

EXERCISE COOPERATIVE KEY

BULGARIA KRUMOVO / PLOVDIV

Cooperative Key brings nations together

Being the largest exercise of combined NATO and Partnership for Peace (PFP) nations the Cooperative Key 2005 (CK-05) exercise was held at Plovdiv Bulgaria, between 25 August and 5 September. The exercise was hosted by Bulgaria for the third time and this has everything to do with the successful and satisfying way Bulgaria handled the organisation twice before. According to Brigadier General David E. Clary of the USAF "it is a matter of trust, and we feel that Bulgaria - being a volunteer from the beginning - did a good job before which gives us more guarantee for another good performance in hosting." Bulgaria could take that as a big compliment. For most of the participating countries Bulgaria is favourable located and the leading command structure from NATO is the Joint Force Command in Naples with the leading organisation in the field established by Turkey this time. The Allied Component Command Head Quarters Izmir (CC-AIR HQ Izmir) conducted the exercise. The main operating bases for CK-05 were Graf Ignatievo Air base located in the north and Krumovo Air base located in the south of Plovdiv.

Sharing knowledge

The main objective to achieve in Coop Key is to join NATO countries with PFP nations in a major exercise in order to learn how to handle in specific situations of warfare and evacuating manoeuvres. The exercise is profiled within NATO rules of engagement and NATO staff and logistic procedures. The scenario applied by NATO and sharing NATO Air-Space doctrine gives PFP countries a first class opportunity to learn from NATO but also from each other. One of the major aspects is to achieve interoperability. Operations are carefully planned in the so called Planning Conferences with interaction of as many countries as possible in different roles. This means that for example Hungarian special forces could be transported by a Croatian Helicopter while Slovenian PC-9's are observing the landing zone surrounding for enemy troops. Another important matter is to involve public organisations in that part of the exercises related to peace support operations like evacuations and medevac operations. In today's major conflicts in the world the UN has great involvement in most cases and therefore it is useful to simulate operations which are combined with UNHCR and the Red Cross which both organisations are present at Cooperative Key exercises. Crisis response operations (CRO) and peace support operations (PSO) are actual items today.

Bulgaria delivers the most assets

The scenario was set to reflect incidents which could threaten the NATO southern AOR (Area Of Operation) while the exercise is a LIVEX/AIREX type characterising the live and air aspects. Special Military Tasks (MTI) for Interoperability in the air and limited land operations (CRO/PSO) developing a dynamic theatre of operations with

changing roles for the participants. A variety of air operations and deployment or redeployment of troops/units being the ingredients daily. While 'opposition' aircraft from Greece (2 x F-16 and 4 x A-7) and Turkey (4 x F-16) were not seen at Graf Ignatievo or Plovdiv while operating from their home bases a mix of Bulgarian fighters started their missions from Graf Ignatievo. Three Mig-29 fighters were defending the sky above the area of operation while other aircraft (Mig-21bis and L-39ZA) were acting in the attack role, as well as Combat Air Patrol (CAP). Fighter bomber operations were conducted by 5 Su-25K "Frogfoot" attack planes. These Su-25 are examples of the very last few in Europe and watching the start and landings of this aircraft is a treat. While the Air Tasking Orders (ATO) were supplied by the Combined Air Operation Centre (CAOC) at Graf Ignatievo, this centre was closely operating with a NATO early warning AWACS aircraft. An important type of operations to gain experience are the Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) operations which are refined by those who experienced war time situations. Such operations are vital to recover pilots or other persons from behind enemy lines and are much wanted to practice by most of the participants. For example some Romanian SOCAT Puma's and Bulgarian Mi-24 Hind's or a Hind from the FYROM (Macedonia) or Polish/Hungarian armed Mi-17 Hip's could approach the landing zone fully armed and are special suited for this type of operations. The transported soldiers can be of other nations. Although you may not describe the operations as a contest it can show painfully where you are standing. Both strength or weakness can be recognized and one can learn to improve their own capacities.

Visit of NATO's Secretary General

As reported the fighters were supplied by Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey while helicopters took part in the exercise from Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, Moldova, FYROM, Turkey and the USA operating from Graf Ignatievo as did the observation aircraft from Slovenia. Transports from Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Moldova and the Ukraine were located at Krumovo Air Base. At this air base preparations were also made for the visit of NATO's Secretary General Mr. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. This visit of the Secretary General can be seen as a reward for good performances of the hosting nation and was much appreciated. After the welcoming under severe safety-measures there was a visit to a refugee camp and a military hospital with actions took place under the eyes of Mr. de Hoop Scheffer.

It is quite an experience, to see all these different nations working together bringing in victims and wounded of all kinds by several helicopters. At certain moment a mass of 'refugees' was flown in. The Romanian C-130B Hercules landed on the runway delivering refugees to the base which were brought to the refugee camp to be distributed over the tents in the camp. At the same time the air was noisy with approaching helicopters. A pair of Lithuanian and Hungarian Mi-8/17 Hips brought in refugees and wounded people followed by a pair of Moldovan and Bulgarian Mi-8/17 and a pair of Slovenian and Turkish Cougars. The medical people in the medic camp took care of the wounded very fast but still with grate care. In this way interoperability was shown to the Secretary General while dedicated people showed the best they could. Observers of all kind like the Jordanian officers or people of UNHCR watched

closely all activities. Afterwards the Secretary General complimented every single participant senior standing up in a line with a personal word !

The Future

The Cooperative Key exercises will continue in the future as established now and maybe the number of participants will increase. As the safety of southern Europe is closely related to the safety of the Mediterranean some observers were invited to watch the exercise. These countries are recognized as the Mediterranean Dialogue Countries which consist of countries feeling responsible for stability in the region. Responding on the invitation were Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Jordan as did another group of newcomers being Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia-Montenegro.

To the question if observers of today could be participants of tomorrow the answer from the Secretary General was that for a major part they should decide that themselves but showing interest in what was happening in CK-05 was considered very valuable. Cooperative Key honours it's name, because cooperation between several countries is the key to major goals which often cannot be reached by the single participant.

Wim Das en Kees Otten
