



# Fire Support for the Nordic-Polish Brigade— An Interoperability Lesson for the Future

Text and Photos by Captain Harold M. Knudsen

**F**ive years ago, it would have been unimaginable for a US Army Europe (USAREUR) direct support (DS) FA battalion to foresee the task of providing an allied maneuver brigade its fire support—a firing battery and a brigade fire support element (FSE)—augmented by a US Army Pennsylvania National Guard detachment providing the fire support team (FIST) slice. Add the fact that the allied maneuver brigade, itself, was multinational, comprised of elements from ten allied countries. Combine all this to form one of Task Force Eagle's three maneuver brigades in the US sector of NATO's Implementation Force (IFOR) and deploy it to Bosnia-Herzegovina to enforce the peace. It sounds like something out of a Tom Clancy novel; however, this unprecedented organization came to life during Operation Joint Endeavor as the Nordic-Polish Brigade.

The Nordic-Polish Brigade, headquartered in Doboj, was comprised of one

Danish battalion (one mechanized company and one tank company), one Swedish pure mechanized battalion and one Polish parachute battalion with BMP (tracked infantry combat vehicles) and BRDM (armored reconnaissance vehicles). Additionally, the brigade included a Finnish construction battalion, a Norwegian logistics battalion and infantry platoons from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. It even included a few Icelanders. The brigade was responsible for controlling the largest and one of the most unstable areas in the Task Force Eagle sector, an area that also had the highest mine density in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As US and NATO armies continue to shrink, coalition efforts, such as Joint Endeavor, will occur more often. Hence, small contributions from many nations will come together to form a large army like the IFOR. Interoperability will be a challenge.

American soldiers in the Nordic-Polish Brigade worked interoperability is-

suages daily and helped develop new tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) to accomplish the mission—many of which deviated from US doctrine or TTP. This article outlines the unique organizations and multinational operations for the Nordic-Polish Brigade from its formation in January 1996 through November 1996 as 1st (US) Armored Division personnel rotated out of the theater. The article gives examples of how US fire supporters expanded doctrine and used equipment to adapt to multinational organizations.

## Unique Organizations

*Nordic-Polish Brigade FSE.* The FSE the US sent was standard but, upon arrival, was added to the Nordic FSE, which made the brigade FSE unique and robust. The FSE was led by a Norwegian lieutenant colonel fire support coordinator (FSCoord) and had a Norwegian major, Swedish major, Polish major and, from the US, a major, captain, sergeant first class, staff sergeant and two specialists who operated the radios and initial fire support automation system (IFSAS).

Our personnel robustness allowed us flexible shift routines; we trained the allied officers on our equipment, and they used it in the absence of US members. In addition, our Scandinavian and Polish officers, who also spoke English, helped bridge the language barriers and

doctrinal misunderstandings that sometimes arose.

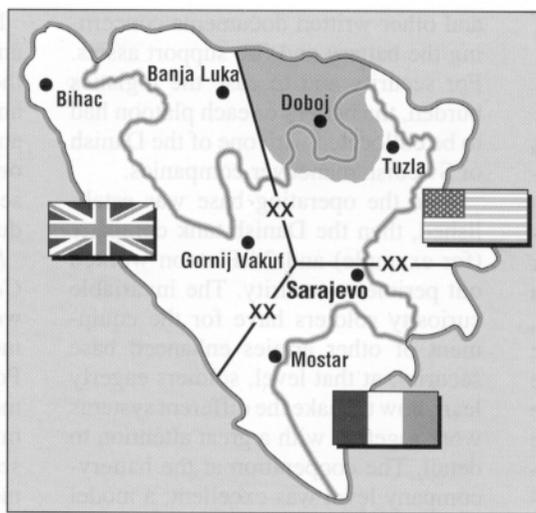
The air liaison office (ALO) cell came under the FSE. It consisted of three tactical air control parties (TACPs), two from Denmark and one from Norway. The TACPs road in M113 armored personnel carrier (APC) variations and worked closely with the FISTs and combat observation laser teams (COLTs) to direct artillery, helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. The TACPs, FISTs and COLTs complemented each other's radio and laser capabilities.

**Forward Command Post.** In actuality, we had parts of three brigade FSEs: the Nordic FSE; the US FSE from the 2d Battalion, 3d Field Artillery (2-3 FA), part of the 1st Armored Division; and an FSE from the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. The 2-3 FA people and equipment basically were absorbed into the Nordic FSE while the National Guard FSE remained separate.

The National Guard FSE functioned in the brigade's forward command post (CP), the equivalent of a US brigade tactical command post (TAC). Two high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs)—one built up and carrying an IFSAS and one with a mobile subscriber radio terminal (MSRT)—departed with the brigade commander's forward CP. The soldiers in this FSE lived at the battery headquarters and, when not deployed, concentrated on logistics, maintenance and other administrative matters.

The recall status for the National Guard FSE was six hours unless an increased level of readiness was required. The rest of the forward CP consisted of three APCs with tent extensions and the FSE radios remoted into the tents. This arrangement gave the commander greater flexibility to control operations at a distance from the brigade headquarters at Doboj.

**COLTs and FISTs.** Initially, there were no observers at the battalion level and below because our Scandinavian allies brought no artillery assets. Eventually, the National Guard detachment from the 28th Infantry Division (Mechanized) was identified to provide FIST personnel. But prior to its arrival, we employed a non-doctrinal stop-gap. A FIST vehicle (FISTV)-equipped COLT was attached from one of the US brigades to each of the three maneuver battalion



Bosnia-Herzegovina During Operation Joint Endeavor. The darker area around Doboj is the Nordic-Polish Brigade's area of responsibility in the US-led Task Force Eagle sector.

headquarters in the Nordic-Polish Brigade. Each COLT had four men: a lieutenant, sergeant and two fire support specialists. For most of the month of February, the COLTs were the artillery liaisons at their battalions.

We considered centralizing the COLTs at the brigade-level and farming them out to the battalions or companies as the missions required. Ultimately, we decided linking them to the battalions was more desirable to forge the all-important multinational relationships.

Once at the battalion, the COLT priorities were to integrate fire support into base camp defense plans and determine the best method to provide fire

support to its maneuver companies. The COLT also conducted initial target area survey around its base camp, at checkpoints and along routes. The COLTs filled the role of the artillery liaison team, but they also worked on the battalion staffs, advising the maneuver S3s and helping to coordinate US assets.

In late February, the 40-man National Guard contingent completed our organization for fire support. Fire support for the companies was provided by nine, two-man forward observer (FO) parties using HMMWVs, ground-mounted versions of the ground/vehicular laser locator designators (G/VLLDs), forward-entry devices (FEDs), precision lightweight global positioning system receivers (PLGRs) and the single-channel ground and airborne radio system (SINCGARS). Each team consisted of a lieutenant and a sergeant or fire support specialist from a task-organized unit of the Pennsylvania National Guard: the 1st Detachment, 28th Field Artillery (1-28 FAD).

The National Guard battalion FSEs were four-man sections, each with a captain, a fire support sergeant and two fire support specialists. Each had two HMMWVs, an IFSAS and SINCGARS. All three battalion FSEs operated out of fixed sites in their respective battalion base camps with much of their equipment ground-mounted using portable power supplies.



Front gate of the Nordish-Polish Brigade Headquarters at Doboj.

## Multinational Operations

Doctrine for adequate fire support is normally a DS battalion for each committed maneuver brigade. Assuming a linear battlefield, the battalion is normally deployed behind the maneuver brigade six to eight kilometers covering a parallel 15- to 20-kilometer battalion front.

**Platoon Operations.** Although the mission in the Nordic-Polish Brigade was nonlinear, the brigade only had one battery (from 2-3 FA) to provide fire support for three battalions. The Nordic-Polish Brigade area of responsibility (AOR) was the largest in the US sector and included 156 kilometers of the four-kilometer-wide zone of separation (ZOS). At no time could the battery's two platoons cover more than 50 percent of its AOR or 90 percent of its ZOS.

The battery had to conduct platoon operations to increase the area supported by artillery. Such operations were at the expense of the ability to mass fires. When the mission required fire support for a different part of the brigade AOR, a platoon moved out of its operating base and occupied a position within range of potential targets. The occupations lasted anywhere from a few hours to a week and became known as "support-the-force missions." They were similar in planning and methodology to an artillery raid but were less time-sensitive.

**Integration of the Battery.** In previous tours of duty in the former Yugoslavia, the Scandinavians had not had the luxury of field artillery support, so the positioning of their companies was not done with artillery in mind. Some of the camps were already occupied by a mechanized or tank company a month and a half prior to the US platoons' arrival.

Most camps were selected for the decent buildings for long-term housing rather than for their tactical locations within the brigade AOR. Others were chosen because of the space available after eliminating areas with mine fields or restrictive terrain. Thus, adding the howitzer platoon and employing it brought new considerations and required some flexibility.

Our immediate concerns were to integrate the battery into the brigade and then position it. The brigade G3 staff was very receptive to the battery and always planned for it in operations. The FSE actually handled the various orders

and other written documents concerning the battery and fire support assets. For security and to ease the logistics burden, the battery or each platoon had to be collocated with one of the Danish or Swedish maneuver companies.

Once the operating base was established, then the Danish tank company (for example) and 2d Platoon worked out perimeter security. The invariable curiosity soldiers have for the equipment of other armies enhanced base security; at that level, soldiers eagerly learn how to make the different systems work together with a great attention to detail. The cooperation at the battery-company level was excellent, a model of tactical interoperability for units of different nationalities and branches.

The logistics provided by the brigade were barracks space, food, water, medical and some engineer and maintenance support. The US channels had to provide the JP8 (different than Danish or Swedish fuel), the third level of shop maintenance and other US-specific needs, such as mail.

**Radar Support.** The brigade's only target acquisition radar support came from one section: 3/A/25 FA from USAREUR's 41st FA Brigade. Although located in different positions as necessary, the radar's primary base camp was at the Danish battalion headquarters. From there, the radar established continuous voice and digital communications with the brigade FSE. Because the brigade had no targeting cell in the radar section, the brigade FSE, assisted by the radar section warrant officer, analyzed radar acquisitions.

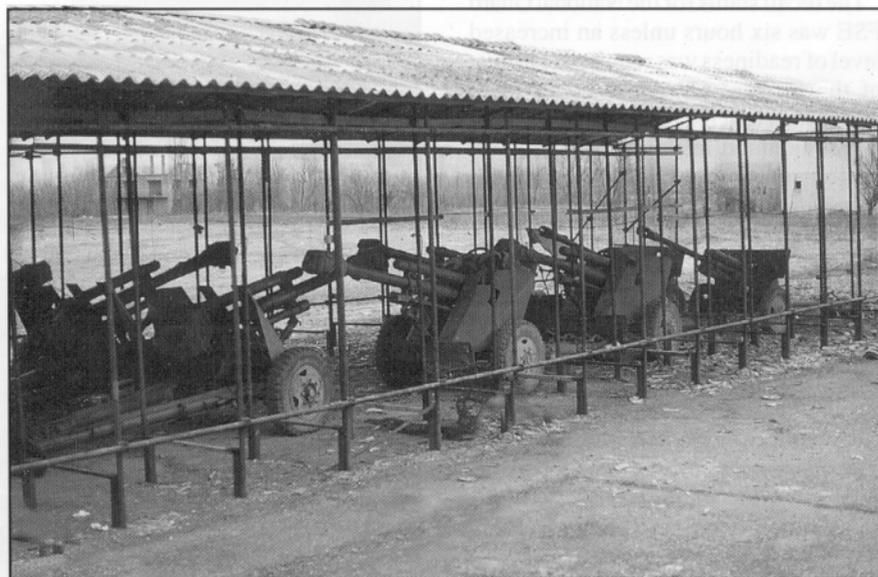
In Bosnia, radar sections were rotated among Mount Vis on the ZOS; Tuzla, the former Yugoslavian Air Force Base and headquarters for Task Force Eagle; and the Nordic-Polish Brigade every one to two months. This allowed the sections to take turns at the more austere duty positions.

**Multinational Command, Control and Communications.** Communications were very much degraded in the first month of operations. The vast Nordic-Polish Brigade sector had plenty of mountains and dead spots to hinder communications. Also, the limitations of several types of older, non-secure equipment caused additional degradation.

The primary link from IFOR's corps (Allied Central Europe Rapid Reaction Corps or ARRC) in Sarajevo to the 1st Armored Division was the United Kingdom's Tarmigan, and then from the division to the Nordic-Polish Brigade, the US mobile subscriber equipment (MSE) was the primary comms link.

The G6 of the brigade was Danish and was responsible for establishing and maintaining communications within the brigade. The Danish chose to bring the older VRC-46 radio variations without communications security (COMSEC) and encryption devices to Bosnia.

Because the brigade radio net was non-secure and the former warring factions (Serbians, Muslims and Croats) could listen to it, we didn't use it for much. For example, on one occasion, we conducted a "dry" mortar exercise on the brigade net. Within minutes, Serbians and Muslims contacted us about why the brigade was firing mortars.



Serbian M56 105-mm artillery pieces stockpiled for inspection per the Dayton Peace Accord.

The former Yugoslavian military had an advanced capability to conduct electronic warfare (EW) and jam its enemy's communications, which the former warring factions inherited. In one instance, US helicopter pilots believed their net was jammed whenever they came near the brigade headquarters around Doboj; at times, they experienced strange interference believed to be EW equipment.

Distance compounded the problem. The Danes had a retransmission device for the non-secure brigade command net. It took almost two and a half months to get a secure US retrans device to improve fire support communication across the brigade—at first limited to a 20-kilometer radius around the headquarters.

The only other secure means of communication throughout the brigade was the excellent Danish DEOS system (similar to our MSE). This system was secure and worked well to the other base camps, but it wasn't a mobile system. Units on patrol or at checkpoints had to use their internal battalion FM nets with no secure means of communicating with the brigade.

When the US soldiers from 2-3 FA and the Pennsylvania Army National Guard arrived with SINCGARS, the fire support net became the focus for brigade command and control. During several confrontations, the fire support net allowed the G3 to issue orders through a FIST to the commanding officer on the ground.

When forced to deal with a situation occurring near the perimeter of the brigade AOR, we often used FIST relays to solve the distance problem. The FIST and ground commander used the fire support net to control air assets sent to a hot spot. Although a nonstandard method of controlling assets, circumstances dictated the FIST relay solution, which became routine.

*Brigade FSE as Aviation Liaison.* The Nordic-Polish Brigade had no aviation liaison officer (LNO) or organic or attached helicopter assets. All aviation support for the brigade was provided by tasking from the 1st Armored Division G3 Air to its 4th Aviation Brigade. At the direction of our FSCOORD, the brigade FSE assumed responsibility for requesting and coordinating all operational uses of helicopters.

For several months, the Nordic-Polish Brigade Aviation LNO (a Swedish captain) was placed with the 4th Aviation Brigade to coordinate helicopter activities in the AOR. Later, this captain

moved to the brigade FSE and coordinated and tracked helicopter support. Using their secure SINCGARS, company and battalion fire support officers (FSOs) communicated with the helicopters in the AOR, reporting and coordinating with the brigade G3 through the brigade FSE.

Also a unique employment, we used COLTS to guide and assist helicopters on their ZOS reconnaissance missions. Once the aircraft were in the sector, it was very difficult for the brigade to get feedback from or change and add something to the daily recon mission. The COLTs and FISTs were excellent contacts for the helicopter pilots and worked closely with them almost daily.

*Multinational Training.* In February, the brigade FSCOORD issued the first training guidance and brigade plan to train the Danes, Swedes, Poles and Norwegians as FIST members. Luckily, the 1-28 FAD came with a guard unit army device for full crew interactive simulation training (GUARD FIST II) that was superb for training the Scandinavian infantry and armor soldiers on calling for fires.

When US soldiers were away, allied soldiers, such as the Danes of the brigade's headquarters company, became FIST members who served as FOs and used the G/VLLD. More than once, Danish headquarters company soldiers emplaced and operated our equipment. We trained soldiers of the Finnish construction battalion to call for fires and on how to defend their camp with artillery. One time, we sent Swedish infantrymen with our FISTs to the live-fire range at Glamoc in western Bosnia to practice real calls-for-fire.

The training program was an effective team builder for the brigade, especially for the Finnish who didn't work with US FOs on a daily basis.

*Language Challenges.* Much has been learned from working with IFOR allies in this ongoing mission. The most profound lesson is the importance of being adaptable to pull separate national units together as a brigade—and to do it communicating via a second language.

We must credit our allies with their superb command of English, the second language that made most of our accomplishments possible. Proficiency in a foreign language should become a requirement for American military professional development. Not all multinational units will have command of the English language as many in the Nor-

dic-Polish Brigade did. Even when working with allied soldiers fluent in English, displaying knowledge of their language and culture is greatly appreciated and encourages team building.

In an operation such as Joint Endeavor, there will be some degradations of communications and cultural understanding by virtue of bringing so many different national units together, which is beyond the control of a single nation. However, the ability to expand systems—such as the US fire support system—with the least degradation in a multinational environment should be part of the goal for an Army package. Designers of the future Army should ensure US units have the equipment and doctrine to allow them to transition from a pure US, high-intensity focused organization to a multinational IFOR-type organization.

It took about a month to assemble our fire support organization from scratch: from the Scandinavians in theater transitioning from the UN mission to the IFOR mission to the last US soldiers joining the brigade and linking down to the company level. We had to overcome many challenges: from cross-leveling soldiers and equipment to accepting different philosophies and finding the best solutions to make fire support work. These exact circumstances may never occur again; however, to date, providing fire support for the Nordic-Polish Brigade was a good lesson in interoperability. There are more to come.



Captain Harold M. Knudsen was one of the Fire Support Officers in the Nordic-Polish Brigade Fire Support Element from January to July 1996 at Doboj, Bosnia-Herzegovina, during Operation Joint Endeavor. Currently, he's a Ground Forces Readiness Enhancement Observer/Controller with the 1st Brigade of the 91st Division (Exercise), US Army Reserve, at Camp Parks, California. Previous assignments include serving as Commander of A Battery, 2d Battalion, 3d Field Artillery and Assistant Division Artillery S3, both in the 1st Armored Division Artillery, Germany. During Operation Desert Storm, he served as battalion Fire Direction Officer (FDO) for the 2d Battalion, 29th Field Artillery, in the 8th Infantry Division (Mechanized) and, prior to the Gulf War, as part of the Fire Support Team (FIST) and as FDO for the same battalion while in Germany. He's a 1992 graduate of the German Army Artillery Advanced Course/Battery Commander's Course at Idar-Oberstein, Germany.