

### ITALIAN BLADE GENERATES EUROPEAN INTEROPERABILITY

*The blade exercises under the EDA developed Helicopter Exercise Programme (HEP) are evolved to a high level multinational activity where basically helicopter crews and airborne troops learn how to operate with each other in international environment.*

EDA setting outlines for standardization of working methods while the military try to achieve interoperability by mixing and exchanging crews. Of course this process also includes staff functions, planning, maintenance, joint exercise and all detailed aspects you can imagine creating an adequate warfare instrument. After a successful exercise serie in Portugal last year, this year's issue was organised in Italy where more than 30 helicopters and over 1000 military personnel from seven nations were gathered at Viterbo, the home of Italian Army Aviation for the exercise Italian Blade 2015 (IB15).

### SPECIAL FORCES IN LEADING PART

Colonel Andrea di Stasio, Commander of 3 reggimento Elicotteri per Operazioni (3 REOS) 'Aldebaran' explains that Italy plays the role of the Combined Jointed Task Force commander during IB15 and has the task to integrate European nations on the tactical level conducting the collaboration of helicopter missions with infantry units. During the exercise the scenario will see an increasing level of complexity. Since Italian Call in 2011 there has been an evolution in possibilities, especially in communications. Work at tactical level has been always very different, but now European countries know each other more and follow a natural development at tactical issues. The branches are now more developed in specific experience with each other. Strategics is an art, but so are tactics.

For all nations the formula of using Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and Tactical Techniques and Procedures (TTP) makes it a lot easier in commonly understanding what the mission is about. Colonel di Stasio looks always forward without fear as is the motto 'Durabo' or 'I will resist', a title earned by Roman legions at the Adrian Wall in North England. Italy deployed new air assets in IB 2015 introducing the new ICH-47F and NH-90. For the first time a FARP hot refueling was performed by an ICH-47F refueling another one and a NH-90.

### CORE PLANNING AND MENTOR TEAMS

Milos Pecha of the HEP core planning team (CPT) works closely with Andy Gray, EDA's helicopter programme manager. The core planning team was established in 2013 with the main aim to create challenging scenario's, especially from pilots point of view. Lessons learned are being transferred to new ones, to ensure continuity of the program and to customize the exercise to the needs of the participants. To make the exercise 'tailor made' it is important to identify for yourself what you expect as tactical growth. For this we need the latest tactical experience and so in 2013 we invited tactical instructors from other nations to do the job for us and let us coordinate them with the CPT. This turned out to be an important step. Tactical instructors were drawn from existing national courses such as QHTIC (UK), HWIC (NL) or from EDA's initiatives Helicopter Tactic Course (HTC) and Helicopter Tactic Instructor Course (HTIC).

A team of six 'mentors' from Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom under supervision of a chief instructor makes it effective and provides tactical depth to aircrews. In 2014 this concept was worked out more and more and is equally important today. CPT concerns planning, flying and debriefing phase. The instructors do not interfere with planning, nor do they correct in the flying phase but will ask questions in the debrief. It is their task to capture the learning points. These are to be shared with everybody since the target is to have a flow of aircrews with improved tactical awareness. During Hot Blade 2012 an 2013 we asked ourselves; 'don't we need some standards on the content of briefings' and recognized we needed some in common. This was established with Standard Operatin Procedures (SOP). The CPT is the holder of the documents, but the the SOP's can be changed weekly.

Since they are tested in real multinational conditions new inputs are supervised by the chief instructor of the 'mentor team'. Any request for change is going to the CPT by e-mail. The CPT has a point of contact (POC) in every participating nation so we speak only with 13 guys. They're talking it further on national basis. On the other hand we have to be diplomatic as well being mostly in contact with Ministries of Defence. CPT personnel are mostly retired soldiers, now being employed as civilian contractors, providing their long-time field experience to the EDA and its members. The SOP's don't compete or contradict with national and NATO training standards, it reflects the crucial procedures for conducting multinational missions, but those nations will benefit to implement those procedures into national training pipelines. Now 13 nations signed the agreement on EDA's Helicopter Exercise Program but EDA allows a free trial participation once as is the case with Slovenia at this moment. Most likely Slovenia will join the club in the end of 2015.

## **MANGUSTA IN FAVORITE ROLE**

During insertion of troops on the ground the Mangusta is providing a shield of safety from out of the air for paratroopers (ambush), close support from armed helicopters can be very much needed. The Italian Army puts the Mangusta in a picture for us. It has both potent firepower as high performance flying characteristics. Roughly it is half the weight of an Apache which benefits the agility. Both crewmembers can act as pilot. The gunner in the front seat has the best picture on the target using the observer targetting unit, but even more important he can guide the gun with his helmet. To achieve the best aiming position when a target is selected the gunner can take over controls. The gun is used for highly precision fire while rockets spread an area. Contrary to the pilot the cycle stick of the gunner is positioned on the right side. The later versions of the Mangusta were upgraded with better avionics and five blades. Viterbo has a full mission trainer for both cockpit positions available with software which creates 3D images of f.i. complete Afghanistan territory enabling new pilots to train in advance before going on mission there.

## **SUPERB AWARENESS WITH IPAD**

The Joint Operational Center (JOC) is tasked with the very challenging job to deconflict the air traffic in complex air movements. Many air assets are involved with COMAO flights. JOC acts as coordinator cell to match requests with flight safety. They 'fly' every day some 50 hours which in fact is a heavy contrast with the normal average of 60-80 hours a month at Viterbo. JOC consists of different nations under Italian leadership. The goal is to get representatives of other nations in the daily routine and not only as an observer presence. Both planning as supporting running flights makes it a job with two insights. Helicopters are to be guided in area ROMEO 53 which is special airspace dedicated to the Army Aviation School at Viterbo. Mission commanders change all the time to give every nation a change to lead a complex mission. There was some feedback from previous exercises in the pre-phase but Italy was mainly in charge itself to set up a good and useful management system.

They introduced the so-called Safestrike system, actually for the first time four years ago in Afghanistan, but now it comes to extensive use in the Italian military and today in Italian Blade. This battlefield management system (not in the apple-store...) is easy and powerful at the same time. The operational room can monitor every helicopter in the theatre and track traffic real time over a large distance. A look on the iPad shows 'duke 1, 2 & 3' slowly moving over the screen representing three homecoming AB-212 of the Austrian Air Force flying just above my head now. Distances in nautical miles are projected on the screen. Every helicopter also takes a small iPad on mission. This is tracked by the JOC, receiving a continuous picture about where everybody is.

In the mean time the traffic in the air can see each other in the same way. Similar iPads with JTAC's in the field present the whole picture also to them. The main option is to connect the system with the radio but also a SIM card can be operated, both cryptonic. When a Mangusta attack helicopter cooperates with a JTAC he can oversee the situation from a long distance with this instrument and together they can choose the most appropriate weapon system avoiding collateral effects. Safestrike is also very helpful with planning. By creating a wavepoint it is possible to obtain satellite information in a 3D mode seeing the surrounding at that spot. Basically it is working effectively and in future other forms of use such as working in this way with UAV's and more specific units in the field will be introduced.

## **AUSTRIA TESTS NEW COCKPIT**

Colonel Hannes Mittermaier of the Austrian Air force is present with four AB-212's but now upgraded with new digital cockpits and for the first time in that configuration present in international environment.

With three multifunctional display's and three control and display units, NVG and improved navigational unit (INS/GPS) the helicopters are expected to last another 20-25 years. New cockpit or not, to Hannes the AB-212 is the *'Harley Davidson' of the air with two rotorblades, two engines, two wheels and uncomparable sound'*. Austria is eager to learn from the others since this occasion is the only annual international exercise they attend. We already did a cockpit swap with the Slovenian Cougar, Hungarian Mi-17, Czech Mi-35 and Italian Mangusta and NH-90, flying as co-pilot with a flight instructor of them.

We have six crews and fly two daily missions with three helicopters or one daily with three and one night mission with two helicopters. Austria started in 2011 by joining EDA's Italian call 2011 and found the brigade commanders wish to have international crews in helicopter operations and started then with the cockpit swaps. Austria, although not NATO partner is part of the EU. Its foreign and defence politics underline that they have to do their part. They also recognize the availability of military helicopters in Europe is decreasing, so in the long term you can't do it alone. After joining successfully the Hot Blade series in Portugal and Italian Blade it is, due by costs, not sure if Finland 2016 is within reach, but Hungary 2017 might be a good occasion to regain participation again.

## **HUNGARIA PREPARES ITSELF**

Another good example of national interest was found with Hungary. The Mi-17 Pilot major Endre Daróczy came here to train high mountain take off and landings which is possible at a range north of Viterbo. This experience can be mentored to pilots for Afghanistan missions. We have two crews, changing day by day in morning and noonsessions and we take part in the planning for the other mission. We also have someone in the special forces and we trained soldiers from other nations in fast roping from our Mi-17. The Mi-17 took part in insertions and extractions of troops. A second objective was to practice English and common procedures in COMAO flights. Two JTAC from Hungary were put in the daily COMAO and they practice with other helicopters since they have to be in control with every type of aircraft in war situations. EDA provides SOP's for pilots, and the JTAC's use NATO standard regulations but these don't bite each other. Another challenge is to play air mission commander and coordinate in such a big planning (for example 16 helicopters involving 150 soldiers. To organize the best way it takes 4-5 big briefings and EDA mentors visiting every hour was very helpful. The atmosphere is very good and we feel comfortable under the working lines. The Air mission commander and deputy speak honest about failure, so everybody can learn. We fill in review sheets after the action with failures, problems etc. Another thing for Hungary is how to learn to organize such an exercise with 2017 in mind. That is also why we are here.

## **DUTCH/GERMAN COLLABORATION APPROACH**

Germany provides the majority a great deal of ground forces in this exercise by sending one company of combat-ready paratroopers belonging to Rapid Forces Division or 'Division Schnelle Kräfte' of the German Army (HEER), a unit permanently composed of both German and Dutch soldiers. Led by a two-star general, the division consists of three combat brigades, including German Special Forces troops (Kommando Spezialkräfte [KSK]) all of which are fully air-mobile. In June 2014, the Dutch 11th Airmobile Brigade was fully integrated into this unit as part of the binational military cooperation between Germany and the Netherlands. Troops of this division or its respective predecessors have taken part in all overseas deployments of the German Army and were largely involved in the preparation process of these operations. It is the most combat-proven unit of the German military, today. As of late, the division's infantry regiments are accompanied by a total of three helicopter regiments. Having both assets under one roof is a true innovation for the German Army, as historically infantry and aviation have always been under separate division commands.

By now, the two transports and one attack helicopter regiment equipped with NH-90, Bell UH 1D and Tiger have become an integral part of the division and its motto: "Combat-ready at any time - world-wide" Thus underlining Germany's new approach in order to meet its goal of providing a world class army fit for the challenges of our time. The division's Public Affairs Officer Major Philipp Graf summarises accordingly: *'Now has come together what belongs together'*, and he elaborates with regard to multinational and especially German-Dutch collaboration. Paratroopers all over the world have always been very much alike. It's their uniqueness that they have in common, while setting them apart from others. Whatever uniform they wear, they share a common approach and mindset. For example we've learned so much from the expertise of air assault from the incorporated Dutch '11 Luchtmobiele Brigade who take their experience from engagements in several international war zones. We need to put our skills to the test among the best. That is why exercises like Italian Blade are so important and valuable to

us. In IB 15 however, only German Army soldiers and two Dutch staff officers involved in exercise planning soldiers took part.

## **JOINT FIRE SUPPORT TEAM**

Germany deployed a Joint Fire Support Team in the field, following NATO Procedures as there are no own EDA standard procedures yet. This team in the field helps in the decision-making process to concentrate fire from all available sources from land, air and naval artillery in the most effective way. This firepower can be from another nation. It is common to connect an airborne infantry company to a fire support team. The latter operates close to first lines of troops, but not in front and such a team usually comprises a FAC or JTAC, a Non-Combat Officer (NCO) for support and a third person of different kind such as a driver, a medic or a force protector.

## **GERMAN NH-90**

Colonel Christian Rütter is the commander of the German 'Transporthubschrauber-regiment 10' which is subordinated to the Division 'Schnelle Kräfte'. He says that Italian Blade has proved to be a good opportunity to train in a multinational environment and to deploy his assets in the field. The overall operational level of each NH-90 model was not top notch, yet is not yet optimal. But many of the relatively new helicopters were already in full operational capability (FOC) configuration. Col. Rütter takes special pride in the German NH-90 based Forward Air Med Evac helicopters whose capabilities are second to none in the world. "It's like putting an ambulance in a combat zone". As this asset is admired by many, but mastered only by German and US forces, it marks the growing abilities within every new Issue of EDA's blade exercises within HEP.

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