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U.S. ARMY EUROPE SOLDIERS TO TRAIN WITH RUSSIAN TROOPS DURING 'TORGAU' EXERCISE

By Spc. Joseph McAtee

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office

HEIDELBERG, Germany -- April 25, 1945, was a historic day for the Soldiers of V Corps' 273rd Infantry Regiment, 69th Infantry Division. As they moved deep into eastern Germany, the American troops apprehensively chased remnants of the German army. Approaching the Elbe River in the small town of Torgau, the Soldiers saw something unexpected – men in Soviet uniforms. As they came together to shake hands, the union of the U.S. and Soviet armies marked the symbolic defeat of Germany's Third Reich and the victory of the Allied forces.



U.S. ARMY PHOTO

V Corps troops of the 69th Infantry Division linked up with Russian forces by the Elbe River at Torgau, Germany on April 25, 1945. American Lt. William Robertson and Russian Lt. Alexander Sylvashko posed for this victory photograph to commemorate the event.

Since 2004, the two armies have commemorated that historic day in a joint exercise that rekindles the sentiment of cooperation and camaraderie both armies felt more than 60 years ago. The exercise – named Torgau for the place where the two allies met – is a manifestation of both armies' desire to work together.

Lt. Col. Kevin M. Volk, exercise division branch chief for U.S. Army Europe's operations directorate, said the exercise proves the two countries are committed to fostering cooperation, collaboration and improved interoperability.

“They're able to learn how we think, and likewise we're able to learn how they think and how they do business,” he said. “It's a great chance to strengthen our relationship with the Russians.”

Maj. Leslie L. Balfaqih, an exercise planner in the USAREUR operations directorate, said fluid interoperability can lead to two goals: positive military and political relations and an increased probability of success if the two countries join to combat a common foe.

“In the event we operate with them, we’re on the same page,” Balfaqih said.

This year’s exercise will be the third since the Torgau “series” began in 2004. Last year’s exercise was cancelled.

Training will take place at Germany’s Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels training areas. More than 180 Russian Soldiers are expected to take part this year, training with members of the V Corps staff in Grafenwoehr for a command post exercise and with troops from the 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment for combined exercises in Hohenfels, Balfaqih said.

She explained that the command post exercise in Grafenwoehr will join the two forces’ staff officers for training on simulated scenarios focusing on four areas: stability, support, transition and reconstruction. At the same time, U.S. and Russian Soldiers will join together at Hohenfels for situational exercises including simulated urban operations and improvised explosive device training, before capping the two-week event with a live-fire exercise.



U.S. ARMY PHOTO

U.S. Army Europe and Russian Soldiers practice infantry skills during the Torgau exercise in May 2005. This year’s iteration of the two-week combined exercise will take place the first half of this month at the Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels (Germany) Training Areas.

Although the U.S.-Russian military relationship is not yet as cultivated as those between the U.S. and its NATO partners, Volk said, USAREUR officials hope events such as Torgau will help the alliance between the two forces mature.

Planning an international exercise the magnitude of Torgau has not been easy, Volk explained: the two armies have conducted planning conferences to work out the thousands of “moving pieces” the exercise entails and to try to predict any problems that might crop up. During the conferences planners from both sides work together to

organize and coordinate training, logistics, command and control procedures, and even spoken and written translations that ensure any information that comes from one side can be understood by the other.

In the case of an exercise such as Torgau, planning and execution are further complicated by political sensitivities, Volk said.

For example, the most recent conference took place near the end of September in Mulino, Russia. Volk said the meeting was a historic milestone in its own right, as it marked the first time members of a foreign defense force had been allowed into Mulino. But when these planning forums close, he added, the two militaries communicate any further needs through their respective embassies. The complexity of this inter-embassy communication pushes both sides to resolve the bulk of their issues at the planning conferences, he added.

Volk said the focus for Torgau each year is on learning valuable lessons that will yield dividends not only for future combined exercises, but for both militaries as a whole.

“The work that we get done together as two military forces sows the seeds for future cooperation between our two countries,” he said.



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