

## U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

contact: paoci@eur.army.mil  
phone: 49-6221-57-5815 / DSN 370-5815  
fax: 49-6221-57-6376 / DSN 370-6376



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### Guard, Reserve Soldiers train at Joint Multinational Readiness Center for Kosovo mission

By **Dave Melancon**

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office

**HOHENFELS, Germany** -- Just three months after returning to the United States from a 15-month tour in Iraq with the 29th Infantry Division, Spc. Sean Evans of the California Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 185th Armor jumped at the opportunity to deploy again.

However, instead of shipping out for another tour in Iraq, the infantryman joined about 1,300 other members of the California Guard's 40th Infantry Division for a 10-month peacekeeping mission to Kosovo as part as KFOR-11, the 11th iteration of the Kosovo Force mission. The task force also includes Guard members from Alaska's 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation; Maryland's C Company, 1st Battalion, 169th Air Ambulance; West Virginia's 753rd Explosive Ordnance Disposal Company; and the U.S. Army Reserve's 176th Medical Group from Garden Grove, Calif.



SGT DARRIEL J. SWATTS

A Soldier from the California Army National Guard's 40th Infantry Division observes activity in a simulated village in Kosovo during a multinational training exercise at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany. The unit recently took part in a mission rehearsal exercise and departed Germany to assume responsibility for the 11th iteration of the Kosovo Force in support of Operation Joint Guardian.

Task Force Falcon prepared for their deployment during a mission rehearsal exercise at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center here from Jan. 22 to Feb. 15, and deployed to Kosovo shortly afterward. The task force is scheduled to assume responsibility for the KFOR mission from the Missouri Army National Guard in mid-March.

The Los Alamitos, California-based 40th led the Kosovo mission in 2005. U.S. forces have conducted the KFOR rotations, called Operation Joint Guardian, since 1999.

While the basic mission in Iraq and Kosovo is the same – to help people build their country in a safe and secure environment -- the attitude and stance Soldiers carry with them to Kosovo requires them to remain alert, but they will not always be on edge.

“I am going from straight-legged (infantry) -- humping and driving in a Humvee turret in Iraq -- to a completely different mind-set in a non-violent area,” Evans said. “You’re not expecting mortar attacks, so you do not have to keep your IBA (interceptor body armor) on all the time. You’ll keep your weapon slung on your back. You’re out there in the towns with the civilians and talking with them.”

Evans said his unit’s change in perspective began during the task force’s training at Camp Atterbury, Ind., in December. Simulated street patrols were less confrontational and more relaxed, he said. Instead of looking for improvised explosive devices and snipers, he and his fellow Soldiers learned to observe a community’s day-to-day routine and to prepare reports on those observations for their leaders.

The Soldiers also trained for detainee operations, learning personal defense -- including unarmed self-defense, using non-lethal weapons -- and familiarized themselves with the Albanian and Serbian languages.

Instead of training for raids and convoy support operations, they studied and practiced crowd control, using shields, batons and other non-lethal weapons, Evans said.

“We were constantly on the alert. We were running raids and other missions during the entire day,” Evans said of his unit’s training for Iraq. “We were not in the attack mind-set [training for Kosovo].”

Evans’ change in outlook is typical for many KFOR-bound Soldiers who train at JMRC, and his attitude reflects the Task Force Falcon mission, said Col. Philip Butch, the task force’s deputy commander for civil and military operations.

“Some of these Soldiers have been in an insurgency environment where people are trying to kill them,” the colonel said. “Soldiers are not getting killed in Kosovo, nor are they getting blown up. So the mind-set we give these Soldiers right off the bat is to treat everyone with dignity and respect.”

One reflection of that new reality is that Butch’s 16-Soldier CMO team will work with the international community organizations such as the Office of Security and Cooperation Europe, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, local civic and political leaders, and non-governmental and private humanitarian organizations.

Soldiers are in the country in a supporting role, Butch said. They will use Kosovo's institutions and help local leaders to support the nation-building process.



SGT DARRIEL J. SWATTS

Slovenian Soldiers prepare to board a U.S. UH-60 Blackhawk during a multinational training exercise at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center's Camp Albertshof in Hohenfels, Germany. The Slovenians were part of the mission readiness exercise for U.S. reserve component Soldiers preparing for the 11th iteration of the Kosovo Force in support of Operation Joint Guardian.

Albanian immigrants, acted as role-players, forcing the Soldiers to practice an important skill -- communicating through interpreters.

"You're not talking to the interpreter, you're talking to the person you're talking to," Butch said. "Nation-building is building a good solid rapport with the residents of Kosovo -- Albanian and Serb."

Trainers emphasize how to conduct proper engagements with Kosovars, he said, including managing their weapons posture and body language to the point of suppressing the Californian urge to wear sunglasses.

The "bilateral training" at Hohenfels focuses on junior Soldiers and leaders who will have "big jobs" demonstrating the values of America and its Army to Kosovars, he said.

The Guard troops have one advantage over the active Army counterparts that they will exploit in Kosovo, Butch added.

"We want to leverage the National Guard's civilian skill sets," he said. "We have Soldiers that have a wide variety of civilian occupations that will blend in well in this environment. We bring a wealth of knowledge from working in the civilian sector: bankers, sociologists, law enforcement and agriculture."

Kosovo is new country with new constitution and a very young population, and its development will take time, the colonel said.

"This is going to be a long process," he said. "It is going to take a generation to get these youth on the right track, and part of that is to have good prospects for jobs."

The ongoing global economic recession will add to the challenges facing the task force, he said.

During their month at Camp Atterbury under the guidance of the 205th Training Brigade, members of the task force focused upon building relationships with the people Kosovo, Butch said. Contractors, many recent Serb and

“About 99 percent of our contacts will be at the squad level -- at the Soldier level,” Butch explained. “In this day and age, an E4 (a junior Soldier) can have strategic implications by what he says or by what he does, or what he fails to do.”

The bottom line, Butch said, is that Soldiers will keep their minds on safety and security, but their primary focus is on helping people.

“Bring it down a notch. It is a safe and secure environment,” he said. “We need to establish a good rapport with the residents.”

While Evans trained to transform himself from combat-ready infantryman to peacekeeper, he isn’t completely without experience. He said he and several members of his battalion have deployed on similar missions to Haiti and Honduras.

And other task force Soldiers arrived at Hohenfels with special skills they said are ready-made for the KFOR mission.

“We come from Alaska, and when you come from the Last Frontier, you come out ready to help people,” said Spc. Steven Ernst, an aviation fuels specialist with Anchorage’s 1-207th Aviation. “Up there, we help each other.”

Ernst’s unit also prepared at home with monthly drills focused on Soldier warrior tasks, humanitarian aid training and classes on the region and its language, politics and current affairs, he said. During December’s training at Camp Atterbury, the Alaskans concentrated on aviation missions they may encounter in Kosovo and the special role the battalion will play, Ernst said.

“We were glad to get together for this training, especially for something as awesome as this. We’re going on a peacekeeping mission, and that is something to be proud of,” he said.

Evans said regardless of home stations, job skills or titles, the Guard troops’ bottom line is pretty simple: help the people of Kosovo in a positive way.

“We are there to provide a safe and secure environment for the locals,” he said. “Seeing us in that positive role has got to be a relief and a comfort to people.”



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