HEIDELBERG, Germany -- In response to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’ directive mandating U.S. Forces to work directly with International Security Assistance Force nations on countering improvised explosive devices. This week, U.S. Army Europe’s Joint Multinational Readiness Center premiered its first NATO Counter IED Baseline Course for ISAF partners looking to fill gaps in their training.

More than 50 soldiers from Albania, Estonia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine were grouped together to cultivate camaraderie and to emphasize the importance of the teamwork needed to accomplish the objectives in training and in the real world.

Collectively, they trained on standard NATO operating procedures for countering IED threats. The overall training concept is composed of three pillars aimed at preparing every ISAF soldier, from junior enlisted to command staff level, to defeat the device, attack the network and train the force.

“Every soldier is looking to deploy to Afghanistan, so regardless of their country, these soldiers face the same threat,” Maj. Phillip Borders said, the JMRC multinational counter IED planner. “It is very important for us as a U.S. nation to work with those partners … to meet the emerging threats together as an ISAF force.”

Earlier this year, troops from various countries participated in a preliminary four-day class in Poland to keep brigade level leadership up-to-date on the
various operational tactics used to attack IED networks.

The class laid the foundation for the training at JMRC, Borders said.

In order to provide the most relevant training to the soldiers, JMRC decided to focus the instruction in the "defeat the device" phase on the tactical mindset of patrol leaders and platoon sergeants.

In addition to establishing the proper frame of mind, trainers covered visual IED awareness, employing electronic warfare, ISAF reporting procedures for 10-line unexploded ordinance reports and on collecting evidence from blast sites.

The three-day course was broken down into two-hour blocks of instruction alternating between classroom and field environments. The classroom portions introduced soldiers to the underlying concepts of defeating IEDs. The field portions split them into three groups to complete individual counter IED tasks in a “round robin“ fashion, while reinforcing the classroom concepts through hands-on training.

During the last day of training, soldiers conducted mounted patrols using Virtual Battle Space 2, a first-person shooter computer program used by the Army to test a unit’s ability to perform collective tasks. The program is able to simulate any terrain and provides instant feedback to soldiers training on the equipment when they are wounded, knocked unconscious by an IED or killed in action, Maj. William Duffy said, the VBS 2 officer in charge at JMRC.

During the middle of their patrols, soldiers received sniper fire from VBS 2 training instructors playing as insurgents. If soldiers were wounded during the patrol, teammates would have to risk their avatar characters’ lives to perform combat life saving techniques, and remove the soldier from the kill zone.

For some soldiers, the idea of conducting training in a virtual based environment might seem unrealistic with the current threats in Afghanistan, but the benefits of using the VBS 2 to supplement live training outweighs any criticism skeptics might have.

“This is a low-cost solution to get them to work through their training tactics and procedures, and working the radios under pressure,” Duffy said. “In no way, do I feel this replaces them getting out there. But this will make them more efficient; especially with the current op-tempo ... we can take this and train them anywhere in the world.”
In addition to the financial savings the units receive, they also save valuable time that could be used to train in other areas.

“By doing this before the live training, everyone in the unit will be familiar with all of the procedures,” Duffy said. “That way when they do go out to do the live training, not only do they get a first time go in their squad training exercises, they will be able to learn more advanced tactics instead of having to run through the same lanes two or three times.”

For Capt. Agron Kuta, a team commander from the Albanian Special Forces Battalion, the hardest part of the training was overcoming the language barrier.

“I think that the language barrier was difficult at times,” Kuta said. “Some of us are not as quick to understand the words, so it took us a little longer to do what they wanted us to accomplish but the instructors were patient with us, and we were able to complete most of the tasks well.”

Despite the language barrier, Kuta said the experience gained from the various instructors and classes is invaluable to him and his team members, and supplements their core training as they prepare to embark on their fourth and fifth deployments in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

“I believe we have been trained by the best instructors that I have seen in my army life,” Kuta said. “I saw that a lot of them shared personal experiences from being in Iraq or Afghanistan, and were not just saying things that came straight from a book.”