting area is very sufficient for

ground units but might be also a possibility for life -firing use of rockets from aircraft in future.

ANNUAL FIGHTER DRILLS

Back to Graf Ignatievo where U.S. Air Force units exercised annually and a mix of types met the Bulgarian Air Force counterparts including F-16's ,F-15's and today the A-10 thunderbolt II. This was not without reason because the U.S. could find out the strength or weakness from their types against Russian built aircraft in hands of skilled pilots. F-15 and F-16 pilots were impressed by the agility of the Mig-29 but engagements also showed the limited endurance of the Mig-29 considered by them as a short range fighter. The skills of the Bulgarian pilots however are outstanding and push U.S. Pilots to the limit. Another points is that the deployments are lasting nearly three months and so some people say it is a way to strenghten NATO's southeast area in a reflect to counter Russian imperialistic politics. The settlement was initiated in 2006, and saw firm establishment in the last few years and nowadays it is an advantage to have that instrument in that area since Russian threat invaded the Ukrain. Many Bulgarian people are afraid that this politics could harm them too and feel secured by U.S. presence. Officially the major goals are the improvement of operational capability of Bulgaria's air forces for participation in operations under NATO command, the improvement of flight technique of the personnel, as well as the improvement of logistic activities and maintenance of guest units. Permanent U.S. presence although on rotational exercise purpose also masks more-or less the weakness of the Bulgarian air force fighter capability. The Mig-21 is to be phased out leaving twelve Mig-29 fighters as the only credible fighter part. The engines of those aircraft are reaching a life extension need. Sending the Mig-29's to Russia at this moment is awkward, besides the fact the Russian Mig-RSK company asks a very high price for the work. In an attempt to decline dependence on Russia the Bulgarian authorities found the way to Poland which is facing the same problem. Technology was obtained in Poland with help of the Ukrain to service and refurbish Mig-29's in one of the WZL factories.

A-10 VERSUS SU-25

Both aircraft are not designed for combat but play excellent roles in close air support (CAS) to ground troops. It was a nice opportunity to learn each others flying characteristics and to be tasked with the same mission. Their goal was to learn more about interoperability. More and more tasks are given to armed drones to penetrate ennemy territory for attack and this can be quite precisely. Somehow the typical CAS aircraft is wanted for the fire power, especially as tankbuster and so their potency of threat is quite symbolic, especially when conflicts on the ground are a possibility. For the U.S. Pilots the chance to exercise in Europe is a gift because the A-10 had left the European continent for a longer period before returning in exercises like this. Twelve A-10C Thunderbold II from the 23rd Fighter Group (23rd Flying Tigers Wing) based at Moody AFB joined 'Thracian Thunder 16'. Together with the crews, ground support units, staff, evaluation officers and logistic personnel were involved. The U.S. sees its participation, especially expeditionary elements as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve with the objective to strenghten the military force in Europe, especially Eastern Europe against Russian built up military by applying so called 'theater security packages' with a temporary character. Ground attacks were challenged by Bulgarian Anti Aircraft systems Cube/Sa-6 Gainful (Russian 2K12 Kub) and Wasp/Sa-8 Gecko (Russian 9K33 Osa) Anti aircraft missiles. Next to the fighter aircraft including Bulgarian Su-25 and Mig-29 also Bulgarian Mi-17, Mi-24 and AS-532AL Cougar helicopters were involved in several missions wirth a joint character with army units.

FUTURE PLANS

Apart from Russian behaviour the plan is to continue the drills and to modernize facilities. Novo Selo will see a more intensive use with more theater capabilities to exercise. The Bulgarian Air forces will cooperate with Poland concerning their Mig-29 but also other military cooperation

between the two countries will be in the scoop. Bulgaria is looking for replacement of their outphased Mig-21 and it is likely that this will be asked to the U.S. being leading in military aid to Bulgaria. It is said that most probably second hand F-16's from U.S. stock will fill in the gap. It is uncertain if Bulgaria will also seize flying with the Mig-29 but since the Poland offer can help Bulgaria out there is a fairly good chance we will see the Mig-29 around for some time along the Su-25 attack planes.

SPECIFICATIONS:

Role:	Multifunctional transport / assault unit
Crew:	2
Variations:	V-22A, CV-22B, HV-22, EV-22, MV-22B, SV-22
Length:	17,5 mtr
Height:	6,7 mtr (rotors up)
Wings:	25,6 mtr (rotors up)
Start weight:	8463 kg (depending on type)
Max. weight:	23500 kg
Engines:	2x Rolls Royce AE1107C Turboprop
Propellers:	2x 11,6 mtr
Thrust:	4586 kW kN
Cruising speed:	460 km/hr
Top speed:	550 km/hr
Range:	24 persons without refuelling 772 Km
Board weapon:	1x M-240G 7,62 mm