

The site of Operation Market Garden, the largest airborne operation of all time. The objective of this WWII operation was to use airborne forces to secure bridges over the main rivers in Nazi-occupied Netherlands in order to allow a rapid advance for allied armored units into northern Germany.



## **NCO TRAINING**

# European Style

**NCOs from across Europe gather in the Netherlands to share ideas and build durable international partnerships**

**STORY & PHOTOS BY MASTER SGT. ANTONY M.C. JOSEPH**



A Dutch NCO instructs a soldier on how to correctly hold his firearm during a pistol firing demonstration at one of the ranges in the Netherlands.

When noncommissioned officers gather together at one place, it usually benefits a nation's military as a whole and all service members in general. When these NCOs are the senior most representatives of armies from around Europe and North America, the benefits such a conference brings to the respective armies take on greater importance.

Hosted by the Royal Netherlands Army, the fourth annual Conference of European Armies for Noncommissioned Officers was held in Garderen, Netherlands, May 9-12. The three-day event included various training activities such as firing Dutch rifles at pop-up ranges and in virtual simulators, multiple training presentations, group discussions, various field trips and a visit to the site of Operation Market Garden, which saw the largest airborne operation of World War II.

The conference is part of a program by U.S. Army Europe to build and foster partnerships among military forces and nations in Europe. The goal is to improve

military and security capabilities and build interoperability between the United States and partner nations.

Though the theme of this year's conference was "Train the Trainer," it achieved much more — from building familiarity and camaraderie among Soldiers to understanding policies and how to better execute the Global War on Terrorism. "Communication is the best part and an essential part of coalition forces," said Warrant Officer Class 2 Tony Gordon, the British Armed Forces' deputy liaison to USAREUR. "If we are going to work together, we need to talk to and understand each other. Here, we have a perfect platform for the exchange of ideas."

Different hues and colors were scattered among the conference attendees' uniforms, different languages were being spoken during breaks and many cultural differences were readily apparent. But, the honor and pride of being a Soldier were always evident in the manner attendees spoke and the respect they showed to each other. Most nations represented at the

conference have fought alongside American troops as part of the coalition since the start of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom; in fact, European nations make up the majority of the countries involved in Operation New Dawn in Iraq.

"The interaction we are having here will be very useful to me and my army in the future," said Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Fabricius, command sergeant major of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic. "[This conference] is a great opportunity to strengthen personal relationships and take the interaction to a higher level. The better the relationships, the better the cooperation. It is like building up a wolf pack — live together, hunt together and stay in all environments together. This way, a lot of trust is built up, and we can always rely on and call on each other for advice and to make suggestions."

"This world is small; nobody is [going to be successful] standing alone," said Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Blackwood, the interim USAREUR command sergeant major. "As it has been shown around the



Top: Senior NCOs from many of the European armies get a chance to shoot at a rifle range after watching a demonstration by soldiers from the Royal Netherlands Army.

Bottom: NCOs from the Royal Netherlands Army brief NCOCEA conference attendees before a demonstration by Dutch soldiers at the pistol range.

world, and especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, it takes a coalition of forces [to prosecute a war], and in the future that is how it is going to be done — together.”

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston said, “Combined and joint operations that bring forces from two or more nations and two or more services together is a fixture of modern warfare.” Thus, the understanding of the mission by all parties is the way to future success.

He said that some of the sergeants major from the different countries represented at the conference are graduates of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, who are renewing friendships they made while in school, and are now getting a chance to discuss how they have put what they learned into practice. They also conferred with NCOs from other nations on how to build a strong NCO corps.

The conference participants are from nations in various stages of building a professional NCO corps within their armies. Some nations only have conscripts as enlisted soldiers, while other nations, such as Slovakia, have embraced the idea of a professional NCO corps. However, some countries’ officer corps still have not completely embraced the concept of the NCO as a vital, professional part of their



nations’ armed forces.

“One of my jobs as sergeant major is to show the officers that we are here to help and not to threaten their positions,” Fabricius said.

“We have to show where we are in the hierarchy and how NCOs can enhance the capabilities of the military. It takes a lot of patience — patience and tolerance with both junior soldiers and officers to make a professional army.”

Command Sgt. Maj. of the Royal Netherlands Army T.J.A. Witlox echoed Fabricius’ comments and added that “NCOs are the guys who make things work. To make a comparison, there’s a big body — there’s a brain, there’s a backbone and the legs. The legs are the soldiers. We have to prepare them; we have to train them and equip them; we have to take care of them (so they can carry us), and as NCOs, it is our job to do that. The NCOs



Top: Command Sgt. Maj. of the Royal Netherlands Army T.J.A. Witlox addresses the assembled senior enlisted soldiers of the respective European and U.S. Armies during the fourth annual Conference of European Armies for Noncommissioned Officers.

Bottom: Soldiers prepare to participate in the training provided by the Royal Netherlands Army at the simulator center.



make things happen. So, the NCO is the cog, the backbone that makes it all work, and I think it is the same in all professional armies.”

The “Train the Trainer” aspect of the conference was very beneficial to many of those assembled. Attendees were able to see another aspect of training which could help the fledgling NCO corps in their nations’ militaries.

According to Command Sgt. Maj. János Zsótér, senior enlisted leader of the Hungarian Ground Forces, “Training is a hot subject in the army. It is important to establish academies in places like Afghanistan, but it is also important that we allow

the Afghan soldiers to train their own. We can’t ask Hungarian cooks to teach the Afghan soldiers to cook Hungarian food,” he said. “It would be better if we teach the Afghan [soldiers] how to cook; they in turn can then teach others to cook, and so on. That is why the Train the Trainer program is important. You allow the trained to go on and teach others, and it will not be left up to one or two individuals to train the whole army.”

Through all the group discussions, training events and site visits, one talking point reverberated: bettering the NCO corps — how to improve the image of an NCO in the armies where they have little

or no say. This conference allowed many of the senior leaders a chance to bounce ideas off each other regarding that aspect.

“NCOs have to gain the respect of the soldiers and the superiors,” said Sgt. Maj. Fabrice Brousse, the senior enlisted leader for the French Ministry of Defense. “This can only be done by performing at a higher moral level and always being aware that we have an ethical responsibility in the development of not only our own soldiers, but also the soldiers of other countries such as Afghanistan, whom we mentor. How we as NCOs handle ourselves on a daily basis will affect how others follow.”

With each iteration, the conference’s themes and talking points have evolved, adapting to the attendees’ needs and incorporating lessons learned in-theater.

“I have been coming to the conference since the beginning,” Fabricius said. “The first conference was more of an orientation on how to work in a joint environment and how NCOs work through difficult times such as combat. Now we deal with more involved subjects such as active and passive learning, counter insurgency etc. All the conferences have been invaluable to me, and I look forward, each time, to take what I have learned and educate my force.”

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