

U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

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U.S. ARMY, EUROPE AIR DEFENSE SOLDIERS FEEL THE STING OF REALISTIC TRAINING

By Staff Sgt. John Queen

69th Air Defense Artillery Brigade Public Affairs Office

SCHWEINFURT, Germany -- During a typical field training exercise, air defense Soldiers in a Patriot missile unit would conduct a series of maneuvers called march-order and emplacement with their launching stations and support equipment.

Once in place and set up, they switch into the "air battle" mode and train to protect units from variety of airborne threats.

U.S. Army Europe's 69th Air Defense Artillery broadened their training by adding several scenarios to a recent exercise, giving the Patriot crews an opportunity to train using different tactics.



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Soldiers of U.S. Army Europe's Alpha Battery, 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery move from a disabled convoy during a situational training exercise in Schweinfurt, Germany.

"The purpose of this exercise was to assess our Soldiers and incorporate situational training into an air and missile defense exercise," said Maj. Philip Labasi, the operations officer for the brigade.

"This time we wanted to really challenge individuals and leaders," he said.

Labasi explained that although the brigade's Patriot crews are extremely knowledgeable in what it takes to deploy and operate the large air and missile defense system, many are unfamiliar with other aspects of the battlefield.

"Our Soldiers are really good at what they do, and they understand their (missile defense) tasks," he said. "They know their core competencies -- there's no doubt about that."

Labasi said the idea of this training was to catch the Soldiers off guard and see how they react.

"We wanted to put our air defense Soldiers outside of their comfort zone and introduce them to intense and stressful situations -- situations that are more realistic and prevalent to what's going on 'downrange' in Afghanistan and Iraq," the major said.

Like most field training exercises this one was split into several phases, most of which the air defenders have been through countless times before.

One phase, however -- a situational training lane -- added a whole new dimension that was sometimes painfully educational.

As each battery from the brigade passed through the 5-kilometer long lane, its Soldiers were subjected to four separate battle situations: sniper fire; civilians on the battlefield; breaching an obstacle, and reacting to an improvised explosive device. To complicate each of these tasks even more, both friendly and opposing forces fired paintball-type ammunition at each other.

"It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would," said Pfc. Keith Davis, a light wheeled mechanic attached to Bravo Battery, 5th Battalion, 7th ADA.

Davis was part of his convoy's breach team and was hit while trying to take cover during an ambush scenario. He admitted that the adrenalin rush from the attack probably numbed most of the pain.



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Sgt. James Cleveland of U.S. Army Europe's Charlie Battery, 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery uses a hand crank to move a Patriot air defense system antenna into place before raising it to its operational position during a recent training exercise in Schweinfurt, Germany.

“This was hard training, and that’s good,” he said. “If it was easy you wouldn’t learn anything.”

Davis also said he and the others in his convoy learned a number of lessons during their trip through the lane.

“We needed to watch the civilians on the battlefield,” he said. “We had a plan and we were moving so quickly; we were too focused on security and we didn’t pay attention to the civilians.”

Mixed among the friendly civilians were insurgents, who, when the opportunity arose, began shooting at Davis and the other 5-7th Soldiers with sporadic rifle fire.

The ammunition used during these mini-battles is called Ultimate Training Munitions.

The rounds, fired from each Soldier’s issued M16A2 rifle using a specially modified bolt carrier, look similar to standard NATO 5.56mm ammunition with their copper-colored metal jackets replaced with a white, blunt plastic cap filled with blue or red paint. When fired the UTM makes a metallic “tick” sound that is much less intimidating than the distinctive “pop” of a regular bullet. A hit by one of these rounds, however, can be painful, much like a bee sting or a hard snap from a rubber band. It leaves no doubt in a Soldier’s mind that he’s been hit.

Dealing with ammunition like this, safety stays at the forefront of the training.

In addition to their ballistic vest and helmet, during the lane each Soldier was required to wear a padded face mask, ballistic goggles and groin protector. Gloves were not mandatory, but they were highly encouraged.

Many of the Soldiers that went through the situational training lane said it was tough and exhausting, but they also relished the training.

“I thought this was good training,” said Pvt. Nacee Cowell, a welder assigned to 5-7th’s Service Battery. “This was like the real stuff. I haven’t had training like this since basic (training).”

Cowell, who was covered in mud and dirt from crawling through bushes and puddles of water, said she was expecting a lot more attacks.

“I really wanted to do more,” she said. “During one attack, as soon as I got out of the vehicle and hit the ground, I was 'killed' by a simulated grenade.”

As the exercise progressed, each battery passed along the lessons it learned to the next unit. After each engagement the Soldiers and their evaluators gathered to discuss the events of the battle. Soldiers raised issues as well; the major complaint was that the safety goggles fogged up.

“Everybody was having problems with them,” said Spc. Travis Hirschman, a chemical operations specialist assigned to Service Battery. “It was damned if you do and damned if you don’t. They were a necessity, but the fogging is one of those things you can’t help.”

Despite the foggy goggles, mud and the sometimes painful reminder that someone is shooting at you, the Soldiers agreed that the training was some the best training they have received in a long time.

The 69th, which serves as the Army’s only forward-deployed Patriot missile unit, is scheduled to relocate to Fort Hood, Texas during summer 2008.



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