Interview with Major General Michael Edwards
The Adjutant General for Colorado on the occasion of his farewell visit to Slovenia
SLOVENIA OFFERS HANDS-ON, REAL WORLD TRAINING

Major General Michael Edwards is The Adjutant General for Colorado, USA. He was appointed on 14 May 2007, a day before the Slovenian Armed Forces Day and this year marks the 10th anniversary of his highly successful tenure as The Adjutant General. This year he is about to end his active military duty and retire. Additionally, 2017 also marks 24 years of very effective cooperation of the Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF) and the Colorado National Guard (CONG).

In 1993, the U.S. Congress decided that the State of Colorado become a partner nation of the Republic of Slovenia. Consequently, both parties signed the State Partnership Program, which is still underway. We talked to The Adjutant General for Colorado Major General Michael Edwards about its effects.

Text: Liliana Brožič

This year marks the 10th anniversary of your tenure as The Adjutant General for Colorado. You graduated from the United States Air Force Academy and joined the CONG as a pilot as early as in 1980. You have thus been member of this elite U.S. Armed Forces unit for over 37 years. During this time, you have flown different aircraft such as A-7, C-21, F-16 and others. Does the time schedule of your current duties still permit some flying? When was the last time that you flew?

Because The Adjutant General of Colorado is not an authorized flying position, I last flew for the U.S. military about three years ago during an orientation to view the latest modifications in the F-16. However, I own my own aircraft and have a private pilot’s license. I’m never out of the cockpit for very long. One of the most enjoyable flights I’ve ever had was in a PC-9 aircraft flown by a professional instructor pilot from the Slovenian Air Force. During the flight, I had the chance to view Slovenia’s beautiful countryside from the air.
CONG members regularly take part in main SAF exercises, such as Adriatic Strike and Immediate Response. These joint exercises are very successful especially because participants are able to exchange and enact different experiences and views. In the summer of 2016, two F-16 fighters of the CONG landed at the Cerklje ob Krki airport. You were there and, if I understand correctly, this event was something special for you as well?

What made it so very special was that it was only the second time in 20 years that Colorado Air National Guard fighter jets had landed in Slovenia. It’s been a goal of mine to get our fighters back to Slovenia for training. I’ve also wanted to expose the U.S. Air Force to the world-class Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) training that Slovenia provides. The regional and multinational Air Ground Operations School at Cerklje Airfield is accredited by both NATO and the U.S. military.

As for exercises like Immediate Response, they’re highly effective exchange activities because we can be who we are while sharing how we do things with each other. Slovenia has shown a commitment to being a regional leader for multi-national operations by continuing to host these exercises. When our fighter jets landed in Slovenia to participate in Operation Atlantic Resolve, this meant that we had, once again, successfully aligned the CONG’s with SAF’s training. It makes sense to do more of that since the CONG’s structure and capabilities are applicable to SAF as they transform their force in size and mission.

However, the SAF’s cooperation with the CONG is not limited only to the participation in military exercises. It also includes cooperation in the sense of investments into the SAF infrastructure and training areas. You have made an invaluable donation of containers for training, participated in the assessment of a safe use of laser markers and the renovation of a facility at Bile. The interesting thing in this cooperation is that CONG members have contributed their personal labor effort to renovate and establish new capacities. What is your estimate of this cooperation and what are your impressions?

In partnership with SAF, the 140th Wing of the Colorado Air National Guard executed the first U.S. Department of Defense military construction project in Slovenia on time and under budget. This is valuable experience for our civil engineering forces both for National Guard state and federal missions.

Moreover, this cooperation helped set up Slovenia to provide great training opportunities for the region, the U.S. Air Force, and other allies. Slovenia offers hands-on, real world training. We have a great appreciation for Slovenia’s leadership as a nation in that its leaders always express a strong desire to host joint and NATO exercises that will further increase interoperability.

The »State Partnership Program« has been recognized as a very effective and financially favorable program of security cooperation, especially in the field of EUCOM. Considering your experiences, do you think the SPP also encourages and supports state partnership in the areas other than the military?

The State Partnership Program is a low-cost, small footprint program that focuses on military-to-military exchanges, but its original intent was to eventually include civilian-to-civilian exchanges. Within the military-to-military intersection, civilian relationships are inevitably impacted. Through SPP, the National Guard leverages whole-of-society relationships and capabilities to facilitate broader interagency and corollary engagements spanning military, government, economic, and so-
cial spheres. This is one of the great benefits of the SPP, because National Guard members have civilian work experience that can be incorporated into the exchanges. Also, each State has a Governor who is the commander-in-chief of the National Guard in their State. This allows easy access to applicable civilian resources during exchanges.

To give you an example, we’ve had exchanges involving American citizens of Slovenian descent. Also, the Colorado30 Group, a nonprofit of more than 150 distinguished civilian participants from across the State, entrusted with communicating between local Colorado communities and the U.S. military, visits Washington, D.C., each year. The group always contacts the CONG to set up a meeting with the Embassy of Slovenia in Washington to better understand the SPP relationship between Colorado and Slovenia and to explore innovative ideas that overlap the military and civilian spheres.

An interesting experience in the years-long cooperation of the SAF and the CONG are operational activities in a mixed mentoring team – OMLTs in Afghanistan. What is your estimate of these joint experiences and what do they mean for the new Resolute Support Mission?

The CONG and the SAF had six co-deployments to Afghanistan to train and mentor the Afghan National Army, or ANA, with the goal of a self-sufficient and effective Afghan security establishment. The SAF’s contributions proved the interoperability of SAF ground forces. The CONG was honored to serve side-by-side with Slovenia in its responsibilities as a NATO contributing country in Afghanistan. These joint experiences enhanced Colorado’s and Slovenia’s partnership. When you deploy shoulder-to-shoulder, you really get to know and understand each other. You become like family. It makes the partnership so much stronger.

What is the role of the CONG in the establishment of the Air to Ground Operations School in Slovenia? I have been told that what happened last year, was your great wish – that the F-16 aircraft would be landing at the Cerklje Air Base. Could increased military traffic provide more practice for Joint Terminal Attack Controllers in their training?

Yes, you could say that my wish came true when the first F-16 Fighting Falcon landed at Cerklje. To me, it was a symbol of the way that our partnership has grown to have regional impact. Cerklje’s capability has been built up. U.S. and other NATO forces will continue to come to Cerklje because the opportunities available there to keep JTACS very current are superb. When you consider the type of conflicts we face, such training is essential.

According to my information, you have visited Slovenia on several occasions and have liked our country. The cooperation between the SAF and the CONG has been long and intensive. In your capacity as TAG, how would you rate this now ten years long cooperation?

Over the course of 20 or so visits, I’ve been able to appreciate the natural beauty of Slovenia. I’ve noticed that the people show such pride in their nation. They welcome you with open arms. I feel completely safe there and truly able to relax in their culture. Bottom line is that the Slovenian people will always be our brothers and sisters. Our partnership, which started in 1993 after the fall of the Soviet Union, marks the very beginnings of the SPP. Our partnership is in its 24th year. We have such a special relationship, built around our shared mountain and rural cultures, our deployments and hundreds of exchanges.
What are your expectations and the vision for the future with regard to our cooperation?

The U.S. and Slovenia share a vision to deter and defeat terrorism and aggression throughout the world. Working together, we’ll continue to reassure our allies and enhance regional security despite threats. Slovenia has already proven that it’s a full partner in supporting the efforts of the Global Anti-Terror Coalition.

The future is about us doing this mission together in more and more ways. Some examples include assisting Slovenia in further development of the Pocek range complex for NATO use, participating in more Slovenian-led regional and multinational partnerships, and embedding SAF in CONG training. I would like to see the partnership expand more on the government side. Another partnership goal is more aligned military training between our countries. I also see Slovenia, down the road, enabling expeditionary operations. There is no doubt in my mind that Slovenia will remain one of the most capable and committed NATO military partners.

What about with regard to your career? After such a prosperous life and career, are there any new challenges left, especially now that you will retire? What are your personal goals and expectations?

As a civilian, I’ll continue to visit beautiful Slovenia. I’ve been so privileged to have the opportunity to serve so long, and the people whom I’ve met during my service mean the world to me. That’s in addition to the tremendous honor of being able to put on the uniform to defend our nation. Once you’ve served, it’s hard not to have significant interest in continuing to serve in another manner. I intend to also spend a little more family time and decompress on my family farm in Nebraska. My grandson’s baseball team also needs a coach. I imagine that my wife, Laury, and I will always make ourselves available to our Slovenian friends who visit Colorado—always.

Major General Michael Edwards and his wife in Bled (Photo: CONG)