

Volunteers to Bulgaria; Concerns about Russia; More Troops to Iraq

Airmen from the 144th Fighter Wing based in Fresno, Calif., in September completed the first-ever joint NATO air policing mission in Bulgaria, as part of their unit's European Theater security package deployment.

As the 194th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, the unit sent more than 75 airmen to Bulgaria for the roughly two-week mission in response to a request by Bulgarian leaders. The deployment was part of NATO's "enhanced air policing measures" for eastern European countries.

Lt. Col. Robert Swertfager, commander of the 194th EFS, told *Air Force Magazine* he had no problem finding airmen to participate—there were actually far more volunteers than available spots.

"Everybody was extremely excited, especially with the new emphasis on reassuring our eastern European allies," Swertfager said, noting that air sovereignty is important for all NATO allies, "especially on the eastern European edge right now."

During the deployment, the airmen worked with Estonians, Romanians, and Bulgarians, he said.

"It's great, because we're able to learn some of their techniques and tactics, and we're able to share some of ours with them as well, and at the end, we're all just a lot more capable of performing that mission," Swertfager said. "I think, to a person, each one of our members that got down to Bulgaria really enjoyed the mission."

The unit only learned about the deployment a month in advance, but Swertfager said air sovereignty of the West Coast is the 144th Fighter Wing's primary mission at home, so Bulgaria air policing "was a mission that was easy for us to pick up and execute."

While in Bulgaria, US airmen flew "every single day" for the NATO mission, Swertfager said, and two of the four F-15s were on alert at any given time.

Though nothing ever is going to be perfect, Swertfager said, it went well.

"Honestly, the flying part's the easy part," he said. "It is developing the relationships and coordination to ensure that every step of a scramble or an intercept goes flawlessly—that's where we do all of our homework and spend a majority of our time."

Swertfager described his Bulgarian counterparts as "very easy to work with, [with a] very capable air force flying very capable airplanes."

An F-15 from the California ANG lands at Graf Ignatievo AB, Bulgaria, as part of a theater security package to defend the Bulgarian skies.

To see MiG-29s and F-15s on the same ramp is "pretty amazing, and it really inspires you to go the extra mile to get the mission done and to work together," Swertfager said.

The "benchmark takeaway" from this mission was Total Force integration and interoperability, he said. The team of airmen sent to Bulgaria was a mix of Air National Guard and Active Duty members.

The seamless integration "just validates all the training and time that we're putting into doing what we do," he said. "When you tear down the borders of these paradigms, you really harness the ability to accomplish greater things."

The unit's deployment was the latest in a series of European TSPs that began in February 2015 and came as the Department of Defense continues to make the case to quadruple funding for the European Reassurance Initiative.

In late July, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said American allies close to Russia are becoming increasingly concerned about Russian mobilization exercises to test military readiness, and hope the US will make funding for joint operations permanent.

Also in July, Air Force Maj. Gen. David W. Allvin, director of strategy and policy for US European Command, told a House committee that increasing ERI funding will mean the US can change from a focus on assurance to a focus on deterrence.

"We are planning and executing activities designed to serve as a stronger deterrent to Russian aggression," Allvin said.

Meanwhile, to counter ISIS in Iraq, Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter announced that the US military would send 615 additional troops to Iraq for airpower purposes. Part of their mission will be to help build up the Qayyarah West and al Asad airfields and make al Asad a 24-hour air base.

Air Force Col. John L. Dorrian, spokesman for Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, told reporters the US flies remotely piloted aircraft from al Asad, and the Iraqis are already flying their own fighter and attack aircraft from the base, allowing the coalition to "get better intelligence insight into what the enemy is doing."

That's something "we want to be able to do 24/7, 365, not just in daylight hours," he said. ★

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USAF photo by SSgt. Joe W. McFadden