

Project Partnership

— it works at the company level

CPT Raymond T. Van Pelt

As I stood in front of my company on the parade field waiting for the ceremony to begin, I was struck by the apparent differences between my unit and the German chemical company next to us. The German soldiers marched to a slow cadence of 60 counts per minute, arms swinging in front of them. Thick black pistol belts circled their dress gray uniforms. Their boots were bloused and they wore red berets.

On the other side of the parade field, we marched out at a brisk cadence of 120 counts per minute, arms swinging slightly at our sides. We wore dress green uniforms, black low quarters, and green garrison caps. Caucasian males made up the German ranks. Our company contained both men and women from all ethnic backgrounds.

Yet, despite the differences, a bond and similarity existed between our two units. We were both chemical decon units with similar missions, assigned to Germany in support of NATO. During this ceremony, we would exchange scrolls, signifying that we were partners under Project Partnership.

The Project Partnership program, sponsored by USAREUR and the German Ministry of Defense, aims to improve the relationship between

German and US forces stationed in Germany by encouraging joint military training. In order to apply for a partnership, units must be similar in organization and mission, such as two armor battalions supporting AF-CENT. To request an official partnership, the units must develop a relationship and document five significant training and military events throughout the past year.

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The request for partnership is forwarded through each unit's chain of command to the USAREUR and German Ministry of Defense headquarters. Upon joint approval at these headquarters, the units receive partnership scrolls that are exchanged between the units at a ceremony.

Project Partnership is normally conducted at the battalion level, since

most units in both armies operate, train, and fight at the battalion level. So, awarding partnerships at this level is consistent with our methods of organizing and training. However, there are instances when two companies may wish to establish a partnership at the unit level. Such was the case between the 10th Chemical Company and 2/900 ABC (Atomic, Biological and Chemical).

When assuming command of the 10th Chemical Company, 84th Ordnance Battalion, one of my goals was to establish a training relationship and possibly a partnership with a German chemical decon unit. I mentioned this to my platoon leaders and platoon sergeants during a training meeting early in my command and found them excited and supportive. I approached my battalion commander a little hesitantly. After all, I was a new company commander pursuing a USAREUR project established for battalions — and wanting to train outside the battalion and outside of the U.S. Army!

So one day after a command and staff call, I explained my desires to train and work with a German chemical company, to learn how our counterparts train, equip, and organize for chemical decon operations.

We'd learn their doctrine and see if NATO standardization of certain NBC operations really worked at the unit level. Finally, the training relationship with a German company would be different and fun for the soldiers.

The commander leaned back in his chair, thought about it for a moment, and said, "You chemical guys are always coming up with new ideas. I like it. Go for it. Just make sure I get involved in the fun stuff!"

My first sergeant and operations officer scouted some potential German units and decided to approach the 900 ABC Battalion in Zwiebrücken. I met the commander of the 2/900 ABC Company, Hauptman (Captain) Gnan, in January 1989. We immediately established a good rapport by swapping paratrooper stories and discussing the highlights and frustrations of company command. He was very enthusiastic about training together. We both agreed that we should take

the relationship one event at a time and ensure that the NCOs and soldiers were intimately involved with the project. We wanted this to be a unit relationship, soldier to soldier, NCO to NCO — not just one between two commanders.

The 10th Chemical Company and the 2/900 ABC are similar in structure and mission. The 10th Chemical Company, a theater-level decon company, has missions in the rear area. Likewise, the 2/900 ABC, a territorial decon company, has support responsibilities to command and control and support elements. This similarity in mission and organization allowed us to schedule realistic complementary training.

The structure and organization of the German chemical decon company differs from our own corps/theater level decon company. Our units have five decon platoons and a headquarters platoon. We rely on outside assets for recon and security. The average German chemical decon company, on the other hand, has two decon platoons, a recon platoon, a security platoon, and a headquarters platoon. The decon platoons conduct equipment decon missions with recon, security, and administrative support from the rest of the company.

The lengths of tour for the units' personnel differ. Generally, our unit commanders are in command for 18 months, and our NCOs are with the company for 2 to 3 years. The German company commander's tour lasts from three to four years. The first sergeant, being the true "father" of the unit, stays with the company for 10 or more years. The NCOs normally stay with the unit for

five or six years.

This system produces a very cohesive and experienced unit leadership. They need it, because the unit's enlisted soldiers rotate in from civilian life every 18 months. The officers and NCOs conduct individual reception, basic, and advanced training at the company. After four or five months, the unit begins to train on collective missions at the platoon and company level.

Despite the differences between the US and German units, two facets of organization are the same. First, the NCOs are responsible for individual soldier training and soldier welfare, while the officers are concerned with collective training, planning, and resources. Second, the most critical positions in the unit are the company commander and first sergeant. The commander has the vision and sets the goals for the unit. The first sergeant helps the unit attain those goals and, in the process, ensures each soldier's needs are taken care of.

We initiated our relationship with the 2/900 ABC by conducting joint training events focusing on squads and platoons. For example, we exchanged squads on rifle ranges, decon missions, and field training exercises. During a decon mission, one of my platoon leaders would use a German squad with its organic decon equipment. By maintaining squad integrity during training events, soldiers overcame the initial reluctance and fear of the unknown. They worked together in their own squad to contribute to the overall mission of the supported platoon. Of course, we would never cross-level squads during combat, but these soldiers learned, at the most basic level, to be partners and complete missions with their NATO allies.

A plus in training together was learning the similarity of equipment used by each unit. The Germans use a lot of US equipment ranging from the M8 alarm to the M256 decon kit. It was nice to see the NATO stand-



CPT Van Peit (right) gives Hauptman Schoen a memento signifying their work together on "Project Partnership."

ardization of equipment really working! My soldiers were very interested in the German FOX recon vehicle. On FTXs they were eager to hop in and drive the vehicle. We recognized its value and weren't surprised to see the US forces in Desert Storm employing FOXs on loan from the German Bundeswehr.

While we oriented our training initially in the NBC area we soon branched out into other common military training areas. We conducted joint MOUT training, rappelling, and ran through the same obstacle courses. On FTXs, American soldiers dug fighting positions and emplaced weapons under the guidance of a German platoon sergeant. Our soldiers soon realized that regardless of language, culture, or uniform, we had a lot in common. Despite our differences in technique, there is a universal similarity between the basic soldier and the daily tasks that comprise his craft.

For formal military events, we had representatives from each unit present. This served to further each soldier's knowledge of the allied Army customs and ceremonies. During Hauptman Gnan's change of command with Hauptman Schon, a platoon of 10th Chemical stood in ranks with the 2/900 ABC to show our support and solidarity. Major General Watson, then the Commandant of the Chemical School, visited the 10th Chemical Company during his visit to Germany in 1989. The 2/900 ABC set up an equipment display in our motor pool of the current German unit level equipment and doctrine.

In building a solid relationship between units, we found it important to emphasize social events. While training and professional development are important, the partnership should also be fun! Soldiers who relax and share a beer together or enjoy an evening's social event work together better on the next training mission.

We invited the 2/900 ABC to our

organization day in June 1989 to have fun, relax, and further social relationships. The Germans agreed to join in the platoon competition events that were ongoing throughout the day. The day's main event was the tug of war final competition between the 2/900 ABC team and my unit's headquarters team. The 2/900 ABC team looked extremely impressive from a physical standpoint, experienced NCOs who obviously spent much time in the weight-lifting room. The American headquarters team frankly didn't seem to have a chance. As the tugging began, the German first sergeant barked cadences at his team. Our first sergeant took one look at our skinny mechanics, cooks, and supply technicians, and bowed his head to pray. Somehow, our team held their own and gradually began pulling the 2/900 team across the line. To the amazement of all, especially the German first sergeant, our headquarters team won. Our team went wild with excitement, while the 2/900 NCOs dejectedly looked at the rope burns on their hands. I was filled with mixed emotions: I was proud of our soldiers, but, knowing how competitive the Germans were, I hoped we hadn't snubbed our guests.

At the conclusion of the day, the two unit Commanders and First Sergeants sat down to discuss future training. Any ambiguous feelings I had were put to rest when the German First Sergeant said he talked to his NCOs, and they decided it was time to pursue an official partnership with the 10th Chemical Company. Their reason: anyone who could beat them in the tug of war had to be pretty good and worthy of a continued

relationship.

Submitting our partnership request was unique because it proposed a partnership at the individual company level. Because we could document significant training events and showed a sincere desire and determination to make this partnership successful, both chains of command were receptive and eventually approved our requests. As we waited for our requests to be approved we continued to develop our relationship through joint military, social, and civic events.

German military units are often "partners" with a local town. The 2/900 was partners with the little village of Bizengen, near the French border. Each year the company trains in the local woods and culminates the week of training with a cookout. The townspeople come to the cookout, bring pastries, and provide music. During the year, whenever the town



Hauptman Schoen holds the "Project Partnership" memento.

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had a parade or festival, the 2/900 was invited to assist and participate. The soldiers of the 2/900 ABC put on displays for the elementary school children. They invited the townspeople to unit functions and Christmas parties. Because of our relationship with the 2/900, the 10th Chemical Company began attending Bizengen town festivals and civic functions. Our soldiers gained a new insight and warm regard for the German people and their customs.

I believe that project partnership is extremely valuable and can be successfully executed at the company level. My soldiers gained a lot from this program. They learned about the host nation's doctrine, equipment, training, organization, and culture. The program improved our unit's morale and esprit de corps. Soldiers participating in this program learned that despite the color and make of uniforms, the different languages, or the techniques of doing business, there is a great brotherhood and commonalty between soldiers.

The collective training payoffs from Project Partnership are many. After we began training with the 2/900, both units were tasked to support Operation Golden Python, the chemical munition retrograde out of Europe. Each unit provided decon support at different phases of the operation. Although there was no formal mission association during the operation between the two units, we had an informal relationship that kept

us abreast of the mission from the other nation's perspective. It was reassuring to know that our partners, a unit we were confident in and trusted, were on the other side of the fence providing the same mission support.

As another training benefit at the individual level, soldiers learn how to interact with other allied soldiers, even where a language barrier exists. I realized this during REFORGER 90 when our unit deployed to Belgium. During this exercise we trained with numerous Belgian units, and my soldiers performed admirably. I asked them how they were able to work so well with the "foreigners." They replied that the experience of training with the Germans had taught them how to work with any soldiers, regardless of the nationality.

Overall the partnership system is valuable and should be used in Germany for all chemical companies. We have a similar partnership program in CONUS existing between the Active Component and National Guard/Army Reserve units. I would recommend all active duty chemical companies pursue this program. After Operation Desert Storm, no one will question the unit commander who wants to train more with Reserve forces and develop closer relationships. Additionally, I think home-based units should pursue partner-type relationships with small towns in the neighboring area. With the wave of patriotism in the land, this is a good time to find towns that, like Bizengen,

will adopt a unit and its soldiers. Our townspeople might like to support our units all the time instead of only during times of national crises.

Finally, Project Partnership improved our unit morale and enriched our unit history. It is an event in the unit's history that remains permanent. Such a partnership contributes to a unit's unique identity. For our unit, it was an accomplishment we felt proud about and that set us apart from other units. In light of budget cuts and impending strength drawdown, we should explore all ways of improving training and morale. We should enhance unit cohesiveness in inexpensive and innovative ways. Project Partnership can help a unit commander accomplish this goal.

The Commander of the 900 ABC Battalion was a thin, stoic man with piercing eyes. In an extremely formal manner, he handed me the German Ministry of Defense Partnership Scroll on that March day in front of my unit. As he shook my hand, he smiled ever so slightly and said softly, "Well done, Willkommen!"

We had come a long way in 16 months — from being two separate units, from two armies with little in common. We were together now as allies, friends, and partners.

At the time this article was written, CPT Raymond T. Van Pelt was enrolled in the Eisenhower Fellowship Program for Tactical Officers at the United States Military Academy, West Point. He has held leadership positions as platoon leader, executive officer and detachment commander for the chemical units within the 82d Airborne Division. He commanded the 10th Chemical Company and was the S3/3 for the 84th Ordnance Battalion, 60th Ordnance Group, in Germany. He is a graduate of the SUNY at Cortland and was commissioned through Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1983.