

Military walking in the terrain

Written by AG

Friday, 17 October 2008 00:00



MNC NE personnel devoted two days of 15th and 16th October 2008 to analysing and assessing the "Berlin" Operation of 1945, which led to the end of the World War II. This time it was not only theoretical dispute but also a military historic terrain walk to places of crucial importance for the course of events.

In order to provide a fruitful and valuable opportunity for soldiers' development and enhancement of skills and knowledge, the MNC NE Commander Lieutenant General Zdzisław Goral went beyond typical lectures or presentations and offered the soldiers a so-called military historic terrain walk. For two days more than 60 MNC NE officers and senior non-commissioned officers from ten Corps' countries with the Major General Ole Köppen in lead analysed the first phase of the "Berlin" Operation, namely the Odra River crossing and the seizing of the Seelow Heights from two contrasting perspectives – those who attacked and those who defended. The soldiers listened to operational and tactical plans of both sides and followed the actual course of events. The theoretical part was completed by visits to places where the history wrote its own story, like the fortress of Kostrzyń on the Polish soil and, after crossing the bordering Odra River, the Seelow Heights in Germany, where a fierce battle took place killing 12,000 German, and 33,000 Russian and 5,000 Polish soldiers.

1st day – Offensive

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During the first day of the military historic terrain walk, the multinational Corps' staff focused on the perspective of the Soviet Red Army, which started their march towards Berlin. The participants gathered next to the 1st Polish Army Commander's forward command post near the Odra River Bank close by Siekierki, just about 90 km from Berlin in a straight line and listened how the Soviet Army planned to seize the last defence positions on their road to Berlin. They followed the movement of the front line westwards and discussed tactical, logistic and operational aspects of the campaign.

Since the 1st Polish Army fought on the Soviet Army's side, their participation was examined in particular. The MNC NE personnel visited the Siekierki Military Cemetery in Stare Łysogórki to lay wreaths and to honour about 2000 soldiers of the 1st Polish Army, who were killed on the battlefield during the fighting in the Odra River area.

The topic was further developed in the fortress of Kostrzyń, where in one of the Bastions called "Filip" the MNC NE staff was warmly welcomed by the Mayor of Kostrzyń Mr Andrzej Ludwik Kunt, who referring to the history of the city concluded: "For the first time in history we are happy that the foreign forces have arrived". As the Mayor said, the fortress of Kostrzyń was unique due to its unique history. During a lecture, several facts from the city's history were presented, which could serve as a background for understanding the events taking place in Kostrzyń during the World War II. Afterwards, the MNC NE staff visited the remains of Kostrzyń's fortifications.

A real mine of knowledge were three museums visited that day. In the Museum of the 1st Polish Army located in the nearby of the cemetery in Stare Łysogórki, a lot of exhibit items were gathered, like maps and sketches of the course of battles in the area, weapons, pieces of military equipment, documents or even the first border post originally located in Czeplin, which was placed there by the Polish soldiers as soon as the border had been outlined. The museum of the Engineering Forces of the 1st Polish Army in Gozdowice presented the contribution of this service to the Odra River crossing. One could find there missiles, anti-tank mines, fuses and other military equipment, models of bridges, a model depicting crossing the Odra River by the 1st Polish Army but also photos and numerous documents. In the basement a real command post was reconstructed. The way in which the museum in Witnica functioned was a real surprise to the MNC NE personnel. It is a private Museum of Glory of the Polish Arms, owned by Colonel (ret.) Czesław Chmielewski, who has been receiving gifts and exhibit items from many people since 1972 when the museum was founded. As a participant of the fighting in the area, he and his family devoted their lives to history and an incredible collection of military equipment, uniforms, has already drawn the attention of people not only in Poland but also abroad. To enrich Colonel Chmielewski's collection, Major General Köppen gave him the MNC NE crest, whereas Colonel Bojesen, Danish Senior National Representative – a Danish Queen Margaret II's Insignia.

2nd Day – Defensive

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The second day of the military historic terrain walk intended to present the events of April 1945 from the perspective of soldiers of Wehrmacht, who were to defend Berlin from the Soviet Red Army. The first place that was visited was Kienitz, where a T-34 tank monument could be found. This little village was not chosen by accident, it was actually the first place where the Soviet Army managed to cross the Odra River.

A set of briefings in different strategic places on the German side of the Odra River presented the situation of the German soldiers basically day by day in the spring of 1945. Military equipment, operational and tactical plans but also the weather conditions or the terrain constraints were thoroughly analysed. To correctly understand the situation in 1945, the participants visited Gross Neuendorf, where the longest bridge across the Odra River was build, and the Seelow Heights, which played an important role in the defence. The Heights were the last major obstacle for the Soviet Army to overcome on their way to Berlin. Although the Soviet Army eventually defeated the Wehrmacht, this battle cost lives of a lot of German, Soviet and Polish soldiers proving fatal consequences of not taking the lie of the land and a proper flow of information into consideration. To honour the victims of the battle, wreaths were laid at the Memorial of the Seelow Heights.

In the Museum of the Seelow Heights, a film was shown to the MNC NE staff, which provided another visual aid to ensure better understanding of the situation in 1945. Authentic video materials from places already visited by the staff showing the fighting, the dead and injured soldiers, the situation of the civilian population or even propaganda materials were a fruitful source of information.

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