

Vigilant Sentry 2005:

*Tennessee Army National Guard
Conducts Largest Small-Unit Exchange
in the History of the State Partnership Program*

By Captain Darrin Haas

The heavily laden C5 cargo plane lumbered into Plovdiv Airfield, Bulgaria, filled with military police Soldiers from the Tennessee Army National Guard. The Soldiers were ready to get to work. They had been training tirelessly for the past six months to prepare for the coming two weeks. The 80 Soldiers on board were well prepared and excited about the training experience to follow—Operation Vigilant Sentry 2005.

Since 1993, the nation of Bulgaria and the state of Tennessee have worked together in the State Partnership Program. It is a facet of the Partnership for Peace, a program established by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since the collapse of the Soviet Union to ensure stability in Eastern European countries. Bulgaria and Tennessee were paired because they shared similar geographical and cultural features. The two governments have participated in numerous exchange programs, incorporating both the U.S. Army and the Air National Guards with all the components of the Bulgarian military. Tennessee Army National Guard Soldiers have also participated in major military exercises in Bulgaria, such as Operation Cornerstone and Operation Bulwark, sponsored by the U.S. Air Forces in Europe and the U.S. Army, Europe.

The U.S. Soldiers, just returned from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), received the mission in 2004 to deploy to Bulgaria for a bilateral training exercise with the Bulgarian military police. They looked forward to the experience. Many of them had never been to Bulgaria but had considerable experience to pass on to the Bulgarians, who were training to deploy to Iraq. This event would be the first time that Bulgarian military police soldiers would train side-by-side with their U.S. counterparts in a peacetime environment.

In August 2005, 80 Soldiers drawn from the four Army National Guard military police companies in Tennessee deployed to the Novo Selo Training Range near Sliven, Bulgaria. The 164th Airlift Wing of the

Tennessee Air National Guard transported the Soldiers with their weapons, equipment, and 10 high-mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs). After an overnight stop at Mildenhall, England, the Soldiers landed at Plovdiv Airfield and were transported to their hotel.

The training began the day after their arrival. During the opening ceremony, Major General Gus Hargett, the Tennessee adjutant general, said, “This exercise will permit the relationship between our two armies to continue to grow and enable the bonds that bind our two great nations together to become even stronger.” He also asked for a moment of silence for the fallen Soldiers of both countries during OIF. Bulgarian Major General Orlin Ivanov, director of the Bulgarian Military Police and Counterintelligence Service, echoed those statements. The opening ceremony was followed by a demonstration by the Bulgarians of close-quarters combat and a raid on a building.

For the next two weeks, the U.S. Soldiers and the Bulgarian military police participated in a series of events. The U.S. Soldiers taught a professional development class on the role of U.S. noncommissioned officers (NCOs). U.S. Soldiers and Bulgarian soldiers had an opportunity to become familiar with the other’s weapons systems. Soldiers fired MK19 grenade launchers, AK47 and M16 rifles, and numerous other weapons systems.

Both U.S. Soldiers and Bulgarian soldiers shared tactics, techniques, and procedures for a number of peacekeeping missions: for example, cordon-and-search operations, vehicle convoys, crowd control operations, and checkpoint procedures. The U.S. Soldiers and Bulgarian soldiers trained together and executed a joint scenario of military operations on urbanized terrain. More than 80 people were hired to simulate a rioting crowd of civilians on the battlefield.



Bulgarian military police and U.S. Soldiers from the 268th Military Police Company “stack” before entering a building in a cordon-and-search training exercise.

A Bulgarian military police soldier conducts security operations during a training scenario as a “civilian mob” looks on.



Soldiers had to deploy and contain the rioters using civil disturbance tactics. The civilian crowd was also used to block the movement of convoys. Both the U.S. and Bulgarian troops demonstrated different unarmed self-defense techniques to each other. One NCO from the 267th Military Police Company said, “The Bulgarians were able to execute quickly at full speed with little preparation and no problems. We strengthened our ties with Bulgaria and experienced many similarities between [military police] battle drills, techniques, and tactics.”

“The Bulgarians were capable of quickly understanding and training in our tactics, overcoming the language barrier,” said another NCO from the 267th.

Later in the week, a group of Tennessee Army National Guard Soldiers visited an orphanage for special needs children in the town of Medven. Before deploying to Bulgaria, the Tennessee Soldiers had collected donations among themselves and purchased items the children needed. Some U.S. Soldiers helped unload food, bedding, cleaning supplies, and toys into a storeroom at the orphanage while others learned about the unique situation of the children. One U.S. Soldier said, “It felt amazing to help these unfortunate children and see how much we changed their lives.”

One of the unique aspects to this event was that U.S. Soldiers and Bulgarian soldiers were encouraged to interact with each other during off-duty time. The U.S. Soldiers hosted their Bulgarian counterparts in a local restaurant near the training range. The two groups dined on native Bulgarian cuisine and listened and danced to traditional Bulgarian music. The dinner was an icebreaker for the U.S. Soldiers and the Bulgarian soldiers, where they all learned that they had much in common. Later, the Bulgarians returned the favor.

Another purpose of the training was to encourage better relationships among NATO member countries. The U.S. Soldiers challenged their Bulgarian counterparts to a game of soccer and the two teams squared off in the city’s main soccer field with the city mayor as a spectator. The U.S. Soldiers lost by a score of 5-2, with the score kept low due to the kindness of the Bulgarians.

In one of the final training events, the Bulgarians received training behind the wheel of a U.S. HMMWV and the Americans drove the Bulgarian Lada Niva, a small two-door sedan used as a patrol vehicle. The U.S. Soldiers and the Bulgarian soldiers enjoyed the opportunity to operate a foreign country’s military vehicles and learn their capabilities.

Awards were presented during a short closing ceremony and all the Bulgarian soldiers received U.S.

military police brassards. The Bulgarians presented pins and T-shirts to the U.S. Soldiers. Many of the U.S. Soldiers and Bulgarian soldiers exchanged patches, hats, and other items as souvenirs of the training. Many of them also exchanged e-mail and home addresses to sustain their new friendships. A U.S. Soldier said, “I have a newfound appreciation for Bulgarian culture and respect for the Bulgarian Military Police Corps. It was a really awesome experience to get to know these guys personally and professionally.” The Soldiers from both countries will never forget their two-week experience.

While flying home, the U.S. Soldiers received reports that Hurricane Katrina was ravaging the coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi. Just hours after arriving in Nashville, Tennessee, most of these same Soldiers were mobilized for hurricane support and were quickly enforcing a curfew and providing law and order in Gulfport, Mississippi.