

U.S. Army Europe, German engineers show off partnership, skills for defense minister, ambassador

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HEIDELBERG, Germany -- In World War II, they dashed across the Ludendorff Bridge under heavy enemy fire, breaching the final obstacle into the heart of the Third Reich, symbolically marking the end of the war in Europe.

This week they crossed a different bridge, erected by a partner unit from the German Bundeswehr.

U.S. Army Europe's 9th Engineer Battalion, 172nd Infantry Brigade and the 701st Panzer Pioneer Battalion came together here Aug. 24 to display their ability to work hand in hand by constructing a bridge for an audience of distinguished visitors that included German Minister of Defense Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg and Philip D. Murphy, U.S. Ambassador to Germany.

"This is all very impressive," said Guttenberg while speaking to a group of American and German Soldiers at the base of the expansion bridge.

"It has been a great chance for us to build a partnership with the Bundeswehr," said squad leader Sgt. William Satchell of the 9th. "The most rewarding aspect for me is to get the chance to train with them and learn about their culture."

The partnership training began with leaders from both countries sitting down to discuss how best to bring the units and their capabilities together.

"We decided to start the training with a barbecue," said Lt. Col. Kurt Dannenberg, commander of the 701st. "We wanted to integrate the units not just at the officer level, but also at the Soldier level."

That Soldier-level integration was the key to the success of the training, said Lt. Col. Jayson Gilberti, commander of the 9th.

Gilberti said the five days of partnership training were designed to focus on the “three Bs” of combat engineering: building, bridging and breaching.

The training was a prime opportunity for engineers from both nations to share experiences from operations across the globe, and their conversations were peppered with talk of breaching charges, live-fire training and building bridges to allow 70-ton M1A1 Abrams tanks to cross rivers.

“Training with them has been a great experience for me across the board,” said Spc. Jonathan Smals of the 9th. “I have a lot of experience I can bring to the table for them, and they have a lot to bring to the table for me to learn from.”

Smals returned less than a year ago from a combat deployment to Iraq, where he piloted an M9 Armored Combat Earthmover for the 172nd.

The members of the 701st brought their experience from operations in Afghanistan, where they were the first Bundeswehr engineer battalion to serve 12 consecutive months as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force.

The training highlighted comments by the ambassador, who called it a great example of the benefits of European theater security cooperation. The success of operations in the modern world requires partnership between nations, Murphy said.

“No one goes it alone,” said Murphy. “The more closely, the more frequent our training, the more we will be able to succeed in trying situations like Afghanistan.”