‘Roving Sands’ Exercises
Missile Defense Expeditionary Operations

By Capt. Brandon Nalley

Task Force Spartan, headquartered by the 108th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, and composed of missile defense units and support elements from six different installations to include the Kentucky and Texas Army National Guards, with a total Soldier package in excess of 2,500, ceased tactical operations in support of Roving Sands 2019 on March 10.

Roving Sands is the Army’s only brigade-level air defense artillery training exercise designed to test units the way the National Training Center and Joint Readiness Training Center do.

Utilizing the immense landscape, units brought Soldiers and equipment to execute operations in the 642,000 acres of the Fort Bliss, Texas, training area while being presented with challenges in logistics, coordination of units and maneuver that can’t be replicated anywhere else. The wide skies of southern New Mexico were also ripe for air threat interdiction.

Reintroduced in 2018, Roving Sands serves as a tool to test missile defense forces’ abilities to shoot, move and communicate in a contested environment after 15 years of consistent rotations to static positions around the world.

Missile defense assets under the command of the 108th ADA Brigade Headquarters consisted of three Patriot missile battalions and a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system, together capable of defeating short-, medium- and intermediate-range ballistic mis-
siles, with the Patriot missile units capable of destroying tactical aircraft as well. Task Force Spartan, through simulations, identified, engaged and destroyed over 80 tactical ballistic missiles, six fixed-wing aircraft and four high-speed cruise missiles.

Brig. Gen. Clement Coward, commander of the 32nd Army Air and Missile Defense Command, said that “Roving Sands is critical to the air defense community’s ability to remain ready to ‘fight tonight.’ It provides us the ability to exercise mission command and integrate our role as air defenders in multi-domain operations.”

Units were tested by an opposition force in the support area to include rotary air threats provided by the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, creating a complex problem set requiring transitions from movement to maneuver as well as self-securing operational sites. Task Force Spartan also faced chemical attacks, where “dirty routes” had to be utilized and the 299th Chemical Company conducted decontamination. Commanders and senior non-commissioned officers balanced the need to defend themselves while also defeating air threats through problem solving and critical analysis of mitigating risks.

Over the 10-day exercise, battalion headquarters moved as far as 70 kilometers, with some batteries going as far as 95 kilometers. The operational requirement for these movements were complicated by sustained winds over 36 miles per hour, producing blinding sand storms and punishing conditions to establish infrastructures including tents and antennas. Task Force Spartan was also exposed to temperatures below freezing and a rare snow, early in the operation. Operational and environmental conditions tested all forms of support and logistics. The greatest tests coming from enemy forces and the sheer distances that had to be covered...
by physical movements as well as communications.

“With the support of 50th and 51st Signal Companies, we successfully provided connectivity for 185 total users on the Secret and Non-classified Internet Protocol Router Networks for 96.3 percent of the operation. While 3.7 percent of time without internet seems minimal, the enemy gets a vote in terms of disrupting our lines of communication, thus forcing verification of our Primary, Alternate, Contingency, Emergency plan,” said Maj. Charles Hines, the communications officer for 108th ADA Brigade.

External logistical support was provided by the 372nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion. The Army National Guard involvement supported cooperative efforts with active service units to enable future training and forward deployed theater operations. Bravo and Alpha Companies from the 50th Expeditionary Signal Battalion Enhanced and 51st Expeditionary Signal Battalion respectively, provided and maintained upper tactical internet, critical to maintaining seamless mission command through all phases of the operation.

Providing observation, coaching and training over Roving Sands units were air defenders from the 11th and 31st ADA Brigades. These individuals provided feedback to the units while facilitating mission command training through coverage of command groups, staffs and key leaders in their respective assignments from brigade level to individual batteries.

Roving Sands 2019 also drew the attention of multiple visitors. Early in operations, Congresswoman Veronica Escobar, U.S. Representative for Texas’s 16th congressional district, toured the 108th ADA Brigade Headquarters, Charlie Battery, 3rd Battalion, 4th Air Defense Artillery’s Patriot site and Bravo Battery, 62nd THAAD’s site. Her visit covered air and missile defense operations of the Army and the important role that Fort Bliss plays in the future modernization and training of ADA forces.

Other visitors to the 108th ADA Brigade Headquarters included missile defense professionals from the German Army and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces who discussed mission command, planning operations and training objectives. The meeting between the three organizations created greater understanding of allied operations in protecting our common interests.

Like most exercises, units involved in Roving Sands 2019 will take away experiences to drive future operations as well as immense pride in finding success in the face of tough, realistic training. Additionally, and maybe most importantly, all of Task Force Spartan increased its capacity to deter and defeat missile threats in an unfamiliar environment.

Col. Charles Branson, commander of the 108th ADA Brigade, reflected on this year’s Roving Sands saying, “The 108th ADA Brigade ‘Spartans’ is a competent, disciplined, lethal force to be reckoned with. Due to rigorous, realistic campaigns such as Roving Sands, which provide every assigned Military Occupational Specialty an opportunity to hone and perfect their craft, the Spartans remain ready to fight tonight, anywhere in the world! Deeds Above Words, Swift and Sure!”

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