


DEFENDING THE HORIZON

INTERVIEW WITH:

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Defence 



With today's geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe, the importance of guarding the air space has only intensified. The Baltic QRA (Quick Reaction Alert) is tasked with securing the northern-eastern flank of Europe. Defence IQ was privileged to interview **LTC Jacob Swen** on his experience.

Who tasked you for this deployment, and how much planning time have you had for the overall deployment planning phase?

We've been tasked as a wing from our higher headquarters, obviously, like it's usual in the armed forces and, in general, if it's a long-planned mission like this was, we have one year time for preparation, so plenty of time to get ready and get settled.

What were the reasons for setting up this kind of operation?

Air policing is a NATO task. Every nation provides air policing above its own country to cover for short-term problems, aircraft flying in and out that are not supposed to be there, and some nations have a lack of suitable air forces, don't have the capable fighter jets or something like that.

And in this case, it's a common task for all NATO nations to stand by for each other and help out. This is the case for a couple of countries in NATO, Europe, for example for Luxembourg, Iceland and especially for the Baltics. And in the Baltics, it's usually that way that in a four-month rotation all nations are asked to provide support, and Germany is one of those nations responding to that task.

Since when are you participating in the operation in the Baltics?

Germany itself has been involved in Baltic air policing since 2005, since 2009, already, with the Eurofighter Typhoon, and since 2014, we've been in the Baltics every single year.

How often have you already participated in this operation?

Me, personally, I there three times, in Estonia in 2016, 2018 and during the switchover from 2022 to 2023. And additionally, I was in Air Policing South, so not in the Baltics, in 2022. So, I have some experience.

How many materials, aircraft and personnel had to be transferred for the deployment?

It always depends, obviously, on the base that we're going to. Since 2014, we've been regularly in Amari in Estonia, and there we have been working with about 130 persons and, yes, a total of about 140 tons of equipment that we need to sustain for about a four-month period.

Which fighter wings were involved in the deployment?

Normally, the task goes to a single wing, and then the single wing takes over. Our wing, Fighter Wing 74, has been there in 2014, 2016 and 2018 as being in charge, and we were supporting in the other years, when another wing was going up there. So, we normally don't combine the whole air force, like the Royal Airforce is doing it, we send it to one wing and they perform the task.

How was the transfer to the deployment operation base? Was it via Air to Air Refueling (AAR) or land-hopping?

No, actually for the Baltics it's a single hop. We can fly there with all the fuel we have, it's not that big of a distance, so we don't need air-to-air refuelling, or don't have to land in-between.

What was your designation, training, air policing, QRA?

Yes, air policing is the overall task, so what we do there is sit on QRA 24-7 and provide that task. However, we do also training missions, and we, as the Germans, actually fly twice a day for training if we're not tasked for hot scramble. We actually do a lot of training out there, from smaller situation training up to complex missions if we have to.



In case of a QRA assignment, how many aircraft had to be on 24-7, and how many spare aircraft had to be available?

We actually had two aircraft on status that could go up for scramble, and we had two spares available.

Could you outline the daily routine of your aircrews?

Obviously, it depends on the timing and when you do the crew shift. Normally, what we do is we change the personnel in the morning and then we sit actually 24-7 in the QRA building. If we can, and we're not tasked for a certain mission, we do training, one AM go and one PM go. And for the rest of the time, we sit around and wait to be tasked, or maybe, or hopefully actually, not to be tasked.

Could you describe the standard information loop on how your aircrews get scrambled? And how fast do they have to be airborne in case of a QRA scramble?

In the case of a scramble, we have to be airborne within 15 minutes. That's the regular status we are on. The decision is made in a CRC, so in a control and reporting centre of NATO, and they have a big screen there and see all the aircraft flying around in Europe and they make the decision if they need us, or, for example, if an aircraft stops behaving like it's supposed to.

And then they basically press a button, that goes down via the chain and, in our building, there's a siren, we start running to the jet and go airborne. And sometimes, when they see something is coming up, they put us on a higher alert state, for example for ten minutes alert or five minute alert, depending on the alert status, we either basically sit in the building or even sit already in the jet to get ready.

What was your fastest time for a scramble, up to being airborne with the Eurofighter?

It depends if you're cheating or not, meaning sometimes we get preplanned information, we also look at the big screen. But if you don't know the scramble is coming, it's about nine to 11 minutes, about the standard, during daytime, where everybody's awake. And obviously if you're at night, a little bit sleepy, everything gets a bit slower, everything is dark, then we need 13 or 14 minutes, that is why we have this 15 minutes to cover for smaller problems.

During a QRA scramble, what kind of aircraft were you intercepting, and what was your follow-on task after the interception?

We've been intercepting all kinds of aircraft so far, from military transport aircraft, VIP business jets, command post special jets, reconnaissance aircraft, lots of them, and typically, of course, fighters. All those fighters, or most of the fighters, even were armed when we saw them coming up.

And when we fly there, the primary task of course is to identify what aircraft it is, take some pictures as proof that they've been up there, and most of the time we escort them for a certain while and check out what they're doing.

If they're not acting according to international standards, for example they didn't file a flight plan or they're not talking to ATC control, or not sending transponder messages, that's especially important, we fly next to them, then we send out our transponder message, so everybody else can see that there's a chunk of metal flying around and not endangering anybody.

If you get re-tasked during an airborne mission, how does it happen?

Obviously via radio contact and there's a coding matrix that they're sending us. For example, if they say, you're next task is to escort, then we want to make sure that we get the task from the right person and we have a small sheet with a code on there and we ask for a certain code, and only if this code is answered correctly then we fulfil the task.

Did you have any air-to-air refuelling during your missions? And if so, which nation was providing the air-to-air refuelling aircraft?

For the standard mission up there, there's no tanker on an alert status. So if it's a preplanned mission, yes, there are tankers coming up there, and then there are tankers coming from every NATO nation. We had tankers from the Brits up there, from the French, from the US, from Germany of course. But on a daily mission, there's no tanker being tasked because the region is not that big, so you don't need the tanker. But if the situation goes higher and we have to loiter for a certain time, then, yes, we would ask for a tanker to come up there.

Since the war began in Ukraine, has there been a change in the mode of operations of the Baltics air policing operations? And if so, what were the biggest changes?



Actually, and also a little bit surprisingly, the mission did not change much. We expected that maybe the Russian aircraft were violating the regulations more often or flying more aggressively than they have been in the years before. And they did not. They still violated some of the rules on a regular basis, but it did not change so much.

What actually happens on the NATO side is that we were often tasked more to fly closer to the borders to Russia and Belarus, to just show that NATO is there and show a presence. But the regular tasking of the Baltic air policing did not change so much.

Does Kaliningrad play an important role in your air-to-air operations?

Yes, it does. Actually, I think it is most of the reason why we are up there, because obviously Kaliningrad is part of Russia and is not connected with the mainland of Russia by land, so all the Russian aircraft that are flying to Kaliningrad, and they have to get their material up there, get information, get people down there, they always have to fly because there's no other way to get there.

And they fly over international waters, normally, and then we come in play, and escort them. So, Kaliningrad, yes, that's probably the main reason why we're up there.

Did you encounter any electronic warfare or communication spoofing measures from non-NATO states during your Baltic operations?

It's a tricky question, of course, because electronic warfare is a form of aggression. We know, obviously, that the Russian aircraft are spying on us by passive reconnaissance, but we did not encounter like jamming or spoofing information.

We obviously had some of their radars looking at us and following us, and that obviously is indicated, but I wouldn't call that electronic warfare by itself. That would be an aggression that could possibly lead to war. So, it did not happen in that fashion so far.

Nowadays, the four-month Baltic air operation deployment is shared between multiple nations. Does that provide an advantage, and, if so, who is benefiting the most from it?

The rotation is the only way to do it. Obviously, not just one single nation can fulfil the task all the time, otherwise we have to set up our own base in the region. So, the four-month rotation is a good way to handle it, for the training, obviously you have to come back and do other missions.

But during the change-over periods, obviously we learn from each other, we see how other nations have the

set-up there. The tactics are almost the same. We are NATO, we talk to each other, we understand each other, but sometimes it's nice to see how other nations work their procedures, especially.

And normally there are always two nations up there in the Baltics, one most of the time in the north, one in the south, and obviously we fly training missions with each other, and that is a big benefit, to fly and train in the air together.

Does the Eurofighter fulfil the mandatory NATO requirement for this kind of operation?

Of course, it does, otherwise we wouldn't do the mission. Yes.

From the fighter-pilot point of view, what are the challenges between day-time versus night-time missions?

Obviously, it's visibility. The human eye cannot see as good during the night as during daytime. 3D vision is a little bit limited, so, yes, it's a challenge. But obviously we have instruments for that, for example we have a night vision device with us to cover that.

And for the Western types of aircraft, they're all lit up with lights during the night, according to regulation, with red, white, and green so we can see. Some of the Russian aircraft sometimes don't have a light on, or have only a single light on, which makes it hard to identify which direction they're flying. That's where the night vision devices come in handy.

We get trained for that. As I said before, obviously during nighttime, everybody's a little bit slower, but that's part of our deal, it's part of the training, and we're ready for that.

Have you flown training missions? And if so, which kinds of training missions have you flown? Who were your training partners?

Yes, I mentioned before obviously we do fly training missions regularly, twice a day. When we are all up alone, we are there for fighter controller training. The fighter controllers are either from whole NATO or from the Baltic states. They are NATO as well but obviously they need some training because they don't have their own fighter aircraft.

We train with each other, with a partner in the southern part or the northern part of the Baltics. But also the surrounding nations, like Finland, obviously now being in NATO but last time we've been up there they have not been in NATO already, and also with Sweden. And I saw, personally, French aircraft, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Czech, US, all the nations across the globe that are up there.



As the operation is rotated amongst other NATO members, how does this handover work? Is there an overlapping operation? Can you explain how this works and where are the challenges?

Yes. Most of the time, the big challenge is, that the infrastructure we have there is made for one nation. So the challenge during the handover is who parks his jet now in the left shelter, in the right shelter, who's sleeping in which bed? And the biggest problem is the IT thing.

We are all in NATO but we have national IT regulations, so that is the biggest challenge, to get one of the computers out and the other one in, because we have to be on-status all the time, so there's not two days off in-between. Obviously, both nations that switch over in the north and the south do not do that on the same day, so if something goes wrong, obviously one of the nations are still ready, but yes, that's a challenge. But we do not normally have an overlapping or joint operation at the same time.

In the past, we did some special training to train for that, we did that with Spain and with Great Britain so far. That was intentionally, but the normal regulation is without joint operations. So we just show up, and at, whatever, 12 o'clock, the old nation is still in and a 12:01, the new nation is in.

If you had to name the most beneficial advantage of the Eurofighter, what would it be?

There are a lot of things, obviously, but as a pilot, obviously the engines and the power of the engines is the most interesting thing. It's very maneuverable as well. I've seen a couple of other aircraft. I was flying the Phantom and the MiG-29 before, and the Eurofighter obviously flying wise is better than that. And the other good thing, the Eurofighter, it's been criticised a lot but the good thing is it's a computer aircraft so it has the capability of growth and development. So it just depends on us what kind of software we put in there, and if we all work together, the Eurofighter community, we can bring the Eurofighter forward, and we did that over the last couple of years quite well. So yes, power, maneuverability and the growth capability, that's probably the most advantages of the Eurofighter itself.

