

Notes from the Field: Practices for Enhancing Your Rotational Deployment

by LTC Timothy W. Decker and MAJ Alexander Boroff

Rotational deployments are not new experiences for our Army. Nevertheless, each one is different enough that it warrants its own special considerations. This article describes several best practices for units to consider as they embark upon a rotational deployment to the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While our own experiences were derived from a unique mission set in NATO Battle Group - Poland, they are applicable across most of the Baltic states and many other European countries. Specifically, given our experiences to date, we believe there are four topics that incoming units should consider in their training philosophies to best position themselves while forward: interoperability with allies, tailoring training events, land and range usage, and cultural exchanges.



Figure 1. U.S. Army tank crews with Alpha “Animal” Company and Bravo “Barbarian” Company, 2nd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, supporting 3rd Infantry Division, fire rounds from M1A2 Abrams tanks at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland Sept. 12. (U.S. Army photo by Alex Soliday)

Interoperability with allies

It goes without saying, working with allies is hard. But, as former Defense Secretary James Mattis reminds us, “A nation with allies thrives. Nations without them die.” Indeed, nurturing relationships with our allies is one of the primary reasons we are deployed to Eastern Europe.

Early in our rotation, our outgoing unit scheduled a “NATO Road Show” to introduce the incoming commander, the command sergeant major, and the operations officer to their adjacent units and higher headquarters. This proved especially invaluable for two reasons. First, it allowed face-to-face introductions between commanders and primary staff officers. These connections and relationships proved important in the coming months as we navigated our new environment. Sometimes a phone call to the right person is the lever required to make training happen! Second, it allowed us to see, in very real terms, how our tactical actions had strategic effects. Receiving commanders’ intents in-person enabled us to better scope our training objectives to nest with NATO strategy in the Baltic states.

As we planned and executed this tactical training, we quickly learned of both the importance and limitations of interoperability. Interoperability is vital to ensuring unity of purpose and command. In an ideal world, NATO allies should be able to assemble in multi-national formations and communicate securely using organic equipment. Our experience showed this is a very high bar to clear. In practice, we succeeded through deliberate placement of liaison officers (LNOs). For day-to-day activities, our LNO to our higher headquarters, the Polish 15th Mechanized Infantry Brigade, simplified coordination and made communication much more responsive than relying on NATO-Secret email systems or our tactical satellite link. In tactical exercises with our foreign sub-units, we found the technical interoperability solutions to be less effective than placing radio telephone operators with an organic radio at command-and-control nodes to “swivel chair” information from U.S. to foreign systems, and back. Due to these personnel and equipment requirements, as well as technical limitations, the lowest level at which true interoperability occurred for us was the battalion.

Tailoring training events

Upon arrival to our Forward Operating Site (FOS) in Poland, we established a “campaign plan” covering the duration of our rotation, which looked very similar to a standard armored brigade combat team training strategy. We discovered Polish training, in practice, is more geared towards collective live fire events rather than the situational training exercises more familiar to U.S. Soldiers. As such, their training land is designed almost exclusively for live fire use. While this may be somewhat out of the ordinary for a “normal” training progression, it made collective live fire training very easy to conduct. Leaning into this opportunity made us uncomfortable due to the usual restrictive nature of live fire training and our normalized experiences of conducting live fire exercises only after completing situational training exercises. On the other hand, live fire exercises were significantly easier to execute when incorporating allies, given that our training simulation devices (e.g. MILES) were rarely one-for-one matches with those of other nation’s armies. Tailoring the unit’s training events to the specific environment and constraints will yield better results than attempting to force a U.S. training strategy into an incompatible foreign training architecture.



Figure 2. Polish tank fires during the Iron Spear exercise in Adazi, Latvia, Nov. 13, 2023. U.S. Army Soldiers with Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 69th Armored Regiment “Panther Battalion”, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team,

3rd Infantry Division supporting NATO's enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group Poland, joined multinational troops from Canada, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom representing NATO enhanced Forward Presence Battle Groups from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland for the exercise. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. H. Howey)

Land, range usage

Range scheduling and usage at our FOS was not something that looked familiar to a U.S. audience. While there is a very rigid system akin to the Range Facility Management Support System (RFMSS), it takes more interaction to function properly and more detailed planning than we were used to. While a unit can simply reserve land in RFMSS and then cancel it as necessary, Polish ranges require regular meetings and confirmations to ensure their ranges are used properly and supported in accordance with Polish range regulations. The Training Support Activity Europe is a great enabler which can help units who are new to theater use foreign ranges effectively. With time and practice, these systems became familiar and did not limit our training opportunities.

Perhaps the most notable difference between U.S. and Polish range scheduling is the difference in planning horizons. Many Polish units finalize their scheduled training land within two weeks of execution after roughly "locking" the land three months prior. While we adhered to a self-imposed six-week horizon, even as the NATO Battle Group, we were second in priority to Polish Army units when it came to land allocation. We found tremendous value in coordinating cordially with these units, which enabled us to achieve our training objectives through co-use agreements or incorporation of multi-national elements.

Training, cultural exchanges

As alluded to earlier, situational training exercises at the company level and below face technical interoperability limitations that constrained our junior leaders' direct interaction with our allies. Nevertheless, our junior leaders had numerous chances to train individually with our allies. We had direct liaison authority with two Polish sister mechanized infantry battalions, and the Polish Territorial Defense Forces were always willing to execute training with us; we interacted with both regularly. While this most often amounted to simple individual weapons training, we incorporated these forces into our platoon collective events as well. Rarely do U.S. units have the opportunity to face real BMP-1s as an opposing force, or to receive in-depth briefings and hands-on training with these systems while executing live fire training.



Figure 3. A U.S. Army Soldier with 2nd Battalion, 69th Armored Regiment “Panther Battalion,” 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, walks beside a Romanian Soldier down a snowy path during the land navigation portion of the Croatian “Winter Challenge” at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, Jan. 5, 2024. The Croatian “Winter Challenge” is a 15-kilometer competition consisting of seven events: land navigation, small arms firing, wall climbing, obstacle course while wearing a gas mask, rope crossing, low-crawl and obstacle climbing, and a hand grenade toss. U.S., Polish, Romanian, and Croatian troops representing NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group Poland participated. (U.S. Army photo by Dan Yarnall)

On the civilian side, towns near Polish military installations are somewhat akin to those in our own country. We received regular invitations from town mayors, local churches, and other representatives to participate in community events. In our case, we had so many communities interested in mutual support that we assigned each company, battery, and troop commander responsibility for at least one town. This provided opportunities for our junior leaders to engage with local key leaders, and for our Soldiers to conduct cultural exchanges. The Polish National Foundation, Morale Welfare and Recreation, and our own Building Strong and Resilient Teams events were a further boon to our ability to expose Soldiers to Polish culture. These experiences allowed Soldiers to interact with foreign cultures in unique ways and were a tremendous source of stress relief and restoration in between training events.



Figure 4. U.S. Army Soldiers with Golf “Gambler” Forward Support Company, 2nd Battalion, 69th Armored Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, with residents during a holiday festival in Mikolajki, Poland, Dec. 3, 2023. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Cesar Salazar Jr.)

Conclusion

The U.S. Army has been conducting rotational deployments for generations, and there are many lessons learned during the years that remain applicable for today’s officers and leaders. Nevertheless, each deployment is unique in time and location, and each will have its own variables to consider when planning. Our own rotational deployment to NATO’s eastern flank provided us with useful insight into contemporary U.S. European Command missions.

Considering working with allies and the challenges of interoperability will allow better integration early. Tailoring training events to the environment at hand while remaining flexible with country-specific systems and customs will also allow units to maximize the training opportunities available to them, some of which might not be feasible at home station. Finally, leaders and Soldiers should engage with their local communities to embrace cultural exchanges as a means of professional development and personal fulfillment. Deliberately addressing these topics early in the rotation will place units in a position of relative advantage and create meaningful memories for Soldiers and leaders throughout the formation.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

FOS – forward operating site

LNO – liaison officer

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

RFMSS – Range Facility Management Support System



ADAZI, LATVIA – A Polish tank moves into position to join NATO Allies from Canada, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom and U.S. Army Soldiers with Charlie and Bravo Companies, 2nd Battalion, 69th Armored Regiment “Panther Battalion,” 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division supporting NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence Battle Groups from Estonia, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, for exercise Iron Spear in Adazi, Latvia, Nov. 13, 2023. The 3rd Infantry Division’s mission in Europe is to engage in multinational training and exercises across the continent, working alongside NATO allies and regional security partners to provide combat-credible forces to V Corps, America’s forward deployed corps in Europe. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. H Howey)