»After eleven years of our NATO membership, NATO flag will finally be flying in Slovenia as well. This could have happened earlier, maybe on the tenth anniversary, but nevertheless, this is still a great achievement, « said Brigadier General Miha Škerbinc.

The 2nd Establishment Conference of NATO Mountain Warfare Centre of Excellence took place between 20 and 24 October at Training Centre in Poljče. We sat to talk with Brigadier General Miha Škerbinc, Commander of SAF’s 1st Brigade, who has been breaking new ground on the way from Multinationalised Centre of Excellence of Mountain Warfare to NATO Mountain Warfare Centre of Excellence ever since 14 March, when the decision of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia was taken. We asked the 1st Brigade’s higher-up what material the new ground was made of and how the breaking was progressing, but mainly what would be the result.

Brigadier General Škerbinc, the last day of the 2nd Establishment Conference of NATO Mountain Warfare Centre of Excellence is underway. What was the course of the conference and what are your impressions as it closes?

The 2nd Establishment Conference is the most important step along the over a decade long road, which started in 2004 with the intent on the establishment of the NATO Mountain Warfare Centre of Excellence (NATO MW COE). It shall now come to the point when the Centre will officially begin its work. We have trodden a long road and it is impossible to talk about today’s feelings without taking a look back. I see the Centre’s establishment as a typically Slovenian story both in a positive and a less positive way. It is important to respect and appreciate the boldness of the generation of SAF leaders, who at that time courageously announced such intent within the Alliance. Our specific approach to establish the Multinationalised Centre of Excellence of Mountain Warfare in February 2011 proved to be interesting and useful. We not only tested the will of Partner Nations to participate, but have acquired a good amount of experience in these years and put several activities into action bringing upon ourselves a good reputation, a sort of a trademark. On the other hand, however, we should have done some things earlier with less doubt and fear, less hesitancy and bureaucratic narrow mindedness.
On behalf of the Slovenian Armed Forces, conference participants were first welcomed by Chief of the General Staff of the Slovenian Armed Forces Brigadier General Andrej Osterman.

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} conference has confirmed that we have done an excellent job lately both in the Slovenian Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence as well as beyond. The support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and some other ministries is evident. The most important thing is that we have attracted four countries, which have decided to actively participate in the work of the Centre. To put it very simple, this means that they will co-finance the work of the Centre and have their representatives within the Centre. These countries are Italy, Germany, Croatia and Austria. The first three will acquire the status of Sponsor Nations and will participate in the Centre’s decision-making process. In addition, quite a few other nations expressed their intent to participate more or less actively in the Centre’s work. We expect to acquire additional nations before the completion of the accreditation procedure and the official opening of the Centre, which is planned for next May. With some nations, we only have some minor legal issues to resolve, while others are still deciding on their participation due to financial or some other reasons.

At the conference, we also completed the least pleasant part of the establishment procedure. We completed and coordinated all legal documents and agreements, namely the Centre’s Concept, two basic memorandum and non-NATO Partner-Nation Technical Agreements. In this respect, we also reached the agreement on the Centre’s structure and individual tasks performed by each nation.

It has been an arduous conference, but a successful one considering the quality and quantity of the accomplished work as well as the feedback of the future Centre’s member nations.

The structure of the Slovenian Armed Forces includes the 132\textsuperscript{nd} Mountain Regiment, which also incorporates the Mountain School. We also have the MN COE MW and you have organised everything necessary to establish the NATO MW COE. Could you please explain the relations among the three units, their similarities and differences?

In 2012, when we were intensively preparing the transformation of the Slovenian Armed Forces as part of transformation activities or a necessary consequence of defence budget reductions, we considered and decided upon a number of things. One of such decision made in that period was to embark on the accreditation and establishment of the NATO MW COE. The alternative option was to let the Alliance know that we were not capable of doing this. The second decision we made was to make an exception and keep the mountain warfare capability in the Mountain Regiment, despite the equal capabilities of four regiments with equal structure, composition and mission.
During the conference, there was a constructive exchange of opinions and fruitful collaboration of participating nations with the aim to develop successful cooperation within NATO MW COE in the future.

The MN COE MW was only the intermediary form of organisation. Its work included Italy, Austria, Hungary and, recently, Croatia and Montenegro. On the day when NATO MW COE begins its work, the MN COE MW will cease to operate. This will conclude the 1st Brigade’s task to successfully bring to an end the decade-long story of the establishment of a Centre of Excellence after having accepted into its structure the 132nd Mountain Regiment and the MN COE MW during SAF transformation.

Does this mean that the cooperation with some of the above-mentioned countries will end?

The transformation of the MN COE MW into the NATO MW COE was one of the fundamental goals of the MN COE MW, therefore it would be theoretically possible that all five countries participate in the establishment of the NATO COE. However, this option proved to be overly complex and difficult to implement from the political point of view. Consequently, Italy, Austria and Croatia remain actively involved in the NATO COE, while Hungary has renounced this ambition, which is a logical decision considering its geographic characteristics. Montenegro, however, has expressed strong interest to take part in the Centre’s activities, but their accession is probably difficult to implement at the moment due to other short-term priorities.

A vast majority of armed forces in mountainous countries have their military mountain schools. We also intend to keep our school in a way that it will not require additional human or financial resources. It will be organic to the 132nd Mountain Regiment and mainly intended for certification and licensing of national mountaineering skills and organization of international activities on bilateral basis. But, what is perhaps most important is the fact that the work of all three entities, the 132nd Mountain Regiment, SAF Mountain School and NATO MW COE will be mutually complemented, coordinated and supported. In this respect, every organization will save some resources; while on the other hand, the synergistic effects will bring benefits both to the SAF and the Alliance.

What are the reasons that mountain warfare has been identified as the asset Slovenia can offer within the Alliance?

Sometimes, I say tongue-in-cheek that the Slovenians climbed and conquered mountains as early as 70,000 years ago and that the evidence to prove this lies inside the Potočka zijalka cave. However we put it, Slovenians are a mountaineering nation. Slovenia has over 350 two-thousand-metre mountains, its own part of the Alps as well as Dinaric and Mediterranean hills and plains.
Conference participants

From the alpinist point of view, Slovenians reach the world’s peak, both considering the tradition and alpine results. The same goes for sport climbing and hiking. We have a rich mountaineering and military mountaineering history and tradition. The World War I Isonzo Front is still considered to be one of the most well-known examples of mountain battlefield. Ever since the skiers of the Bloke plain and later Elan’s story of success and good results of our athletes, we have also been known and recognised in the world of Alpine and Nordic skiing, innovations and manufacturing of skiing and alpine equipment. Mountain School has operated in the SAF ever since the beginning and we have been the Framework Nation within the MN COE MW for several years. On several occasions, Slovenia served as the role model of professional competence and good organisation in the field of mountain rescue and there is probably much more I could list here, but I am not considered to be a subject-matter expert in this field.

Maybe we could have selected some other field of expertise, but I am certain that we could not have found one to better reflect our specifics and better connect an international military activity with the advantages, specifics and beauties of our country. So much about the motives and aims. However, there is at least one more reason why Slovenia has presented its candidacy for the establishment of a NATO Centre of Excellence, which is more of a pragmatic nature. Although I was not present at that time, I am convinced that we also wanted to demonstrate our readiness to operate equally within the Alliance and that at least then, we were full of the genuine patriotic zest, endeavouring to prove ourselves within the international environment. We were the first after the change of NATO’s doctrine and structure to express readiness to form a Centre of Excellence. After eleven years of our NATO membership, NATO flag will finally be flying in Slovenia as well. This could have happened earlier, maybe on the tenth anniversary, but nevertheless, this is still a great achievement.

What status will NATO MW COE hold within the SAF, the Ministry of Defence and NATO?

First, it would perhaps be good to explain what NATO Centres of Excellence are and what their mission is. In the 1970s, there was a lot of transformation-related speaking and writing in military theory, mainly in the USA. It has been established that bad work, bureaucratisation of armed forces, negative human-resource selection, conservative approach and unwillingness to change during the war period are always paid in blood
during the next war. Not only must armed forces constantly adapt to technological, political, social and other changes; these changes must be predicted and subject to constant changes and development so that they would be able to respond to security challenges of the future. In 2002, NATO’s organisational structure has also changed in a way to form a new command, the Supreme Allied Command Transformation (SACT). NATO Centres of Excellence also hold an important part in the development of doctrines, collection, analysis and learning from experience, training and education, concept development and experimenting as well as the establishment of interoperability and capabilities. Since 2002, NATO has accredited 18 such centres in different member nations, while five are still in the formation stage, including the one in Slovenia. NATO MN COE will be an independent entity. It will not constitute a part of NATO nor SAF chain of command. The most senior body in the centre will be the Steering Committee, where all NATO member nations and NATO MW COE Sponsor Nations will participate in the decision making. Slovenia as the establishing and Framework Nation will always hold the position of Centre Director and Director of Steering Committee. Even nations that are not NATO members, but are Partnership for Peace members can actively participate in the Centre’s work as Partner Nations. The only limitation is that they do not have the right to vote and that they have a restricted access to classified information.

Who is actually organising the NATO Centre of Excellence; who is the founder and what does that mean for Slovenia? Who provides the financial resources for its operation?

Usually, individual nations express interest for the formation of NATO Centre of Excellence. The only exception is the CIMIC centre, which was co-founded by Germany and the Netherlands. Other Allied and Partnership for Peace nations then decide in line with their respective interests. As far as NATO MW COE is concerned, nations will decide on the basis of several criteria. First certainly comes the evaluation of the contribution a nation can make with its experiences, tradition, expertise, the importance it attributes to the access to “first hand” expertise and mountain warfare knowledge. Last but not least, here is the economic issue – how much one can profit from the use of cheaper services provided by the Centre in comparison to the contribution they are providing. NATO Centres of Excellence are one of the best examples of NATO’s Smart Defence principle. In this respect, the principle of reciprocity plays a considerably important role. It is expected that if a nation supports a centre in some other, Partner Nation, the latter will reciprocate

Colonel Boštjan Blaznik, future Director of NATO MW COE
this support. As far as our centre is concerned, several questions remain open in this field. We reasonably expect Romania to join as a Sponsor Nation, as we have been actively cooperating with Romania within the Human Intelligence Centre of Excellence in Oradea. We also expect the participation of the Czech Republic, as we are a Sponsor Nation in their CBRN Defence COE in Vyskov. Bulgaria would also decide to participate as a Sponsor Nation in NATO MW COE if, for example, Administration for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief of the Republic of Slovenia actively joined their Crisis Management and Disaster Response Centre of Excellence (CMDR COE) in Sofia.

The financing of Centres of Excellence is carried out according to a specifically determined distribution formula. Sponsor and Partner Nations contribute their respective financial shares proportional to the number of their members actively involved within the Centre. Therefore, it is important for Slovenia both from the point of view of the successful work of the Centre and the reduction of Slovenia’s expenses to acquire as many Sponsor Nations as possible. The larger the number of countries, which contribute members to the Centre’s organisational structure, the larger the Centre’s budget. This will also reduce the basic amount of each nation’s contribution and the expenses of the Republic of Slovenia as the Framework Nation. Later, the Steering Committee will determine on the amount of the contribution. The amount of the resources will in fact decide the level of ambition. Slovenia as the Framework Nation will contribute infrastructure, i.e. the building which currently hosts the Training Centre in Poljče, direct logistic support and proportional share of finances as well as the basic equipment for the initial operation of the Centre. Therefore it is necessary to mention that the Centre will have its own income based on the participation fees from trainings and seminars and conduct of different mountain warfare courses. Considering the experiences within the Multinationalised Centre of Excellence, this source of income will not be negligible.

Speaking of finances, it is important to mention two additional things. First, if we sum up operation expenses of the Training Centre in Poljče, the MN COE MW and the Mountain School so far, it can be concluded that from Slovenia’s point of view, the establishment of NATO COE will not importantly increase the financial burden. And second, it is important to keep in mind that such centre will be an excellent opportunity for the promotion of Slovenian knowledge and products in NATO and Partner Nation markets, since the centre will also engage in the development and standardization of weapons and equipment.

When will the first students and trainees open the door of the NATO Centre of Excellence?

One of the particularities I often notice with Slovenians is the indecisiveness in decision-making, but mainly criticism once decisions have been made. The final decision on the establishment of the Centre was taken during the preparation of Slovenian Armed Force’s transformation plan. The 2015 Slovenian Armed Forces Day has been determined as the deadline. So I believe the centre will solemnly open its door on 15 May 2015.

Liliana Brožič
Photo: Brane Petrovič
Translation: Iris Žnidarič