

I wish I could deploy to Afghanistan with you!

Written by AG

Friday, 15 December 2006 00:00



Commander Artur Bilski is interviewing Lieutenant General Egon Ramms, the outgoing Commander of Multinational Corps Northeast.

Cmdr Artur Bilski: Would you like to go to Afghanistan with the Corps as the Commander?

LtGen Egon Ramms: It is a strange feeling to make the plans and preparations for the mission and to know that you will have to hand over in mid December 2006 and somebody else will be going to Afghanistan to deploy with the Corps. I wish I could go with the MNC NE to Afghanistan but a Polish successor will be commanding the HQ MNC NE at the time. However, I will be the commanding officer at JFC in Brunssum and I will try to take care of this Corps HQ because JFC Brunssum is the Operational Command for the Afghanistan mission. Obviously, I will visit the HQ ISAF in Kabul and I will meet the officers, non-commissioned officers and privates deployed to Afghanistan whom I shall remember from Szczecin. That helps a little bit.

- Do you think that the decision about the deployment to Afghanistan was premature?

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According to the plan, we were to deploy in August 2007.

No, it was not premature. We hosted the defence ministers' meeting on 21 February 2006 during which the ministers of the three framework nations asked me whether it would be possible for the HQ to deploy either in February or in August 2007. I clearly stated that if I received a decision in due time, the Corps would be ready to deploy in February 2007. The decision was made a little bit late but the HQ did a good planning work in May and June and now we can say that the training was conducted according to the plan and with good results. So the time is ripe for the mission. We are ready!

- Under your command the Corps has been certified by North Atlantic Council as the NATO HQ of Forces of Lower Readiness. How will that shape the Corps' future?

I believe that this is a very important point. NATO has received an HQ of Forces of Lower readiness that can be used for a deployment or any other purposes such as exercises. If we had not passed the Full Operational Capability (FOC) in such a successful way as we did, NATO would not have taken this HQ into account. That is why it was very important, all the more so because we received a certification with which we can engage into discussions with the nations, or between the nations or between NATO authorities and our framework nations. We are an HQ that really counts among all NATO Corps Headquarters!

- What will be the future of the MNC NE? Is there a political will to sustain the Corps?

The graduate readiness forces concept of NATO includes the decision from 2001 that NATO would like to have three high readiness Corps HQs and six HQs of lower readiness. If you look at the realities right now, you will find seven and even eight high readiness Corps HQs in the future and only two of lower readiness. I do not think that this balance between the higher readiness Corps HQs and the lower readiness Corps HQs is in accordance with the NATO concept. You need the high readiness Corps to go for NATO Response Force operations or other urgent missions. But after employing high readiness Corps, an HQ of lower readiness can always be used to fulfil the mission further on or to relieve a high readiness Corps. If the framework nations or one or two of the framework nations intend to raise the level of this HQs to the high readiness level, they will have to discuss it with the remaining framework nations. I can imagine that there is a certain interest to do so from the Polish or Danish side. But the negotiations with the Germans would be quite difficult because Germany is already participating in several Corps HQs of high readiness. To change the MNC NE HQ into a high readiness Corps, one would have to increase the strength at least by another 150 soldiers not to mention additional costs. This has to be negotiated. But I am personally confident that MNC NE has taken its position within the NATO-Corps family. And its position will be strengthened by the deployment to Afghanistan. It means that the position is much stronger than in 2003. Further discussions about the future are not necessary.

- You are ending your three-year term as the Commander of MNC NE. How would you assess these years?

Somebody else should answer this question: the Corps Committee, the framework nations.

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They may say "OK, he did a good job" or the contrary. Personally, I am satisfied with the work I have done. I took the command of the HQ in the period between Intermediate Operational Capability (IOC) and FOC. Although the HQ had passed the IOC successfully, I realised that there was a lot I would have to do as the commander of MNC NE. We identified the areas which needed to be improved and we worked on them step-by-step, e.g. within the structure and organisation and we upsized the HQ. We passed the FOC very successfully and I can say that everything has been done to prepare the MNC NE HQ for its first mission deployment to Afghanistan. The 2,5 years have been very busy but also very satisfying. I have enjoyed it and it has also been interesting to experience the multinational character of the HQ.

- Which moments were the most difficult for you?

There were some areas which were not easy. One of them was, for example, the situation we had prior to and after the Capable Warrior exercise in 2004 when we identified structural deficiencies in the Corps HQ. After the exercise Capable Warrior, some people of higher HQ stated that with the organisation we had, it would not be possible to pass the FOC evaluation successfully. I realized how much work we had to do to prepare the Corps for FOC in November 2005. There was some resistance at the HQ to that because the HQ faced plenty of work, including changes in the structures, the SOPs, the SOIs, etc. There were also some obstacles coming from the framework nations so I had to persuade the Corps Committee to support all the necessary changes. That has been the most critical situation I have had during my three-year term as the Commander.

- How did you learn about your assignment as Commander of MNC NE?

I got this information quite early, mid 2003, and it was something I had not expected. So I was surprised. I made a reconnaissance in Szczecin together with my wife. Well, if you do not know the circumstances here, then perhaps not all first impressions are positive. But now, as the time passed, I have to state that I would not like to have missed working at the HQ and with the people, including the civilian Polish environment in all areas. It has been a big experience. In many areas within the HQ, I have established some special relationships and the same applies to the city, the Province and the Church. My wife and I have been living for 2,5 years in a fully Polish environment and we like our Polish neighbours. And I think they like us, too. We have been enjoying our stay in Szczecin.

- What were your stereotypes about Poland? Have you been able to confirm or reject them?

As I look back and compare what I have experienced with the point of view of a typical German, I think it is very important that Germans change their opinions about their neighbours. What I have found out in Poland is that the people here are very open and very friendly, even if you speak and understand little Polish. And if you go to Szczecin or other Polish cities and ask about a church or a museum, you will always get a friendly answer. Polish people try at once to switch into German or English to help you. There is another important point which I would like to stress - the reliability of Poles. This is one of the biggest experiences that I have gained working with Polish people here in Szczecin and other cities. The openness and reliability are the most

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convincing abilities that Polish people have.

- How do you perceive Szczecin, especially looking at current German-Polish relations?

I always make a joke when I am asked this question. The reason why the personnel department in Germany selected me for the post in Szczecin was that we did not have any relations to the area and that we were Catholics. There was nothing that might have discouraged my family. So I came to Szczecin and Poland with a very open mind. During my first meetings with some city officials I realised I was received with reserve. And I tried to help it and clarified this awkward situation giving a very simple answer: I was born in 1948, three years after the end of World War II. That is why I was not able to take responsibility for what happened between 1933 and 1945, and in regard to Poland between September 1939 and 1945. Nevertheless, I always said that I would do anything, and this would never change, to avoid repetition of such a situation, such a wrong development in the future. And as a German, it was my responsibility to make sure that Germany would never create such a situation again. As for the Polish population and the Polish officials in the area of Szczecin, I must admit that nobody has ever blamed me for what happened during the war. With regard to the opening ceremony of the German military cemetery from World War II in Stare Czarnowo in which I participated together with the Voivode of West Pomerania Province and Bishop of Szczecin, it was a very interesting experience. It shows that Germans and Poles are able to cooperate together in a very good manner. This cooperation has to be increased and continued.

- Does that mean that you think that cooperation within MNC NE may help overcome the difficulties arising from the history of Europe?

I am convinced. We are neighbours. We live together "in the centre of Europe", a phrase I have borrowed from Norman Davis. It is important that Germany establishes the same relationship with Poland as we have with France. And the history of France and Germany used to be as difficult as the relations between Germany and Poland. So it is possible to overcome these obstacles and become really good friends through a close relationship, good neighbourhood and good friendship over the lifetime of one or two generations. I must state warmly that I am convinced that the Polish side is full of good intentions. I believe that this direction and this approach will be dominating the relations between Germany and Poland and I can assure you that chancellor Angela Merkel or president Horst Köhler are working in the same direction. I believe that they even have special positive relations with the Polish people. The work we have been doing within the HQ and in the region is one of the tools in this process.

- What is the message you would like to leave to the HQ personnel and the new Polish Commander?

There is one big message I would like to send: all members of the HQ should act in the interest of the HQ. There are sometimes differences as to what German interests, Polish interests, Danish interests and interests of others are. The first question that should simply always be asked is: what is the interest of the HQ and will it produce benefits for the HQ? In my opinion, all members should head in one direction so that everybody knows what to do. This would be the most important message before I leave. And such attitudes of HQ personnel would promote all

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kinds of future positive developments at and outside the HQ.

- Thank you for the interview. On behalf of the staff, we wish you the best of luck on your new post.