

From Cameroon to the Baltic States: Chosen Company's Path to Atlantic Resolve

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The task seemed daunting. With only seven days' notice, Chosen Company — an airborne Infantry company of approximately 100 paratroopers with their assigned weapon systems, tactical vehicles, and other equipment — would board U.S. Air Force C-17 aircraft bound for Estonia. The Soldiers would display a united front with their NATO allies in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine.

To even get into the country, there were a number of bureaucratic obstacles to overcome — diplomatic clearances, customs inspections, health readiness exams, and movement requests. Transportation contracts, which would set up expansive logistical lines, needed to be in place. Vehicles had to be serviced, equipment packaged, and sustainment agreements signed.

While monumental, it was not unprecedented. Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, is an element of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, a unit that has operated in 10 countries over this past year. The brigade serves as the Army Contingency Response Force (ACRF) in Europe, capable of deploying paratroopers anywhere in the U.S., European, Africa, or Central Command's areas of responsibility within 18 hours.

From the outside, it seems an overwhelming scope of responsibility. From inside, the pace is fast and often frantic. However, the brigade has opened new horizons in terms of combined operations. Chosen Company spearheaded these efforts, beginning with its successive 2014 deployments to Africa and involvement with NATO allies in the Baltic states.



Soldiers with the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), wait for the C-130 aircraft prior to conducting airborne operations with Cameroon Army paratroopers during Central Accord 2014 in Cameroon, Africa, on 15 March 2014. (Photo by SPC Coty Kuhn)

Cameroon

In May 2013, less than a year prior to Chosen's arrival in Estonia, the 173rd Airborne returned from its fourth combat deployment to Afghanistan to its home stations in Italy and Germany. The "Sky Soldiers," as they were named by Nationalist Chinese Soldiers on Taiwan prior to Vietnam, prepared to assume their new mission combining contingency response with a host of multinational exercises.

The brigade expanded its training footprint across Europe and committed to a number of combined training operations with allied militaries across Europe. In March 2014, Chosen Company participated in Exercise Central Accord 14 in Cameroon, the brigade's first exercise with U.S. Army Africa. This also marked the first time a conventional airborne unit conducted a large-scale training exercise in Africa since 2002 when the brigade conducted a training jump in Tunisia.

On the outset, there were pressing questions. How would the troops move around the country? Who would interpret? However, simple solutions were found. Participants in the operation were transported in Cameroonian military transport trucks and contracted Toyota Hiluxes. French speakers at the battalion were identified and manifested. Interpreters from the Utah Army National Guard's 300th Military Intelligence Brigade (Linguist) also helped bridge the language gap.

In February, the brigade sent a pre-deployment party to Douala, Cameroon's largest city, about a month prior to the airborne operations. Junior officers were given the responsibility of preparing for the arrival of Chosen Company and a robust brigade and battalion headquarters element. They were also given the freedom to make important operational decisions.

While Chosen Company and its higher headquarters were preparing official passports and getting the proper vaccinations, the pre-deployment party was racing across Cameroon to prepare for their comrades' arrival. With their Cameroonian partners, they surveyed drop zones, reconnoitered airfields, received food and medical supplies, and established a footprint for the combined training.

By the time Chosen Company paratroopers arrived for training, the conditions were set. They fell in on established living areas and were ready to train alongside African soldiers from Cameroon, Burundi, Chad, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, and Sao Tome e Principe.

To ensure the training was mutually beneficial, exercise planners derived a simple concept involving lane training. The lanes focused on basic unit-level tasks ranging from patrolling and medical response to civil-military operations. The U.S. Soldiers would execute the lane first and then receive feedback from American observers. The African participants followed the paratroopers, applying those lessons learned. By the end of the lane, each party pulled value from the training.

Central Accord culminated with an airborne operation. Cameroonian farmers, vendors, and children gathered around the drop zone and watched as Cameroonian jumpmasters controlled the exiting American and African paratroopers. It was more than a victory for interoperability; it foreshadowed future assignments and showcased the brigade's ability to adapt.

At the same time, Chosen Company and its supporting elements displayed an ability to deploy quickly and effectively.

A Persistent Presence in Estonia

As Central Accord was wrapping up, 2nd Battalion was planning live-fire events in Pocek, Slovenia, alongside allies from the Slovenian armed forces. Chosen Company returned from Cameroon and immediately began preparing for the live fire. On 19 April, 24 hours before their scheduled move to Pocek, there was a change of mission.

The Ukraine crisis was coming to a head. The Russian tactics that won Crimea and fomented unrest in eastern Ukraine caused concern in NATO's eastern-most countries.

"What does this mean for NATO in the future? How do we change our deployment," asked Air Force GEN Philip Breedlove, the NATO Supreme Allied Commander-Europe and commander of U.S. European Command, at a NATO conference in March.¹ "How do we change our readiness? How do we change our force structure such that we can be ready in the future?"

American policy makers were looking to reassure their allies. U.S. global commitment in the region was expanding, but the U.S. military's footprint had decreased in Europe. The drawdown began nearly 20 years ago; however, it had accelerated over the last five. The Army had more than 200,000 Soldiers stationed in Europe when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989; today there are roughly 30,000. The 173rd, Europe's contingency response force, would be the ones to respond.

The initial plans for a U.S. response were drafted. The 173rd would deploy company-sized contingents to link up with allies in their respective host nations — Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. On the ground, their presence would reassure their allies of America's commitment to NATO, and the combined training would strengthen NATO's military capabilities.

Chosen Company landed in Estonia on 28 April. As they marched off the ramp of the Air Force C-130 aircraft, they were greeted by the elite Estonian Scouts Battalion, the U.S. Ambassador, and the president of Estonia. Elsewhere, throughout the Baltic states and Poland, other paratroopers from the brigade lined up with their respective NATO allies. In total, approximately 600 U.S. Soldiers were posted across the NATO front — relatively few compared to the thousands of Russian soldiers just across the border. Still, the impact was felt.

On the tarmac of the Amari Airfield, Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves laid out the value and scope of the combined operation.

"The Trans-Atlantic link is not something Estonians take for granted. Rather we see it as a vital element of security in an unsecured world," Ilves said. "American and Estonian Soldiers exercising here together, raises the visibility of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance — both for people living here and for those living elsewhere. It makes NATO less of an abstraction and reinforces the commitment we all share in the Alliance."²

The ceremony marked the beginning of what would be a two-month training deployment for the Chosen paratroopers. It was unlike any other before it.

Chosen Company was in a bureaucratic vacuum. The typical constraints — forecasted land requests, range limitations, suffocating movement requirements — were gone. The leadership's ability to train their Soldiers was dependant mostly on the relationship with the Estonian Scouts Battalion. Platoon leaders and the command focused their efforts on partnership with the Estonians and community outreach. The efforts paid dividends.

The first major training event was Exercise Spring Storm, a combined training event with roughly 6,000 troops from Estonia, Denmark, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Chosen Company, along with both a Latvian and British company and a Lithuanian recon element, was organized under the Estonian Scouts Battalion. The early efforts to partner would play out during the massive training event that matched Estonia's conscripted forces against the Scouts Battalion and these attachments.

Chosen Company, an airborne Infantry company with few organic vehicles, would move along with the mounted Scouts Battalion during the exercise. To keep pace with the fast-moving Estonians in their

armored personnel carriers (APCs), Chosen Company's drivers were assigned Mercedes-Benz Unimogs, all-terrain trucks first fielded in 1949. Because their radios weren't compatible, Estonian radio operators embedded in Chosen Company's formation.

The training area spanned miles of residential farmland. Estonian residents watched from their porches or tractors as battles between the conscripts and the combined opposing force played out. F-16s, controlled by joint terminal attack controllers attached to the Estonian conscripts, dropped notional payloads on Chosen Company's eclectic convoy of camouflaged humvees, Land Rovers, and Mercedes trucks. It was the first time the Americans operated in an environment without assumed air superiority.

To confront the notional threat, Chosen Company employed tactics from the Scouts Battalion — experts in camouflaging their vehicles from the air. After observing the Estonian convoys, the paratroopers drew parachute cord around the vehicles and cut foliage from the area's thick northern pines to create a layered effect that blended them into the wood line.

Both parties drew from the other. The fast, armored Estonian APCs could clear vast areas of countryside. However, advances slowed when the opposing conscripts hunkered down in the forests. This terrain was ideally suited for a light infantry element. After initially sustaining losses from heavy weapons in a contested wood line, the Scouts Battalion headquarters brought forward Chosen Company to clear the area.

CPT Dwayne Steppe, Chosen Company's commander, maneuvered the company through the entrenched enemy.

"We were strict with the force ratio," he later said, referring to the doctrinal rule of employing three Soldiers for every enemy Soldier while conducting offensive operations. "This was a forcing function to task organize our assault force with the APCs. When we maneuvered with this combined element, enemy casualties began to mount."

By the time the event had ended, Chosen Company Soldiers had been in the back of Estonian APCs, tied in with British defensive lines, talked Scouts Battalion mortar fire onto targets, and bounded with Latvian heavy weapons vehicles — all tasks the paratroopers had never trained nor encountered.

After Spring Storm, Chosen Company continued training side by side with the Estonians. Over a period of two months, they planned and executed numerous live-fire maneuver events — events that would have taken months to plan, resource, and execute at home station or other Army training installations.

Atlantic Resolve

In July, Chosen Company returned to Italy with the understanding their next deployment would be to Latvia. They would have two months to recover and prepare for the next rotation. The 173rd would maintain control over the Baltic deployments until October. To capture the inter-operability and grand scope of the operation, all U.S. military efforts in support of NATO operations were renamed Atlantic Resolve.

"Our ability to respond quickly to reassure our European allies and partners was enabled by our forward-stationed forces and the force structure we have in place now," said GEN Breedlove during a news conference at the Pentagon on 30 June. "We may need to add additional rotational forces to cover the sustained, persistent presence that we are now envisioning."³

In mid-August, Chosen paratroopers once again walked off the ramp of the aircraft and into a new operating environment. On the ground, Chosen Company's leadership went to work. The commander tied-in with the Latvian headquarters. Administrative teams worked with the Latvian logistics officers to

bring in food, water, fuel, and ammo. Platoon leaders, with Latvian range control, walked the training grounds, exploring abandoned Soviet-era structures and densely wooded areas for training.

While Chosen Company established their training plan, the brigade prepared for one of its largest training exercises to date — NATO Exercise Steadfast Javelin II. Approximately 6,000 personnel from 17 countries were assigned objectives in Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Germany. Hundreds of aircraft and tactical and armored vehicles were brought in for the massive undertaking, which would last a little more than a week.

On 5 September, Chosen Company attacked an abandoned logistics hub in Latvia. The decrepit buildings were filled with role-players from the Latvian armed forces and a radar mock-up built outside. The company attacked with blank ammunition and destroyed the mock-up. The success of the attack set the conditions for the decisive operation, a multinational airfield seizure nearly 60 kilometers away.

Later that night, a combined force of approximately 700 paratroopers from the brigade as well as Bulgarian, Canadian, and Italian paratroopers parachuted onto Lielvarde Airfield in Latvia. On the ground, 100 Latvians and U.S. opposing force Soldiers were emplaced to defend the site. As the mock battle raged, Stryker combat vehicles and humvees were air-landed from C-17s to rapidly build up combat power at the airfield.

The airfield seizure and its supporting missions in Poland and the Baltics were only one part of the operation. At the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, three additional battalions from the brigade were maneuvering beside their NATO allies under the command of the Lithuanian Iron Wolf Mechanized Brigade. The Iron Wolf Brigade had hosted companies at its facilities in Lithuania since April as part of Atlantic Resolve.

Steadfast Javelin II demonstrated the capabilities of combined forces to conduct such a complex operation. On the various objectives across five countries, combined elements moved in unison to meet a singular end state. This was the case at nearly every echelon during Steadfast Javelin II.

“I’ve been a NATO Soldier for 34 years” said U.S. Army LTG Benjamin Hodges, commander of NATO Land Command, during the exercise. “And I’ve never seen the alliance more unified than it looks right now.”⁴

Sustained Readiness

Atlantic Resolve continues. On 13 October 2014, the 173rd Airborne Brigade transferred the mission to the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. Where airborne operations took center stage during the combined military exercises, Bradley Fighting Vehicles and M1 Abrams tanks now maneuver beside America’s allies.

The last of the 173rd redeployed in October. However, given its abilities to rapidly deploy and adapt to new environments, the brigade will likely continue to be at the forefront of the Army’s approach on the ever-turbulent international playing field.

“We must sustain readiness and prepare to conduct both expeditionary and enduring campaigns in a wide range of environments,” said U.S. Army Chief of Staff GEN Raymond T. Odierno at a European conference in September. “In short, we must be prepared to win in an increasingly complex world.”⁵

Notes

¹ Philip Breedlove, “NATO’s Top Commander Reflects on Crimea,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/brussels/2014/03/23/natos-top-commander-reflects-on-crimea/>.

² Toomas Hendrik Ilves, speech on 28 April 2014, <http://president.ee/en/official-duties/speeches/10107-2014-04-28-14-09-00/index.html>.

³ Claudette Roulo, "Breedlove: Russian Actions Bring Europe to Decisive Point," American Forces Press Service, 30 June 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=122576>.

⁴ Michael Darnell, "Steadfast Javelin Shifts Training From Afghanistan to Russia Threat," *Stars and Stripes*, 8 September 2014, <http://www.stripes.com/news/steadfast-javelin-shifts-training-from-afghanistan-to-russia-threat-1.302043>.

⁵ Cathy Vandermaarel, "Senior U.S., European Land Forces Meet to Discuss Security, interoperability," retrieved from U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs, http://www.eur.army.mil/news/2014/20140918_CEA.htm.

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Author's Note: Chosen Company is currently deployed to Ukraine in support of the Operation Fearless Guardian. Sky Soldiers deployed to Ukraine in April 2015. In June, Chosen Company assumed the mission, which focuses on the training of Ukrainian National Guard.