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U.S., ROMANIAN SOLDIERS SHARE EXPERIENCE, SKILLS WHILE LIVING AND TRAINING TOGETHER HERE

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MIHAIL KOGALNICEANU AIRBASE, Romania -- Romanian and American forces are training elbow to elbow here in a three-month "proof of principle" exercise for Joint Task Force-East.



BILL ROCHE

Cpl. Mihai Dumitru of the Romanian army's 341st Infantry Battalion shows U.S. Soldiers from 1st Armored Division's A Battery, 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery how to disassemble the AK-74 rifle during training at the Babadag (Romania) Training Area Aug. 27.

The task force, composed of U.S. Army Europe and Romanian Soldiers, as well as U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force personnel, was established to build an infrastructure and training partnership that strengthens alliances and theater security cooperation between America and NATO allies Romania and Bulgaria.

At the heart of the JTF-E mission is USAREUR's 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery, a 1st Armored Division Multiple Launch Rocket System unit based in Idar-Oberstein, Germany, that has fully integrated with troops of the Romanian 341st Infantry Battalion to serve as the first combined maneuver unit to test the JTF-E principle.

The first step in preparing to train here required the field artillery Soldiers of the 1-94th to learn basic infantry skills in Germany while taking on the equipment needed to reorganize the battalion as an infantry motorized maneuver battalion, explained Lt. Col. Thomas Matsel, the battalion commander.

The battalion handed off its training mission in Germany in May, Matsel said, and then conducted the MLRS live-fire certification that would have come due during its time in Romania. But as soon as the unit's rocket launchers were stowed away the unit began reorganizing in earnest, taking on "stay-behind equipment" from deployed USAREUR units and digging in to individual, squad and team basic infantry training and classes on the basics of Romania's culture and military forces.

While infantry and artillery skills may be poles apart, Matsel said the transformation of the 1-94th is not unusual in today's Army, and the expertise his Soldiers learn here will serve them well if they deploy.

"There are lots of artillery units doing this in Iraq right now," he said. "It's not uncommon."

In early August the battalion loaded its gear onto three trains in Baumholder, Germany for the three-day move to Romania. Its Soldiers followed a week later.

Upon arrival the Americans were quickly integrated with troops from a company of the 341st. One of the Romanian unit's three platoons was assigned to each of the 1-94th's three company-sized batteries, Matsel explained, to allow a squad of Romanian Soldiers to be formed in each of the batteries' three platoons. In

addition, a 341st officer was chosen to serve as platoon leader for the combined third platoon of each battery.

During the proof of principle, the Soldiers of the mixed batteries are sharing their unique knowledge and skills as they train together on core infantry skills such as route reconnaissance; convoy security; cordon-and-search procedures; vehicle and personnel searches; checkpoint operations, and weapons skills.



LT COL THOMAS MATSEL
Romanian workers and Soldiers from 1st Armored Division's 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery unload battalion equipment from rail cars at Mihail Kogalniceanu Airbase, Romania Aug. 19, 2007. Three rail cars made the three-day trip from the unit's home base in Germany to Romania to facilitate the 1-9th's participation in the U.S.-Romanian-Bulgarian "proof of principle" exercise for the U.S. Army Europe-led Joint Task Force-East.

“We’re trying to teach them how we do business, and we will learn some things from them,” the colonel said.

The batteries work in a rotation that allows one group to conduct preparatory training here as another convoys to the Babadag Training Area some 40 miles to the north and conducts hands-on training and marksmanship. The remaining battery provides support services such as range control and opposing forces for that training. Each time a battery rotates to the training area the training level advances, until the exercise culminates in a live-fire exercise.



PFC MICHAEL SYNER

Soldiers from 1st Armored Division's 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery teach Romanian troops of the 341st Infantry Battalion the basics of firing the M-16 rifle on the range at the Babadag (Romania) Training Area Aug. 29.

Matsel said the integration of the unit with its Romanian colleagues has gone well, with a few “curve balls” but no major issues. Many of the Romanian Soldiers speak English, he added, so even the anticipated language barrier has not hindered the battalion’s mission.

During the first stage of the exercise, the 1-94th’s Battery A convoyed with their new mix of Humvees and Romanian armored personnel carriers to Babadag. As the group settled in and began its weapons and equipment familiarization training, it was quickly apparent that Soldiers from both nations seemed excited about working together and interested in learning from one another.

"We teach each other the basics of our regular weapons systems," said Sgt. Gregory G. Pettigrew, a squad leader for the battery’s 2nd platoon. "I've been demonstrating the M-16 to the Romanians, while the Romanians have been showing us how to use the AK-74."

"The Romanians' eyes really lit up when we started pulling out our gear and began comparing it," said Pfc. Anthony Jurzeka, a Battery A MLRS crewmember.

“It’s fun. We learn a lot. We see their weapons, they see our weapons. We never did that before,” said Cpl. Mihai Dumitru of the 341st as she showed a group of his U.S. colleagues how to disassemble an AK-74.

But the training isn’t all just show and tell. The Soldiers of 1-94th also had an opportunity to qualify on the AK-74 and their Romanian counterparts got a chance to

qualify with the M-16. Pettigrew said the more he learned about the Romanians' training, the more he realized the two armies' marksmanship training is pretty similar.

"There is barely a difference in the way they fire and the way we do," he said. "I don't think there will be a big challenge getting the Soldiers qualified on different systems."

Some things aren't so similar. Sgt. 1st Class Aurel Matei, a Romanian Soldier serving as an interpreter for the exercise, noted some differences in Romanian and American training styles.

"We tend to show a little more caution when training. For example, when searching buildings, we tend to go a little slower. But that is probably an experience thing," he said.

While weapons and field training may be the most visible part of the task force mission, the collaboration of American and Romanian Soldiers spreads across the exercise, from administrative offices to maintenance facilities. In between missions there is time to mingle, talk, share living quarters and meals and organized sports, and just get comfortable with each other. An air of partnership in an evolving joint venture is everywhere.

Staff Sgt. Juan Montalvo is the motor sergeant for the 1-94th's Headquarters and Headquarters Service Battery. Montalvo's Soldiers are working alongside several Romanian Soldiers in his platoon.

"It has been interesting, and they seemed to enjoy working on the vehicles," Montalvo said.

Matsel said the exercise also gives the battalion a single focus and a welcome change from the variety of non-standard missions -- primarily pre-deployment training of other USAREUR units -- that has absorbed its efforts in recent months. It has been also been a real morale-booster for its Soldiers, he added.

The colonel said that the battalion has been busy with such a variety of tasks that its Soldiers are motivated by the focus they have here, and excited to be taking part in a groundbreaking mission.

"They knew that what they were doing (here) was important," Matsel said.

In about 10 days the artillery troops get to expand their military repertoire further still, when a segment of the battalion moves to the Novo Selo Training Area in Bulgaria to form similar unit partnerships with Bulgarian forces and conduct a comparable but compressed version of the training now taking place here.

As the exercise progresses, perhaps one of the bottom line lessons its participants are learning is that while proving the JTF-E concept the participating services are also proving how much they have in common.

"The Romanians are just like us – Soldiers," Jurzeka said. "Same mentality. Same problems and stories. Just a different country and language."



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