

# Masque of the gold death

Gwyn Winfield attended Exercise Golden Mask in preparation for NRF 10

The battered Ford pulled up outside the camp gates and coughed to a halt. The disgorge individual, looking only marginally cleaner than the car, immediately started hectoring the guards: "NERF go home! We don't want you here!" Clearly disappointed with the non-compliance from the German guards, a few phone calls brought another 30 supporters, armed with banners and catchy slogans. After attempts to reason with the Lunelanders failed, the German Company deployed their anti-protestor assets: two Leopard Panzer tanks, about 30 troops and water cannon. Strangely, the protestors decided that discretion was the better part of valour and departed, taking their catchy slogans with them.

"A bit of overkill?" I asked Oberfähnrich (Officer Candidate First Class) Dirk Schikyr. "Ah, this is nothing. Yesterday the Lunelanders used a PzH 2000 [howitzer] as a road block!" This was the last day of the three-day unit level training period of Exercise Golden Mask, held at Camp Hörsten in the Nato Training area in Bergen, that had brought together the various elements that will make up Nato Response Force (NRF) 10. Ostensibly, the exercise was based on a particularly vicious conflict between Nordland and Luneland; the independence of Luneland from Nordland had brought ethnic cleansing and the creation of the Lunen Liberation Movement, a radical group that would stop at nothing to achieve their aims.

Unsurprisingly, in terms of the exercise, these aims were to be achieved with a range of chemical, biological and radiological weapons (fortunately they had failed to buy a nuclear weapon) released in a number of creative ways.

"When you look at the tasks you see that we had dirty bombs, contaminated roads and vehicles, biological warfare, conventional chemical mortar attacks, a chemical accident, a radiation source, an agricultural helicopter crash – where we needed to integrate with civilian forces," said Professor Leopold Weil, the Director General of Nuclear Safety at the BfS Federal Office for Radiation Protection (and also a Reservist). "There was not a focus on one type of event; variations on all three [CBR] were exercised. On 18 October, for example, there was a naval vessel in Kiel – the German vessel Mosel – where they sent in a boarding party and found a terror lab which was taken over and a sampling team sent in where they detected CBRN agents."

## Descent into the Maelstrom

Indeed, when you look at one day of the exercise, you find a dirty bomb requiring medical assistance, recce, decon and sampling, identification radiological agents (Sira); another radiological device at the command post, with weather monitoring, EOD, recce and military police assets; a terrorist biological lab, needing lab and Sibcra assets and a chemical explosion in a factory, needing chemical detection and mass decontamination. The exercise was dominated by a lot of small-scale, though complicated, challenges rather than some other Nato exercises that have been based on major events. "This exercise has departed from the large scenarios – the sort of 9/11-scale incidents that you sometimes see – and the type of NBC aspects that are likely in those," said Lieutenant



Golden Mask trained a range of scenarios ©Bundeswehr

Colonel Ole Petersen, Deputy Commander of the Multinational CBRN Defence Battalion. "The main purpose of the exercise is the integration of the multinational elements; the bringing together of the various national elements into the Multinational Battalion (MNB). The usual philosophy is that you have a simple structure within the Company, so that it focuses on recon, etc. We have mixed that, so each Company has a recon or decon capability, for example. They train and work together so when they go into the mission and go on operation in their area of responsibility they should have all the areas in one Coy; they will have to do all the jobs rather than just one – they need to multi-task. We have deviated from the Nato concept so, if they are in an area, they are responsible for everything in that area rather than just one task."

The exercise was a complex one taking into account many of the aspects of 'Fourth Generation Conflict' – so things like extortion and kidnapping were part of the exercise space but not actually trained. While there were conventional releases – such as the

chemical mortar – much of the focus was on Release Other Than Attack (Rota). Dr Weil explained: "If you look at the real threats and dangers that such a Battalion would face in the world today it is much more Rota than conventional. The dirty bomb, for example, is one of the real risks that our units might face, since you don't need fissile material or expertise, etc. While from a military point of view they can't do real damage, from the civilian side they can make a huge economic mess – needing to decon cities etc."

While the bulk of the NRF is German, mainly coming from the 7th NBC Defence Battalion based at Hörter, there were a total of 11 nations participating – Germany, Slovenia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Britain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands and Hungary – ranging from Company level, such as the UK and Slovenia, down to individual units. While some of the tasks might have been routine for some of the nations – those which are used to NRF rotations – for others the change from conventional to non-conventional Rota would pose more of a challenge. Lt. Colonel Petersen

suggested this wasn't as big a task as it might initially seem. "We tried to tailor the tasks to the capabilities of the participating nations so they are adapted to the challenges that might crop up," he said. "This was based on experience gained in rotations four and seven, and as observers in Peaceful Dragon. This was the third time we have trained together with the other partner nations, so we know them quite well, meaning there are few surprises. There have been no negative surprises – they have all been positive, and any negative issues have been known about and worked on during the exercise to improve them."

## Pitfalls and pendulums

While the nationalities might be used to working together, this is not necessarily true of the units themselves. While some of the senior officers and NCOs might know their national counterparts, this is not always true of the junior officers and men. This is always an important part of any NRF force – the ability for all ranks to be able to take orders from, and support, other foreign elements. Lieutenant Colonel Petersen

The fabled Golden Mask awaited the bold ©CBRN World

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admitted this had been an issue. "International co-operation at the lower level, especially at the battalion level, has been a challenge, but this has been practised and mutual understanding has improved; it has been a successful exercise for that," he said. "It is not a case of showing someone a red card – it is focusing on co-operation and helping it work."

"There has been a basic improvement. Quite a few platoon leaders go from one exercise to another, though the privates might have changed. The Slovenians were at the last exercise at platoon level, and this time they have brought a company, so there has been a lot of progression there. There are also regular bilateral meetings where we get together and we gain mutual progress as we learn from each other."

One of the elements that help with the preparation for the Rota releases is the Joint Assessment Team (JAT), and Lt. Col. Petersen agreed they would have a role in operations, but that it had been limited on the exercise. "The JAT is a very high-value asset, and hasn't featured as strongly as it should. The composition of the nations here has brought together many specialists which, while they may be the only individual in their country with such specialisms, we can combine with other specialists from many other nations and involve them in small teams. This really allows them to show off. It is unusual for them all to be together at any one time."

"Traditionally they would be used in a consultative function before the mission," he continued. "They would advise the Joint Force Commander what capabilities he might need. It is the interaction between the JAT and the Commander that will analyse the capabilities and draw conclusions and posture from that."

While there had been some live agent work, it had all been at the facility in Munster, and as such was on a far lower scale than it had been for other exercises such as Peaceful Dragon in the Czech Republic. Lt. Colonel Petersen admitted that there were advantages to be had from large live agent inclusion, but that at the end of the day it came

down to money. "It is a question of cost, as always, and the cost-benefit equation: if it is not essential then we have to use the means we have to reach the same goal," he said. "The approach has been to take the basic things that are available and use those to test some of the larger capabilities."

The same could be said about civilian involvement, which was also at a lower level and involved piggybacking on coincidental German civilian exercises. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as while being able to work with civilian powers is important, it is secondary to working well with other members of the NRF. Most of the military aid to a civil authority (Maca) scenarios they did used 100 per cent military assets. "Out of the range of tasks today there was a fire in a village set by conflicting parties," said Dr Weil. "This is a regional conflict with guerrilla movements, and they started some fires and injured people, not all of them openly – some in buildings. The response came from the 3rd Coy of the NRF, which acted professionally and in a short time put out the fire, and then

a Bulgarian decon truck which came and made an after-fire watch, in case the fire restarted, while the medical squad took care of the casualties."

As one might expect from the Germans, the exercise was very well run and seemed, from the outside at least, to contain very few major snags or interoperability problems. As the Deputy Commander noted, this is partly because, as the rotations of the NRF lead come round, many of the nations will be involved with the same nations each time (or may have been a junior component to another nation's lead). It is also because the evolving reality of the NRF is that lead nation has to provide the majority of the force – four of the seven companies (not including the lab company) were largely German – meaning interoperability almost by default. With no major sporting or political events planned during the NRF10 rotation, it should be a relatively straightforward operational period, but if nothing else the work done during Golden Mask will continue to strengthen and widen the interoperability between participating NRF nations.



The Ops Centre controlled the movements of the wicked Lunelanders ©CBRNe World

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