

The largest NATO exercise ever held in the Baltic region relied on elements of the Maryland and Michigan Air National Guard for critical air support.



# Baltic Guard

Photographs by Guy Aceto, Art Director, and Paul Kennedy



**O**ver the coast of the Baltic Sea, a Maryland Air National Guard C-130 joins up on the wing of another Hercules from the 135th Airlift Squadron, wrapping up a mission during Baltic Challenge '98. The transports were based at the small airport at Palanga, Lithuania, for the two-week multinational peacekeeping exercise, in which Air Guard units played an essential tactical lift role. Baltic Challenge '98 was conducted under the auspices of the Partnership For Peace, which creates cooperative opportunities for the militaries of prospective and established NATO members.



It's a long haul from Martin State Airport, just east of Baltimore, to Lithuania, especially if you're doing it in a C-130. Two transports from the Maryland Air Guard made the trip in July, hooking up with Michigan ANG crews. Together, they provided a significant part of the airlift component of this year's Baltic Challenge. The exercise brought together about 4,500 troops from 11 European countries and the US for training in peacekeeping and support, making it one of the largest exercises in Europe this year. The multinational force practiced everything from defense against snipers to mine countermeasures and paradrops of military and humanitarian supplies.

Getting there was no small achievement. It was a seven-plus-hour flight from Maryland to Keflavik, Iceland, and, after an evening of crew rest, another five hours to Palanga. The trip was long and tiring, especially for the flight deck crew, which had to navigate much of the way over the featureless North Atlantic. Capt. Scott Pinkham, above, checks fuel consumption tables, while 1st Lt. Gary Bernard, right, consults a map for the next waypoint. Veterans of deployments like this know the drill: a succession of snacks and attempted catnaps, lulled by the drone of the C-130's turboprops.



From time to time, the clouds broke, and passengers took turns at the window to enjoy one of the few perks of military cargo seating: Spectacular views that most airline customers will never see. At left, glaciers on the southern tip of Greenland surrender icebergs to the ocean.



The two C-130s finally reached their destination: an alert strip turned regional airport, just north of Palanga. At left, one taxis to a parking spot, aided by a Michigan Air Guardsman, who, with fellow Guardsmen, had arrived a few days earlier to set up support for the two transports.

Before long, the airport buzzed with activity as airplanes ferried in the exercise participants. Airborne troops from Estonia and Latvia arrived alongside members of the Michigan and Pennsylvania Army National Guard. The ANG aircraft shared ramp space with Antonov cargo airplanes and helicopters as well as Czech trainers and US Army Black Hawks. At right, a C-130 takes on fuel as it gets ready for its next sortie.



Jointness: A five-man Combat Control Team from the Kentucky ANG—lofted by a Lithuanian Mi-2 helicopter—jumped ahead of other forces to establish control at the drop zones. Here, TSgt. William Hill inspects the Mi-2, while SSgt. Stephen Danforth checks out the seating arrangements within. The exercise provided many such unique opportunities to get closely acquainted with foreign gear. The Kentucky team also jumped from a number of other aircraft types.



*There was no shortage of volunteers when it came time for the jump segment of the exercise. On a drop such as this, loadmasters worked closely with jumpmasters as the aircraft neared the drop zone. Below, TSgts. Erik Stone (left) and Scott Demarco work out the details, and at left, Stone signals that it's time to "rack 'em up."*



Staff photo by Guy Aceto

*The loadmasters watched carefully over their charges: Safety was their paramount concern as the cargo door opened and, at right, the eager paratroops hook up. They were part of a "Baltic Brigade"—a joint Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian unit that had already deployed on a number of peacekeeping missions. There was a mix of uniforms and equipment, but everyone kept his assault rifle tucked in front for easy access.*



Photo by Paul Kennedy



*The C-130s flew nearly every day during the exercise. At left, a Maryland ANG Hercules skirts the coast near the ancient port town of Klaipeda, which served as headquarters for Baltic Challenge '98. Most exercise scenarios centered on peacekeeping and humanitarian relief after a notional "earthquake" in the region. Paratroops practiced dropping in to restore order and distribute supplies brought in by the transports.*



Photo by Paul Kennedy

Above, members of the Baltic Brigade hook up to a static line, which will pull their parachutes open at a preset distance from the airplane. As the C-130 approached the drop zone, it slowed, the green light came on, and in a flurry of shouts, out they went! In a few seconds, the airplane was empty except for the loadmasters and photographers. Troops made jumps both from the cargo ramp (these photos) and the rear side doors of the C-130. The opportunity to jump from new types of aircraft elevated the excitement and camaraderie among the troops, who also compared notes on how they approach their jobs. One jumpmaster made his 2,000th jump, choosing a US C-130 for this special event since he had never jumped from a US aircraft.



Staff photos by Guy Acevo

On the ground, Baltic Challenge '98 was intended to get Allied troops working together at the platoon level, to make things easier when they encounter each other in real-world peacekeeping situations. Besides the air and paratroop elements, there were naval exercises, mine-clearing practice, and convoy operations.





One component of the US Navy's "Mark 7 Marine Mammal System," at left, goes by the name "Tacoma." He's a bottle-nosed dolphin trained to detect mines. Along with four other dolphins, Navy handlers, and two weeks' worth of fish, Tacoma and his fellow dolphins were airlifted to the exercise by a C-141 from Air Force Reserve Command's 445th Airlift Wing out of Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. Working alongside divers, the dolphins secured the waters around Klaipeda for the naval participants in the exercise, including the hospital ship Comfort.



Count on the unexpected. Michigan Air Guard members had to make an unscheduled engine change on a C-130. Nice though Palanga was, these guys wanted to go home. They worked nonstop to reattach the prop and complete repairs in time to depart on schedule.



For many Baltic soldiers, the exercise was the first contact with American troops, once portrayed to them as "the enemy." Interest in getting to know each other was high, and everyone took advantage of the hands-on access to equipment from the various countries. At left, Latvian troops line up for a chance to ride a US C-130.



*The exercise offered benefits to all participants, many of whom may participate in Baltic Challenge '99, wherever it may take them. For the ANG C-130 crews, one of the rewards was the open cargo door, offering a panoramic view of a part of the world long closed to the West. Above, an unmatched vista of the Lithuanian coast is revealed as a C-130 returns to Palanga. At right, Stone—a Harford County, Md., police lieutenant when he's not serving as a loadmaster—takes in the scene.*



*Below, Lithuanian and Maryland state flags fly together from the open cockpits of the Guard C-130s. Besides the professional training gained from exercises like these, troops on both sides benefitted from the cultural exchange. The military-to-military crosstalk is one of the main objectives of such an operation. Among the participants may be the future leaders of the various militaries present at Baltic Challenge '98. Someday, they may be able to fix a problem or avoid a crisis just by picking up the phone and chatting with a friend they met years ago on a windy Baltic tarmac. ■*

