Soldiers Online

Victory Str

Story and Photos by SSG John Valceanu

Another milestone of post-Cold War European history was reached as the year 2000 drew to a close.

"VICTORY Strike," the first large-scale joint and combined exercise between Poland and the United States, was conducted in October at the Drawsko Pomorskie training area in northwest Poland. The exercise involved aviation, air-defense and field-artillery soldiers from both nations. It was also the first advanced aviation-gunnery exercise to take place on Polish soil.

During the exercise, AH-64 Apache helicopters from V Corps' 11th Aviation Regiment flew day and night live-fire missions, while UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters from the 12th Avn. Regt. flew in support.

The aviators faced an opposing force composed of American and Polish soldiers. Americans included Patriot air defenders from the corps' 69th Air Defense Artillery Brigade,

Rockets fly from an MLRS launcher of the 27th Field Artillery Regiment during a live-fire exercise on Poland's Drawsko Pomorskie training area.

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A formation of V Corps AH-64 Apache attack helicopters heads out on another mission. Apaches flew both day and night live-fires during the exercise.

working with Avenger and Stinger teams from the 1st Infantry Division's 4th Battalion, 3rd ADA Bde. Polish units contributed their own air defense capabilities, including SA-8 anti-aircraft systems which, until a decade ago, were dedicated specifically to shooting down aircraft from the United States and its allies.

Providing suppressive fire for the aviation forces were soldiers from the 1st Bn., 27th Field Arty. Regt., firing Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, and Polish artillerymen firing BM-21 rockets.

COL Thomas Kruegler, V Corps chief of operations, said the exercise had several objectives.

"After Operation Allied Force in Kosovo, we looked at the corps' deep-attack capabilities and asked what we needed to do to improve readiness, especially our deep-attack aviation capabilities in conjunction with artillery," Kruegler explained.

"To do that, we needed more day and night live-fire training. We also had to incorporate low-level aviation training over long distances," he said. "It's hard to do all that in Europe's central region, so we began to look at other areas and concluded that Drawsko Pomorskie was the right area."

Planners then set out to design an exercise that incorporated a realistic force-on-force and live-fire engagement scenario against a formidable air-defense threat, he explained.

"Our intent was to have the best attack aviation in the Army as a result of this exercise, and we wanted to take the lessons we learned and share them with the rest of the Army," Kruegler said.

Training in Poland not only provided V Corps with more flexibility in terms of training terrain, but also allowed for the "added bonus" of training side-by-side with Polish soldiers.

"Getting to train under tough, realistic conditions with a new NATO partner is a very good thing," Kruegler said. "This is a great opportunity for us to work with them and engage them as a new ally."

Another benefit soldiers derived from Victory Strike, Kruegler said, was the experience of deploying in the same ways they would for combat.

"Transformation strategy is not just about brigades; it also impacts divisions and corps units. Corps-level units throughout the Army must be able to deploy

SPC Peter Cobbe of the 57th ADA mans an engagement control station of a Patriot air defense missile system. As part of the opposing force, Cobbe and other air defenders had the unique opportunity to "engage" U.S. aircraft.

During the exercise U.S. soldiers had the chance to familiarize themselves with a range of Polish equipment, including this PZL W-3 helicopter.

rapidly to achieve force projection," he said.

MAJ Tom Core, a V Corps project officer, said the training benefits derived from the deployment were just as valuable as those obtained from the live-fires.

"A lot of the training during this exercise didn't have anything to do with carrying an M-16 or firing a missile from an Apache," Core said. "Logisticians, lawyers, public affairs people, transportation specialists — they all had important roles and

The Polish 8th ADA Regt. joined U.S. air defenders as part of the opposing force. Here, Polish troops maneuver an SA-8 launcher into position.

PFC Edgardo Ramos of the 440th Signal Battalion erects an antenna at the Drawsko Pomorskie airfield. Communications were a critical part of the exercise's success.

A Polish soldier guards American ammunition supplies. Teamwork between the two nations resulted in a safe and very successful exercise.

learned a lot."

SSG Richard Flores, a wheeled-vehicle mechanic from Headquarters and HQs. Detachment, 71st Corps Support Bn., in Bamberg, Germany, described the benefit derived by his soldiers who supported the exercise.

"This lets us know how well prepared we are and what to expect during a real-world deployment," he said. "We've been doing one to three hours a day of unscheduled services. That's a lot of surprises we have to deal with in terms of vehicles developing problems. During training in Grafenwöhr, we normally service only people from our battalion. Here, we're working with people and on equipment from lots of other corps units."

For CPT James Slomka, a UH-60 Black Hawk pilot and commander of Company A, 3rd Bn., 158th Avn. Regt., excitement came out of being able to implement new doctrine that came about following the Army's experiences with Task Force Hawk in Albania. He also said that flying over the Polish terrain added a dimension to the training that is missing in Germany.

"Most of our pilots know Germany's terrain pretty well, and it's easier to navigate there," he explained. "But here it is flat, very flat. There aren't as many terrain features to help the pilots," Slomka said.

The flat terrain also made the aircraft more vulnerable to air defense weapons. Stinger and Avenger teams hid in the woodlines and covered the valleys, where attack helicopters traditionally like to conceal themselves during low-level flights. Meanwhile, U.S. Avenger teams and their Polish

Native Speakers

BORN and raised near Krakow, Poland, Konrad Murak immigrated with his parents to America in 1984, when he was 15. A lifelong interest in the military eventually led him to enlist in the U.S. Army as a combat engineer, but he currently works as a mortuary affairs specialist assigned to Headquarters and HQs. Company, 21st Theater Support Command, in Lahnstuhl, Germany. He has been in the Army for eight years and is a staff sergeant.

Exercise Victory Strike brought Murak back to Poland, but not to work in either of his military specialties. Instead, Murak and a few other U.S. soldiers who speak Polish as a native language helped Polish and American exercise participants to understand each other.

"It's a great feeling to speak Polish again," Murak said. "The people are really happy that we're here. They're happy to be part of NATO. And they're very curious about our way of life. They've all seen lots of war movies, but we're the first real American soldiers most of them have seen."

SSG Boguslaw Ksylak's story is similar to Murak's. He came to the United States in 1990, at the age of 25. Ksylak settled in Los Angeles and enlisted in the National Guard as a personnel administration specialist. Eventually he changed his specialty to make better use of his language skills and became a Russian linguist and interrogator. Like Murak, Ksylak has been on active duty for eight years. He is assigned to the 1st Infantry Division's 101st Military Intelligence Bn. in Würzburg, Germany.

"I'm excited to participate in something like this exercise," Ksylak said. "To do something challenging and real. The Polish soldiers and local population welcomed us, and I'm glad I could be of help. I've really felt needed."

Ksylak said that when he left Poland he had no idea how rapidly things would change after his country freed from the yoke of communism.

"I came back in an American uniform, and I behave as an American, and I am an American now, but it gives me a good feeling to be here and see the country picking itself up," Ksylak said. "When I left, I was pretty pessimistic."

Born in Southern Poland, CPT Stanislaw Kolasa arrived in America and settled in Chicago at the age of 13, in 1980. He eventually earned an ROTC scholarship to Loyola University, and was commissioned in the Army Transportation Corps. He is currently assigned to the 39th Trans. Bn. in Kaiserslautern, Germany.

"I've got to translate and do a job as a transportation officer during this exercise," Kolasa said. "I've had some opportunities to talk to Polish officers, and we've developed good, professional relationships. They are a pleasure to work with." — *SSG John Valceanu*

counterparts operating SA-8 anti-aircraft systems worked together to track, target and try to defeat the Apaches.

But it was the artillerymen who had the most opportunity to interact with their Polish counterparts.

"During a weapon exchange we got to fire each other weapons, and that was a blast. The Polish soldiers were very friendly, and were intrigued by us," said PFC Michael Garrison of Battery B, 1st Bn., 27th FA, based in Babenhausen, Germany. "They always wanted to trade patches or soft caps. They loved to have souvenirs from us. It was a really big deal for them."

Toward the end of the exercise, Polish and American field artillerymen met in a restaurant near the training area for a social event that took the form of a banquet. As with may such events, it started off rather formally. Commanders presented each other with plaques and certificates of appreciation. Speeches were made. Soldiers applauded and cheered.

U.S. and Polish artillerymen shared a meal and friendship during a banquet held near the end of the Victory Strike exercise.

But, when the speeches were over and soldiers gathered together around the banquet table, they began to relax. Americans and Poles found ways to communicate with each other. Through bits and pieces of each other's language. Through gestures. Through drawings on paper napkins. And a funny thing happened. As the lights in the restaurant dimmed, it became difficult to tell who was American and who was Polish. It simply looked like the room was filled with a group of friends. □

V Corps aviators conduct a mission briefing before departing from Drawsko Pomorskie's airfield on one of the many live-fire missions conducted during Victory Strike. The exercise gave units from all levels the chance to work in unison.