

VFW Chief Visits Troops in Eastern Europe

In February, VFW Commander-in-Chief B.J. Lawrence visited some of the Army's finest garrisoned in Poland

Jul 17, 2019

In an effort to learn more about the training, readiness and morale of the troops overseas, VFW Commander-in-Chief B.J. Lawrence embedded with members of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, during the cold February winter in Poland. The unit from Fort Riley, Kan., deployed to eastern Europe in late December as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve.

“Talking to troops on the ground level, especially where they deploy, helps us better advocate for them on Capitol Hill,” Lawrence said. “Visits such as these are essential to maintaining the close relationship the VFW has nurtured with America’s military for now 120 years, and we are grateful for this opportunity to learn even more.”

The purpose of Operation Atlantic Resolve is to build readiness and enhance bonds between ally and partner militaries through training in Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and the Baltics. It also reassures allies of America’s dedication to peace and stability in eastern Europe. It’s no coincidence that Atlantic Resolve follows Russian aggression in Ukraine, including the annexation of the country’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

About 3,500 1st Armd. BCT troops are participating in Operation Atlantic Resolve, including Staff Sgt. Nicholas Rolison, an indirect fire infantryman with 1st Sqdn., 4th Cav Regt. A member of the VFW Department of Kansas, Rolison said he was “enjoying” his time in Swietoszow, Poland.

“I’ve been able to focus on my job, focus on my men and ensure that they are as ready as they possibly can be,” Rolison said. “Our main focus is training and to reinsure our counterparts that the United States stands with them against any threat that they may or may not face.”

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Rolison, who joined the Army in 2012, earned his VFW eligibility in Iraq when he took part in the liberation of Mosul from Islamic State forces in 2016-17 with 2nd Bde., 82nd Abn. Div. He said he had spoken with a few Polish army soldiers while in Swietoszow and that they have been friendly.

“I can’t wait to go out and train with them,” Rolison said. “There is so much that we can learn from one another. It will be interesting to see how other military units operate. We don’t operate in areas like this at Fort Riley. Being here is going to present a different attitude when it comes to the tactical environment.”

‘Excited’ for Training

Since 2014, the Army has conducted training and security with allies and partners in eastern Europe. For armored units, such as 1st Sqdn., 4th Cav Regt., nine-month rotations are scheduled for the “foreseeable future,” according to the Army. During these garrisons in eastern Europe, units are expected to enhance deterrence capabilities, increase ability to respond to potential crises and defend allies and partners in Europe.

Prior to observing a live-fire exercise on Feb. 6 near Swietoszow, Lawrence learned about the capabilities of an M1A2 Abrams tank from Sgt. Michael Messersmith, of Forest City, Iowa. An M1A2 Abrams tank gunner with 1st Sqdn., 4th Cav Regt., Messersmith said he was “loving” Poland.

“It’s my first time ever in another country,” Messersmith said. “I can’t wait to visit all of Europe. But I can’t wait to actually do some real gunnery training.”

Messersmith said he is “excited” to train with Polish troops while in Swietoszow.

Sgt. 1st Class Jeremy Foley, of 1st Sqdn., 4th Cav Regt., also shared Messersmith’s eagerness to train with the foreign soldiers.

“I’m looking forward to enjoying our time with our allied counterparts and hoping to learn from them here in Poland,” Foley said. “Every time I work with them, whether it be in the motor pool or in our living quarters, they have been extremely friendly and helpful.”

Sgt. Darel Maxfield, a Bradley gunner with 1st Sqdn., 4th Cav Regt., said being in Poland was a “new experience” and not what he is used to.

“My last rotation was to South Korea in 2016 to 2017 with Quarter Cav,” Maxfield said, referring to 1st Sqdn., 4th Cav Regt. “I actually like being in Poland more than Korea. I’m not a huge fan of the cold, but it’s a completely different feel here.”

More Troops in Poland

In March, soldiers of 2nd Armd. Bde., 1st Armd. Div., in Fort Bliss, Texas, were told to

immediately deploy to Poland. The 2nd Armd. Bde. commander, Col. Chad Chalfont, told Stars and Stripes he and his troops had “zero notice” from its headquarters.

Within a month, 1,500 of the brigade’s soldiers were on their way to Drawsko Pomorskie, Poland, for live-fire training. Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan ordered the deployment to test the Army’s ability to rapidly alert, recall and deploy under emergency conditions, according to an Army press release.

Talks about sending more troops to Poland, as well as operating a permanent U.S. base in the country, have been more prevalent this year. NATO officials are said to be planning construction of a U.S. combat vehicle storage site in Poland, according to Defense News.

As of March, Polish and U.S. officials also are negotiating a permanent military base in the country. The Polish government has offered \$2 billion for funding of the base, according to Military Times.

During a House Armed Services Committee hearing on March 13, Army Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, commander of U.S. European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, supported the idea of having a permanent base in Poland, as well as rotating forces.

“I am perfectly content with the large forces that are rotating today,” Scaparrotti said. “A more permanent base is helpful because of the relationships you build and the mission they have. So, you’ll see a little bit of a combination there from my point of view.”

While in Poland, Lawrence said he “could not be any prouder” of the troops in eastern Europe.

“The mentorship shown between soldiers ensured that the hard lessons learned after 17 years of nonstop, multifront war and family separations will not be lost on our new generation of patriots,” Lawrence said. “Their professionalism while deployed overseas in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve makes them true American ambassadors.”

This article is featured in the 2019 June/July issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.