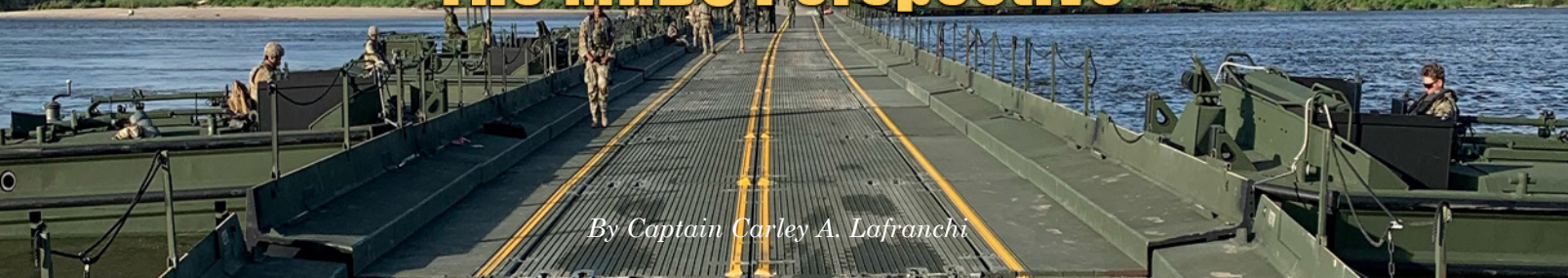


Lessons Learned From Defender Europe 2022: The MRBC Perspective



By Captain Carley A. Lafranchi

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is actively shifting its focus to large-scale combat operations, which has prompted Defender Europe, an annual exercise between several NATO members, to grow in strength and scope. Defender Europe is an exercise designed to help train international partners in preparation for a peer or near-peer threat, testing theater level command and control, logistics, and credible combat capability. Each year, different countries host the exercise and work with participating nations to create training objectives. Last year, the exercise unexpectedly aligned with rising tensions and conflicts within Europe, ultimately solidifying and strengthening the relationships between current and future NATO members.

As part of Defender Europe 2022, several units planned and executed the extremely complex mission set of wet-gap crossings. The 74th Multirole Bridge Company (MRBC), 62d Engineer Battalion, 36th Engineer Brigade, Fort Hood,



A 1st Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment, Abrams crosses an IRB in Nowogród, Poland

Texas, participated in the portion of the exercise held in Poland, demonstrating interoperability and multiple capabilities throughout the exercise. Only six Regular

Army MRBCs exist, providing a unique capability—that of bridging wet- and dry-gap obstacles.

Defender Europe 2022 consisted of five critical phases. The 74th MRBC participated in Phase III, “Long-Distance Movement.” During this phase, a maneuver battalion (1st Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment [1-66], 3d Armored Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, Colorado) joined the 74th MRBC at two locations to execute wet-gap crossings. The 74th MRBC maneuvered Abrams main battle tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles to the far shore to allow 1-66 to seize objectives. At each location, the phases of the

wet-gap crossing were executed while integrating gap-crossing fundamentals, flexible planning, extensive preparation, the element of surprise, traffic management, and organizational speed through unit integration and coordination.¹

There were several lessons learned during the course of the 74th MRBC participation in Defender Europe 2022, beginning with lessons learned regarding predeployment and preparation.

Predeployment and Preparation Lessons Learned

Throughout planning conferences, the 74th MRBC received several mission briefings on the roles and expectations within Defender Europe 2022. The unit assumed risk and focused training on specific mission-essential tasks. Concentrating on select supporting collective tasks allowed the training cycle to be tailored toward specific exercise requirements, enabling increased mission set complexity and contingency planning during training.

Each country participating in Defender Europe 2022 retained unique self-governing laws and regulations. The 74th MRBC coordinated with U.S. Army Europe and Africa to understand the requirements, limitations, and constraints of operating in Poland. Standard operating procedures/execution checklists, planning conferences, in-country points of contact, and resident knowledge of experienced Soldiers were put in place to create condition checks and enable mission success.

Army prepositioned stock (APS) was available for this mission. The on-hand list was assessed early in order to identify shortfalls and create a unit deployment list; critical equipment unavailable through APS was then shipped from the home station to ensure that the company could execute mission objectives.

The mission began with an APS equipment draw. The equipment was shipped from the Belgium/Netherlands/Luxembourg region. APS civilians and the hired contract team had a fluid and highly efficient process for drawing equipment. Signing for the modified table of organization and equipment was completed within 3 hours. However, inventorying components of end items and basic issue items (BII) while conducting preventive maintenance checks and services and technical inspections took 36 hours and was spread over 4 days. After reconfiguring secondary loads to

align with the unit standard operating procedure, the 74th MRBC departed for its mission at Wet-Gap Crossing 1 and joined forces with the Swedish *Göta* Engineer Regiment. Several lessons were learned regarding prepositioned stock.

Prepositioned Stock Lessons Learned

Regardless of unit type, units utilizing APS must inquire about the stock early, asking what associated items are included in the draw; in this case, shop stock quadruple containers, bulldozer BII, a triple container, and the BII box of skid steer attachments arrived in addition to the rolling stock. Factoring in redundancy, the 74th MRBC drew additional platforms with lift capabilities. This enabled the 74th MRBC to secure and transport all organic and attached equipment between locations instead of needing to request support for each site.

The 74th MRBC brought select repair parts and petroleum, oils, and lubricants (POLs), unaware that APS had already allocated parts and a similar container filled with POL to the shop stock. The home station containers arrived at the time of the APS technical inspections, allowing access to the needed POLs. This contributed to the equipment rapidly becoming fully mission-capable. The repair parts brought from the home station were specific to unique engineer equipment that required extended acquisition lead times. These items were not present in the APS shop stock, so it was helpful to have them on hand to keep the unit mission-capable. If possible, an inventory of the shop stock items should be obtained early in order to mitigate maintenance issues and the addition of specific items should be requested if needed.

Assembling the improved ribbon bridge (IRB) and conducting rafting operations require critical pieces of BII. Redundant BII was brought from the home station, and that proved incredibly vital since the BII from APS was incomplete for this bridge system. Inquiring about all BII for all equipment (including whether gases are included with the welding trailer) is suggested.

U.S. and Swedish forces both use the same IRB system. The system comes with two types of bridge pieces—interiors and ramps. A seven-float bridge consisting of five interiors and a ramp at both ends is typically built for rafting operations. This float is small enough to easily maneuver and large enough to support the weight of an Abrams main battle tank (up to Military Load Class 115)² during rafting operations. For full closures, the ramps are in contact with both shores and the number of interiors required depends on the width of the river. Full closures act as floating bridges for vehicles to cross quickly. Since the Swedish *Göta* Engineer Regiment uses the same type of bridge as the United States, both countries can interconnect pieces, solidifying interoperability and allowing NATO forces to cross wider rivers than an MRBC can support organically.

At the first crossing in Deblin, Poland, the 74th MRBC connected with the Swedish *Göta* Engineer Regiment for the first time, creating a full closure spanning 190 meters over the Vistula River. The unit immersed with the Swedish, integrating equipment and techniques from both countries.

Although the same type of bridge is used by both countries, there are variations in the types of boats used for inspection, proofing techniques, load classification systems, and additional equipment. More than 60 international vehicles (from the United States, Poland, and France) crossed the full closure at this location.

Upon completion of the first wet-gap crossing, the 74th MRBC integrated with Polish, Swedish, and French forces to coordinate and execute Wet-Gap Crossing 2 at Nowogród, Poland. This crossing was more complex due to the integration of air support, assault vehicles, and dismounted operations. Once again, the 74th MRBC connected with the Swedish, creating another multinational full closure. The exercise culminated in a display of U.S., Polish, Swedish, and French forces working together to accomplish a wet-gap crossing for the Polish president. It also culminated in doctrinal lessons learned.

Doctrinal Lessons Learned

Wet-gap crossings are executed with the brigade crossing force at the division level. Regardless of the echelon of the training audience, integration of wet-gap crossings into unit training plans ensures holistic preparation and understanding of the fundamentals required to prepare collective forces for future fights in large-scale ground combat operations.

The 3d Armored Corps and Fort Hood recently completed their first Gap-Crossing Training Center exercise. Once the Gap Crossing Training Center becomes fully developed, it will serve as the premier training center for gap-crossing operations and allow Regular Army, U.S. Army Reserve, and Army National Guard MRBCs to be evaluated at full scale alongside maneuver elements. Brigade and division staffs can conduct MDMP, integrate warfighting functions, and execute a mission throughout the exercise. By practicing and validating a wet-gap crossing, maneuver elements can refine this complex mission set before conducting large-scale ground combat operations.

Defender Europe is an annual NATO training event that increases alliance capabilities and interoperability. The experience varies each year, but the training received is always invaluable. Linear wet-gap obstacles are present in every theater, pushing U.S. forces to increase MRBC efficiency and conduct collective training throughout maneuver elements. Training alongside NATO partners enables increased proficiency and interoperability. Defender Europe 2022 proved that we are capable and ready.

Stronger Together!



Endnotes:

¹Field Manual (FM) 3-34, *Engineer Operations*, 18 December 2020.

²Technical Manual (TM) 5-5420-278-10, *Operator Manual for Improved Ribbon Bridge*, 23 November 2015.

At the time this article was written, Captain Lafranchi was the commander of the 74th MRBC. She currently serves as an assistant operations officer for U.S. Army Europe and Africa. She holds a master's degree in environmental engineering from the Missouri University of Science and Technology at Rolla.