

Operation Atlantic Resolve: Training at the Company Level Between U.S. and Polish Paratroopers

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From April to June 2014, paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade's Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment trained alongside Polish paratroopers from the 6th Polish Airborne Brigade's 2nd Company, 16th Airborne Battalion as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve, demonstrating commitment to defense of NATO members in light of Russian aggression in nearby Ukraine. In this article, CPT Teddy Borawski, commander of C/1-503rd, and Polish Army CPT Arkadiusz Skrzek, commander of 2nd Co., 16th Airborne Bn., give their perspectives on the value of the combined training.



CPT Teddy Borawski (front, saluting) and the paratroopers of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, arrive in Poland on 23 April 2014 at Swidwin Airbase to conduct combined training as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve. (Photo by Michal Fludra)

Sky Soldiers Learn From and Share Experiences with Polish Paratroopers

CPT Borawski —

On 18 April 2014, my battalion was serving as the 173rd Airborne Brigade's Army Contingency Response Force (ACRF) in Europe. As such, our battalion was on four-hour recall, ready to deploy within 18 hours of notification. In response to recent Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, we were alerted that we would quickly be deploying to Poland and the Baltic states to assure our NATO allies of America's commitment to collective defense outlined in the Washington Treaty.¹ The hours of equipment and

personal readiness preparation we completed as part of ACRF enabled us to respond with operational calm.

My company was to be first of four deployed, with each heading to a different NATO allied nation. We would be deploying to Poland to partner with the Polish 6th Airborne Brigade. Professionally, I was excited for the challenges to come; personally, I was excited to connect with my Polish heritage over the next few months.

Prior to arriving in Poland, we received briefs on our companies' expectations in partnering with our allies. We also received superb public affairs training in anticipation of media interaction. This proved beneficial as soon as my company landed in Poland. When our aircraft touched down, our brigade public affairs officer stepped aboard to brief me on the reception that the Polish Ministry of Defense had planned. My first sergeant quickly formed the company, and we moved into formation next to our Polish allies. I knew that this event would attract international attention, but I didn't expect the large mass of media, the U.S. Ambassador, and the Polish Minister of Defense to greet us and host a ceremony marking our arrival. Immediately afterwards, the swarm of media engulfed us and began asking questions.

I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to be a part of this operation, and it has left me with a number of takeaways that I will have for the rest of my Army career. During our Atlantic Resolve rotation, our two companies were able to impart new skills and a better understanding of how another airborne unit focuses and conducts training, all the while improving the interoperability between our tactical formations. In determining our training path in Poland, discussions with CPT Skrzek as well as other Polish commanders helped us craft training events to bridge ourselves from the counterinsurgency (COIN) focus of the past several years and begin exploring ways to focus on the conventional fight.

Over the next two months, my company partnered with each of the three battalions that make up the 6th Airborne Brigade. Each battalion arrived at the training area motivated and eager to work with us. This training mission proved to be the opportunity of every Infantry company commander's dreams. I was given almost complete autonomy in planning and executing our training path with a large swath of land and resources. Prior to our arrival, we had recently completed team and squad live fires, so we were ready to begin conducting training at the platoon and company levels.

One of the first training events we conducted with our Polish allies was a company bridge assault. This is a classic airborne task that has fallen out of regular training focus across our Army. We relied on our Polish counterparts for some of the tactical planning and learned their doctrinal method of seizing a bridge in enemy-held territory. This training event served to open the door in sharing each other's doctrinal approach to future problem sets specifically focused on a conventional fight. The technique they showed us resembled our own doctrinal method for a company attack with a support-by-fire element and an assaulting element.

In addition to these larger collective training events, and the fact that we were working with resources our counterparts do not normally have access to, we discussed what type of training we wanted to complete together. CPT Skrzek and I discussed my company's past training in urban breaching. One of my platoon sergeants is master breacher-qualified and ran a breacher course for the battalion only a few months prior. With these resources, we planned a combined breacher course not only with our Polish allies but also with the Canadian paratroopers that had joined us.² We conducted two courses over the span of a week, teaching all aspects of conducting a breach from building the charges to actions in and after the breach. Our counterparts were very appreciative as they now had a new capability within their formations.

The culminating event for our rotation through Poland was a combined battalion airfield seizure with our Polish and Canadian allied companies. All planning was conducted alongside our allies, from the creation of graphics to a combined rehearsal of concept drill. This event proved to each of the our companies that we were capable of coming together, planning, and executing a complex task. The Canadian and Polish commanders and I talked afterwards on the impact the event left on us in terms of our comfort operating with and next to each other on any future battlefield.

The concept and value of embracing our NATO allies was driven home for me. As we have fought beside them in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is important to continue to train and promote interoperability within the alliance. In any future fight, we will most certainly be working side by side, so the importance of training that way in the interim is paramount. Much like us, they have a lot of great ways to approach a problem. Sharing these ideas will undoubtedly result in a more lethal force.

On a personal aspect, my paratroopers interacted with their counterparts extensively — forging new relationships. In addition to the individual and collective training, we were able to conduct several wing exchanges with both the Canadians and the Polish. As paratroopers, we were united by this commonality. It may sound cliché, but it does take a certain type of Soldier to volunteer to jump from an aircraft into combat. The brotherhood that surrounds the airborne community extends past the ranks of the U.S. Army to all who wear the maroon beret. The quick and strong camaraderie forged between the three nations of paratroopers in Poland reinforced this idea.

The personal relationships I made are ones I will have forever. CPT Skrzek and I found a lot of common ground both personally and professionally. He is someone I respect immensely, and I am excited to watch him progress in his career. He personified the fact that our allies are strong, well trained, and eager to work with us. Before this I thought “interoperability” was a buzzword, but after the completion of our rotation to Operation Atlantic Resolve, my company and I wholly embrace multinational training and the resulting strengthened ties with our NATO allies.

Observations from Training with Charlie Company

CPT Skrzek —

*“If one of us becomes tired, the other keeps watch for him!
If one of us should doubt, the other smiles faithfully!
If one of us should fall, the other stands for two!
For God has attached to every warrior, His comrade!
Loyalty for Loyalty!”³*

With those words, Friedrich August von der Heydte, the commander of the 6th Fallschirmjäger Regiment during World War II, described the spirit deeply ingrained within each paratrooper’s soul. Loyalty, combat initiative, readiness to fight against an unknown menace in the most undesirable of circumstances, deep trust for teammates, and utmost respect for the sacrifice of every other paratrooper are just a few of the core values of airborne troops. It was in this airborne spirit, together with developments on the Eastern doorstep of NATO, that brought together two companies — C/1-503 and the Polish Army’s 2nd Co., 16th Abn. Bn., 6th Abn. Bde. — for shared field exercises at a training area in Drawsko-Pomorskie, Poland.

Although initially labeled as “land forces assurance exercises,” from my perspective the combined NATO drills had a different meaning.⁴ Both our companies brought extensive organizational experience of multiple combat rotations within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)/Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) framework (including a shared combat deployment in 2012 where we fought side by side in Ghazni Province in Regional Command-East). Due to a decade of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the

COIN mindset and tenets of asymmetrical warfare dominate our small-unit leadership. On one hand, this combat experience enhances our flexibility and sharpens our awareness of battlefield variables. On the other hand, it clouds the conventional dimension of airborne-typical tasks, forcing us to search deeper into the history of 20th century warfare and to take the best of both historical and modern airborne experiences to meet future battlefield requirements. This is why our combined training encompassed all the phases of airborne operations from troop leading procedures (TLPs) to actions on the objective.

Airborne operations are unique in that we deliberately put ourselves into encirclement — a position of obvious tactical disadvantage — forcing us to adopt Sun Tzu's philosophy of seizing the initiative and inhibiting the enemy's ability to adapt.⁵ We thus focused our training at the squad and platoon level, in order to develop tactical flexibility and capabilities to control chaos on a rapidly evolving battlefield. I enjoyed watching combined U.S. and Polish attacks at the platoon level that brought disorder within the ranks of the opposing force. While observing combined platoon attacks, platoon leaders made changes to the original plan due to changes in enemy force arrayal.

As a commander, it pleased me to see adaptive leaders doing what they could to seize the initiative. This adaptability is critical to transforming our weaknesses into our strengths. Overall, Polish squad- and platoon-level leaders benefited from Charlie Company's methodical approach to TLPs. Apart from polishing our English-language skills, we practiced and synthesized new methods of small-unit information preparation of the battlefield, rehearsals, and mission command, and to some degree adapted them to our own tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).

Apart from tactics, we focused on the development of close combat live-fire skills and proficiency in placing supporting mortar fire, exploiting the increased availability of resources we received for the mission. This helped build paratroopers' situational awareness and mirrored the limitations that airborne elements need to be prepared to face.

Together, CPT Borawski and I conducted an advanced rifle marksmanship course. In doing so we were able to see that both of our companies train the same skills in combat shooting and have similar views on the subject. Here, I experienced one of the major lessons learned from our combined training — tactical-level attitude towards risk management. In running a small arms range, our American allies demonstrated the value of utilizing NCOs in a range safety role. This experience allowed me to completely reevaluate Polish Army organizational patterns of thinking about safety protocols as I benefitted from viewing another approach to conducting the same training.

In my opinion as a commander and facilitator, safety regulations should not be counterproductive to the training goals, but at the same time they must not be neglected — after all, we are in the business of killing. We need to make sure that our soldiers will be able to get into the fight safely. It was not so easy to take the organizational mentality of two different armies and bring them to one common ground. By keeping my mind open, I learned a new approach from Charlie Company leadership, which in some regards appeared to be more effective compared to our domestic regulations.

The breacher course was a significant step forward in this matter as well as a great training opportunity. Unfortunately, this type of training is very rare and limited in scope within our training regimen, making this event even more valuable for my company. Although there were some things we would still do differently on the basis of our own combat experiences, we learned methods in conducting breaching tasks.

We couldn't have conducted combined training without an airborne operation together. Jumping out of U.S. CH-47 helicopters and offering U.S. paratroopers the chance to jump out of Polish C-295 CASA airplanes created strong bonds between the two countries. Jumping the T-11 parachute was a new and different experience than with the Polish AD-95 system. As both systems have benefits and drawbacks

depending on the particular drop environment and technical specifications, jumping together was a good opportunity to build a point of reference. Although equipment and aircrafts varied, the procedures we used were virtually the same — the same structure of pre-jump training, behavior inside aircraft, and hand signals were a visible sign of our interoperability for airborne operations.

As I stated earlier, airborne forces build on the deep trust between each other — regardless of the country of origin. Our companies' training was first and foremost a way of providing me and my men with the opportunity to enhance this trust and establish a common operating framework — a factor of utmost importance if we are to work closely together again in a combat environment. Given that modern combat operations are waged mostly within an alliance framework, our combined exercises with Charlie Company gave me an immense feeling of comfort if we are called on to fight next to each other again in the future.

Notes

¹ North Atlantic Treaty, retrieved October 2014.

² Canadian paratroopers from the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry also deployed to Poland for training in May as part of NATO reassurance measures.

³ Volker Griesser, *Lions of Carentan* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2011).

⁴ The 173rd's deployment to Poland and the Baltic states was initially dubbed as "land force assurance exercises" before eventually being named Operation Atlantic Resolve in late June.

⁵ N. Diane Smith and Nancy LeBrun, *Sun-Tzu: Art of War*, (Bethesda, MD: Center for the Book. Cronkite Ward Company & Discovery Communications, Inc., 1994).

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