

# **Portuguese Navy Special Forces in Lithuania**

Commander of the Portuguese Naval Special Forces Contingent

## **Background**

Portugal's Age of Discovery played a crucial role in shaping Europe's trade networks and cultural exchanges, leaving an indelible mark on Lithuania and its neighboring regions. While Lithuania may not have been directly involved in Portugal's maritime exploits, the impact of Portuguese exploration reverberated throughout the continent, contributing to a broader sense of interconnectedness among European nations. In the modern era, Lithuania and Portugal have further strengthened their ties through diplomatic cooperation, economic partnerships, and cultural exchanges. Both countries are members of the European Union and NATO, sharing common interests in promoting peace, stability, and economic development. On May 2, 1923, Portugal recognized, *de facto* and *de jure*, the independent state of Lithuania, and has since always recognized that sovereignty. On August 27, 1991, it welcomed the restoration of independence and resumed diplomatic relations on October 4, 1991.

## **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Assurance Measures**

NATO Assurance Measures encompass a series of actions and initiatives undertaken by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to bolster the security and confidence of its member states, particularly

those in Eastern Europe, in the wake of heightened tensions and security challenges. These measures were prompted by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its ongoing aggressive actions in the region, which raised concerns among NATO's eastern members regarding their security. Key components of NATO Assurance Measures include the deployment of Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) battlegroups to the Baltic states and Poland, aimed at deterring potential aggression and providing rapid reinforcement capabilities. Additionally, NATO has increased its air policing activities over the Baltic region and conducts regular military exercises in Eastern Europe to enhance interoperability and demonstrate readiness. By strengthening defense capabilities, improving infrastructure, and showcasing solidarity, NATO Assurance Measures underscore the Alliance's commitment to collective defense and contribute to stability and security in the Euro-Atlantic region.

### **Former Portuguese Navy Special Forces rotations**

The first Portuguese Navy Special Forces rotation began in 2018, with a duration of 4 months, between May and September, based in the Lithuanian Grand Duke Butigeidis Dragoon Battalion in Klaipėda, part of the Great Hetman Jonas Karolis Chodkevičius Infantry Brigade Griffin. The Lithuania 2018 Navy Special Forces rotation presented two distinct capabilities: Force Projection and Special Operations, carefully articulated to ensure a coherent and credible operational output. The participation included exercises such as FLAMING SWORD in the domain of special operations, STRONG SHIELD within the defense plans of the Lithuanian Republic, and BUDRUS GRIFONAS as part of the training and certification process of the Griffin Brigade. During these 4 months, the groundwork was laid, not only operationally, but also in terms of human relations, allowing for the building and development of excellent relations between Lithuanian Soldiers and Portuguese Operators.



Navy Special Forces rotation 2018

The participation in 2019 was very similar, with the inclusion of Combat Divers and a reduction in the mission time to 3 months, between June and September. The inclusion of the Diver/Sapper Detachment, most notably with their EOD/CDT capabilities, allowed the force to explore new opportunities, providing it with uncommon flexibility, combining maneuver and special operations with embedded EOD/CDT elements. Testimony of this work were the excellent performances achieved in activities such as Field Training Exercises (FTX), namely FTX EODEX, FTX PABRADÉ, and the Combined Arms Live Fire Exercises (CALFEX) and LOKYS-1 exercise, with the Lithuanian Volunteer Forces (Krašto apsaugos savanorių pajėgos (KASP)). Finally, in the realm of Special Operations, the NATO Reaction Force 2020 (NRF 2020) certification exercise was executed, where the Special Operations Maritime Task Unit (SOMTU) managed to achieve NATO Level II certification of capabilities.



Navy Special Forces rotation 2021

In 2020, following the global scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic, the necessary conditions for the establishment and projection of a rotation were not met, so no rotation was materialized. However, the Portuguese Navy Special Forces returned to Lithuania in 2021, being relocated to the Kairiai Maneuvering Field where we remain since then. For that rotation the Force was equipped with eight armored tactical vehicles

- High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV, but normally referred to as HUMVEEs in military jargon). The use of those vehicles fell slightly outside of the Navy Special Forces traditional *modus operandi*, being that our forces normally prefer speed over protection. Albeit that, the inclusion of those assets provided excellent tools to perform tasks more in line with our Lithuanian Army counterparts as proved in the exercises STRONG GRIFFIN, GRIFFIN STRIKE and BALTIC FORTRESS. This initiative proved to be a one-year endeavour only, not repeated thereafter.



Navy Special Forces rotation 2021

In 2022, the Portuguese Navy Special Forces returned to its lighter tripartite force profile, encompassing Special Operations, Force Projection, and EOD/CDT elements and remained largely unchanged for 2023, being the differentiating factor the mission timing, being advanced in the civil year, starting in March and ending in July. This new iteration posed an additional challenge to the Portuguese Navy Special Forces: cold weather operations. Extreme conditions with which Portuguese Operations are not familiar, requiring adaptation not only at the level of individual protective equipment but also at the level of techniques, tactics, and procedures. Additionally, in 2023, Portugal demonstrated that its commitment to Lithuania, its allies and Assurance Measures, goes even further, assigning the offshore patrol vessel VIANA DO CASTELO to conduct exercises in Lithuanian territory, not only in support of the force, but also with its Lithuanian counterparts and allies in the region.



Navy Special Forces rotation 2022

### Portuguese Navy Special Forces rotation 2024

As for the Portuguese Navy Special Forces rotation 2024, it breaks significantly from the past, as it was entirely generated according to the innovative concept of operations Light&Fast, privileging the action of small groups in distributed operations, with a focus on speed, flexibility, surprise, and technological supremacy that is currently being implemented in the Portuguese Navy. Additionally, a Boarding Team – capable of performing all kinds of Visit, Board, Seize and Secure (VBSS) operations was included, which, together with the Special Actions element and Combat Divers, compose the



Special Operations capability, mirroring the new concept of Special Operations of the Portuguese Navy. Innovation did not stop there, as unmanned systems operators, belonging to the new squadron of the Portuguese Navy specialized in those systems (X31), were also included, as well as various experimental systems aimed at being tested under conditions close to combat. Finally, a high-speed vessel was designed as a dedicated means for the Boarding Team, in what constituted a formidable logistical challenge, successfully completed. The new mission schedule allows for inclusion in more emblematic exercises, such as:

- BRAVE GRIFFIN 24-II which, along the Suwalki corridor, in a pre-war scenario, demonstrated the power and cohesion of 4 allied nations in defense of the ideal of freedom.

- STORM STRIKE, exercise from the Lithuanian Navy, part of a wider initiative: “Perkūno griausmas 2024” (“Thunderclap 2024”), during which the Lithuanian military and state institutions practice transition from peace to wartime, progressing through all stages and systematically carrying out necessary actions and procedures. This exercise, in practical terms, puts shoulder to shoulder Lithuanian Navy units with Maneuver, Boarding, and Combat Diver elements of the Portuguese Navy.

- Regarding the remaining Special Operations capabilities, the Special Actions element will be applied in the FLAMING SWORD exercise, organized by the Lithuanian Special Operations Command (SOCOM) marking the return of the Portuguese Navy Special Forces to this exercise, in which it had not participated since 2018. The scenario of FLAMING SWORD starts from an hypothetical situation, in which an adversary occupied Lithuanian territory and Special Operations cells are conducting irregular operations, working in the shadows to plague the enemy and break its will to fight.

- Regarding BALTOPS, the Navy Special Forces rotation for 2024 will be represented by its boarding team, initiating the tactical phase, before the movement of the Naval Force southward.



Navy Special Forces rotation 2024

- Finally, still within the scope of initiatives, the Force will conduct the Field Training Exercise LIGHT&FAST (FTX LIGHT&FAST), in which the operation concept will be tested to the utmost extreme, with distributed actions being carried out simultaneously by those various elements/capabilities, all contributing to a coherent action whose intent is to establish premeditated effects in the Area of Operations.

### **Conclusion**

The relationship between Portuguese and Lithuanian military personnel is not only made up of operational activity. There is already a space of respect, consideration, friendship, the result of painstaking collaboration dating back to 2018. More than just military exercises, sporting actions and/or cultural challenges have also contributed decisively to the success of this partnership. Whether rowing in Viking boats, overcoming obstacles in the Griffin Challenge, or freezing, shoulder to shoulder, in the snow of Druskininkai, one thing is certain: between Portuguese and Lithuanians, the threshold of mere cooperation and collaboration has long been conquered and shifted into the realm of brotherhood.