

The Baltic Naval Squadron – BALTRON

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The three Baltic States - Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania began military co-operation in the defence area shortly after regaining independence. The defence-related co-operation has resulted in four military projects such as BALBAT, BALTNET, BALTDEFCOL and BALTRON. The idea to establish a joint naval unit was brought up in 1995. The same year started the first trilateral Baltic naval exercise AMBER SEA-95. In the end of 1996 the practical preparations for the BALTRON project were launched, and Germany undertook the role as the leading nation in the international co-ordination of the project. In April 16 1998 the Ministers of Defence of the Republic of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania signed the formal agreement concerning the es-

tablishment of the BALTRON. On 28 August BALTRON was inaugurated. Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON) is a permanently established tri-national standing Naval Force with mine-countermeasures capabilities. The operational task of BALTRON is to counter mine threats, to reduce environmental damage in the territorial waters and economic zones of the Baltic States and to enhance the security of peacetime seagoing. It is the priority of the project to contribute to the development of the national naval forces and to raise the self-defence capabilities of the Baltic States and to develop interchangeability with NATO/PfP forces.

Another aspiration is to have a capability for participation in multinational peace support operations conducted in

accordance with the United Nations Charter.

It is noted as a precondition for planning and implementation of BALTRON activities that BALTRON will train and act in accordance with NATO/PfP naval and staff procedures, both in the fleet and in the staff. The command and communication language is English, and BALTRON activities apply relevant NATO/PfP procedures and standards.

Activities

BALTRON reached its first operational milestone in September 1998 when the squadron as a multinational naval unit participated in the international mine countermeasures exercise OPEN SPIRIT-

98. The main goals of exercise were to allow BALTRON forces to familiarise themselves with NATO procedures and to bring BALTRON communications up to NATO levels.

During exercise U.S. BALTOPS-99 (an American invitational multinational maritime exercise conducted in the Baltic region) BALTRON staff was working in multinational staff shoulder to shoulder with naval officers from Poland, Germany, UK and Norway due to improve overall co-ordination and understanding. So the issuing orders and reporting has followed NATO standards and procedures.

Mine Countermeasures (MCM) Exercise PAS SEX-99 between BALTRON and Mine Countermeasures Force North-western Europe (MCMFN) based on request from Baltic States to NATO was used to create the framework for tasking of ships in order to facilitate procedural and tactical training. Prior to sailing BALTRON staff was embarked on a NATO staff ship. Tasking authority for all participants were Commander MCMFN and Commander BALTRON. During actual exercise

BALTRON staff was involved in tasking and monitoring the situation, commander's briefings and message drafting, preparation and conducting pre-sail and post-exercise briefings. The co-operation of BALTRON and MCMFN was a very valuable experience both for the ships and for the staff as well.

1999 was first full year of operations for BALTRON. BALTRON conducted activities aimed to prepare for stated aims. Beside preparations for main tasks, very important was the presence of the Naval forces of the Baltic States in the Baltic Sea, promotion of the NATO integration process and optimised use of resources. 1999 was difficult year but at the same time it gave to all Baltic Navies first experience in operating the combined squadron during around the year.

Structure and Composition

BALTRON is comprised of a combined tri-national staff and national ships from three Baltic Navies. Each nation provides 1-2 vessels. Each ship in the force

serves for six months at a time. Currently squadron is composed of Staff and Supply ship LNS Vetra (Lithuanian Navy ship), minesweepers ENS Kalev (Estonian Navy ship) and LVNS Imanta (Latvian Navy ship). At the same time BALTRON ships also remain integral parts of national navies of the Baltic States. At the moment BALTRON units have been dismissed to national bases for the crew change, ship maintenance and crew rest. In accordance with the Annual BALTRON activities plan for year 2000 the force will be collected again in Liepaja on the 20 of March and will continue their duties.

The BALTRON staff has started work October 1997 in Tallinn. The staff is fully operational since April 1998 and consists of the following positions: Chief of staff, Operations officer, Communications Officer and Public Relation Officer. Commander BALTRON and staff officers are appointed for a period of at least 12 months. Currently the staff is organised as an operational staff without the administrative capacity and it is designed to operate on board a Staff ship. During

the winter phase BALTRON staff organised more extensive staff planning using on-shore facility located at the Estonian Naval base. Also staff can use on temporary basis other naval facilities in the Baltic States as agreed in the annual activity plan.

BALTRON Units

The force employs two basic types of ships (donation of Germany) to clear mines: minesweeper and mine hunter. The minesweeper methodically travels back and forth across an area at the sea, dragging a buoy that cuts the cord from any mines that are anchored on the sea floor. The mine floats to the surface of the sea where it can be seen and detonated. The minesweeper also deals with influence mines by simulating acoustic and magnetic fields of shipping with a towed solenoid. The minesweepers operating with BALTRON (FRAUENLOB and KONDOR class ships) are considered in-shore sweepers.

The minehunter (LINDAU class) searches ahead with the sonar with which

it can detect mine like objects. When it find a mine, a remote controlled robot is submerged in the water and places an explosive on the mine to detonate it.

Two minehunters are in service with the Baltic States (LVNS Namejs and LNS Suduvis). These vessels are equipped with a modern mine detection and classification system. Their crews have been extensively trained in Germany prior to the ships arriving in Latvia and Lithuania. During exercise MCMOPLAT-99 LVNS Namejs impressed every one by finding and disposing of the first mine in the entire operation.

Personnel

Our Navies are very young, and are working hard to establish themselves in the new environment. There are a lot of young officers coming back from different countries' naval schools and academies, who are willing to use what they have learned to help the progress. One of such officers is the Executive Officer of the Estonian Navy ship OLEV Elvira

BARANOVA. On May 1999 she graduated from the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis with degree in Marine Engineering and the rank of Sublieutenant. Since June 1999, she has been serving in BALTRON. In this period she took part in exercises OPEN SPIRIT-99, AMBER SEA -99 and MCOPLAT-99. For this last operation she worked as staff officer on the Task Group staff.

Elvira BARANOVA tells that there is a big difference between the organisation and function of the US Navy and the Estonian Navy. The differences come from the size of the state, the economic and political situation, the geographical location, and the historical background. However, the basics are the same in virtually any modern military: the military discipline, the leadership principles, task performance standards, etc. The training conducted during the four years in Annapolis instilled a good sense of all that, plus it was an outstanding stress management workshop. It also helped to attain a very broad view of the world's militaries. Knowing the differences between various

navies and having the chance to see how things are done and organised elsewhere helps to get new ideas for own young navy.

Sublieutenant BARANOVA insists that being the only female in the squadron is tough at times, but at the same time it is a good opportunity for her colleagues to get used to the thought that there will be more women actively involved in sailing and mine warfare. Having women as part of the ship's company is a common thing in the US Navy now. For the Estonian Navy, however, it is a new experience, as in fact it is in Latvian Navy and Lithuanian Navy.

Training

The training system within the BALTRON project is oriented in three directions:

- Training of the staff personnel and units assigned to BALTRON before joining BALTRON and provided by a sending nation.
- Training of the personnel assigned to BALTRON before joining BALTRON and provided through BALTRON project by supporting nations.

- Training of the personnel, units and squadron during deployment to BALTRON.

Training provided by sending nations:

Each sending nation is responsible for the preparation of its national units (personnel and ships) assigned to BALTRON. National units must be fully operational for the time of assignment. It is expected that person joining BALTRON be trained to perform assigned duties. For a ship, it is expected to be trained up to conduct all assigned tasks on unit level and be capable to work together in the squadron.

Communicators proved to be insufficient. All these had impact upon BALTRON performance during second part of the year and required to allocate time for basic exercises instead of scenario based exercises.

Training provided by supporting nations.

Supporting nations have provided training support in following areas:

- Officers MCM staff training in Belgian-Netherlands Minewarfare school;
- Communications officer training in United Kingdom;

- Communications operators, technicians and instructors training in Danish Signal School;

- Specialized Damage Control training in German Navy damage Control school. This training involves firefighting, shoring and rescue at sea.

- Divers training in Norway.

Training conducted during deployment to the squadron.

During deployment to the squadron training is executed mainly on squadron level in order to prepare the squadron to conduct MCM operations in the future.

In order to execute training on a squadron level BALTRON has conducted squadron exercises and participated in multinational exercises. These have been mainly small to medium scale scenario based MCM exercises. Beside MCM, seamanship, communications and surface gunnery have been trained during these exercises.

International support

From its beginning the BALTRON project has attracted wide international

support. The states supporting the establishment of BALTRON are Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, United Kingdom, and United States. The international support to BALTRON is focused on providing equipment, training and expertise advice. Supporting nations have organised and conducted:

- Full set of diving equipment for those divers (Norway);
- Setting up the communications training centre in Tallinn and installation of communication equipment by Danish Navy;
- Providing the language laboratory by United States;
- Providing of degaussing (electromagnet and acoustic management) by Sweden;
- Sending staff officers to BALTRON staff in order to supervise and support the staff personal.

During the First and Second World Wars parts of the Baltic Sea were mined. Recent mine clearance operations in the coastal waters along Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have shown that remaining mines and ordnance in the area still pose

a threat to fishery and shipping. Therefore, 1996 The Latvian Defence Minister Krastins wrote a letter to the German Defence Minister Ruhe proposing a German - Latvian exercise with the aim to sweep the mines which were found in former minefield. The result was that 16 mines, 3 torpedoes and 1 bomb were countermined. Germany and The Baltic States agreed upon an annual Exercise in the Spirit of partnership for peace. Since 1996 German Navy Minewarfare Flotilla leads an annual Exercise conducted in waters of Baltic States. The exercise is called OPEN SPIRIT. It aims to effectively foster the maritime co-operation in the Baltic Sea area in the spirit of PFP, to counter ordnance's (mines, torpedoes, bombs, shells, etc.) in the Baltic Sea, thereby contributing to the reduction of the environmental damage in the area and to provide an opportunity for all participating units to increase their individual knowledge and capability.

The overall result of ordnance found only in the Riga Gulf is as follows: 38 mines, 8 bombs, and 12 torpedoes.

After an official request the Swedish Navy carried out Route Survey in the Baltic States beginning in 1994. Follow operations were called MCOPEST, MCOPLAT and MCOPLIT. During the past five years the Swedish Navy has performed seven mine and ammunition clearance operations in the Baltic. 97 mines, 57 units of unexploded ammunition have been destroyed in a 900 km² area.

Last operation MCOPLAT-99 (Mine Counter-measure Operation in Latvia, 1999), organised by the Swedish Navy's 21st MCM Flotilla from 18 October to 2 November 1999, successfully located and destroyed 35 mines in waters of Riga Gulf. Overall, 19 ships and 530 men from 10 countries participated in operation. Continuous support by the Supporting States is important for the further development of the BALTRON project. Especially the support from states with experience in NATO mine countermeasure operations is encouraged. Future development is concentrated on improvement of sweeping capabilities and expanding minehunting capability.