

Illinois Guard Sends the 'Best' to Afghanistan with Polish Brigade

Written by Spc. Jeffrey Granda, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment
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SPRINGFIELD, IL (12/11/2011)(readMedia)-- Someone headed to war surrounded by foreign troops might be expected to be a little nervous, but Col. Michael Zerbonia of Chatham is calm and confident.

Perhaps that's because the Polish brigade that Zerbonia's 18-Soldier Bi-lateral Embedded Support Team (BEST) 10 will co-deploy with this summer are hardly foreign – they're longtime friends with the Illinois National Guard.

The Illinois National Guard has shared a State Partnership Program (SPP) with the Polish military since 1993. The Illinois National Guard started to co-deploy with a Polish brigade first to Iraq and then Afghanistan starting in 2003. This will be Zerbonia's second deployment with the Polish.

In addition to commanding the BEST 10 team, Zerbonia will act as the Deputy Brigade Commander of the 12th Polish Mechanized Brigade, working with approximately 2,800 Polish Soldiers. The 12th's mission in Afghanistan will be to maintain freedom of movement, policing the Ghanzi Province and handing over the responsibilities to Afghan forces.

The Illinois National Guard's SPP is among the oldest and largest of 61 total partnerships. The SPP was established to help former Eastern Bloc countries transition to democracy following the collapse of the Soviet Union by linking the National Guard forces of several states with the

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militaries of these countries. The Illinois National Guard was partnered with Poland because of the many cultural and ethnic ties shared between Poland and Illinois. Poland is now among the United States' staunchest allies in Europe.

BEST 10 Soldiers will train at Camp Lincoln in Springfield before deploying to Poland for two months to train with Polish forces. Following that training, they will deploy with Polish Soldiers to Afghanistan.

"We've compiled a good group of Soldiers from the Illinois National Guard, providing a wide range of skills sets," Zerbonia said. "I've had extensive experience working with the Polish and Russian military and I feel comfortable with the mission."

But that doesn't mean this rotation will be the same as previous rotations, Zerbonia said.

"Our mission changes as the war changes," said Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Sheahan of Moline, the Noncommissioned Officer-in-Charge of the BEST 10 team. "We'll be focusing on the transition of handing back power to the Afghan Army and Police, "

The jobs BEST Soldiers perform range from logistics, intelligence, operations, to airspace management. All the while they work jointly with the Polish Army. The team also signs contracts and works with civilian contractors, as well as training the Afghan Army and Police to take more of a leading role in operations.

The most important role of the BEST Soldiers will provide is advising Polish Soldiers on Western military tactics, techniques and procedures.

"Over the past five years, the Polish Army has adopted a more Western mindset, delegating to their NCOs as opposed to officers handling all the affairs," said Sheahan. "The Polish Army is trying to model itself similar to the American military format. Before, the Polish Army wasn't utilizing its NCO core."

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Zerbonia echoed this sentiment. "We rely heavily on our NCOs to execute," he said. "We've sent Soldiers from the Regional Training Institute before to show the Polish their usefulness. We'll be taking several E5 (sergeant) and E6 (staff sergeant) Soldiers on this deployment."

Though the team expects challenges, they say they are looking forward to this unique experience.

"I know it will be a challenging deployment, and everyone involved is excited," said Sheahan.

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