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Polish Air Force – Transition from Warsaw Pact to NATO

*The JAPCC's Interview
with Brigadier General
Sławomir Żakowski,
Deputy Commander,
Combined Air Operations
Centre (CAOC) Uedem,
Germany*

By Lieutenant Colonel Zenon Kot, PL AF,
JAPCC

Think back to a bygone era, bring back memories and describe what it was like to serve in the Air Force back then.

I associate the 1990s primarily with Poland regaining full sovereignty as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. In 1993, the last Soviet soldier left Polish territory. We were once again able to enjoy freedom, which must be cherished, because nothing is given forever. We remember this well from our history.

Therefore, an intensive search began for a new way to ensure military security. Many concepts were considered at the time, starting with neutrality—following the Swiss model—through to the creation of 'NATO-bis', a concept involving the establishment of



an international military alliance of Central European states which were previously a part of the dissolved Warsaw Pact, and finally accession to NATO. Poland's membership of NATO became our strategic objective in the early 1990s, but our aspirations had to win the approval of our future allies, and it should be stressed that this was met with a reluctant reception by the Russian Federation.

The 1990s were also a period of prolonged economic crisis caused by the collapse of the planned socialist economy, but also a period of successive sacrifices associated with our transition to a market economy. Needless to say, the economic performance of a country has a direct impact on the level of equipment, technical condition and training of its armed forces.

The 1990s saw a significant reduction in our military potential. Obsolete military equipment was withdrawn and the number of garrisons were reduced. The amount of training was also limited.

What was the equipment and what did the training look like?

In the 1990s, the Polish Air Force (PAF) began its transformation to NATO standards. It was a long and bumpy road and we faced many problems and limitations. The basic equipment of those years consisted of Soviet aircraft and equipment. The way the PAF operated was completely different from the Western model, starting from the principles of flight execution, through the concept of technical and logistical support, to the units of measurement used. Financial limitations and subsequent difficulties with the availability of aircraft dramatically reduced the annual flight time of a trained pilot to an average of only 40 hours.

The vision of joining NATO forced changes to our rules, regulations and procedures. New flight training programmes were developed in cooperation with NATO colleagues and it was not only about the syllabus, but also about changing the philosophy of

flight training, the way of performing flight tasks, terminology and aviation phraseology.

What were the expectations when Poland joined NATO? In what areas were there the greatest concerns?

Joining NATO opened a new perspective for the development of the PAF. The sense of security and pride has significantly increased in Polish society. Poland became a member of the largest and strongest Alliance in the world, whose 70th anniversary we celebrated two years ago.



Poland's military security system had acquired a new dimension. Security was based on the ability to deter an aggressor in the first phase of a conflict, in order to carry out further defensive operations together with allied reinforcement forces, in accordance with Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. It becomes crucial to maintain air superiority over the area of Poland in order to create and maintain conditions for hosting the reinforcing forces. The development and maintenance of an effective national air defence

system has acquired a completely new and decisive significance for ensuring Poland's military security. For airmen, it was the announcement of new equipment, but also the acceleration of our training to achieve full interoperability. We increased the intensity of language training, the knowledge of which became a prerequisite for promotion to successive higher military positions and ranks. We began on a large scale sending our soldiers to participate in training, courses, studies in centres and universities of allied countries. This approach generated further challenges, because the more soldiers attending the schools, the fewer of them there were on exercises. Financial constraints were also a significant factor impacting all decisions made during this period.

Another challenge related to standardisation was the adaptation of our military structures, which was also linked to another reduction. Our greatest expectation was to have modern armed forces, in terms of structures, tactics and procedures, but also equipment and logistical security, to be able to perform tasks as a responsible partner in coalition forces.

Our greatest concern was, and probably still is, whether we will be able to rise to all these new challenges and not disappoint our society. At this point, it is worth emphasizing an objective truth that our road to NATO has repeatedly confirmed; it is easier to purchase new equipment and write new procedures than to change our human mentality and habits.

What changes in specialist training, language training and mission participation were most significant?

The PAF became a leader of these changes by introducing NATO standards to the Polish Armed Forces. We adjusted command structures by abolishing the level of air corps and regiments, replaced by air wings, bases and squadrons. The creation of the Air Operations Centre (AOC) and inclusion of Poland into the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System (NATINADS) system was the driving force for fundamental changes. The analogue guidance system was replaced with a digital one, which significantly increased the capabilities of the operational



command of the military aviation. Modern tactical data transmission systems, including Link 11 and Link 16, were introduced, thus bringing about a new quality in the exchange of digital data, images and voice between air, sea and land platforms.

There has been a very dynamic change in training programmes, aviation regulations and procedures. New aviation regulations have introduced aviation phraseology in English in accordance with ICAO and NATO standards. More missions began to be performed in the civil aviation environment, which took over the management of Polish airspace.

We started using the same units of measure that are used in civil aviation and NATO. Kilometres and metres were replaced by miles and feet, in the initial period using conversion tables, because the on-board indicators were still calibrated differently. This is just one example of the additional burden of both flying and ground personnel in the initial period of change. Modernizing or replacing equipment is a long-term and continuous process. Achieving interoperability is a process, not a single event.

Unfortunately, during this period of change, we have not avoided making mistakes. At every stage the

limitations of human factors must be considered. Personnel within the PAF found the transition difficult at times, but their overarching commitment to the challenges and the ultimate goal of security within the country and with NATO saw them secure our place within the Alliance.

How has the PAF benefited from equipment changes to meet the NATO standards?

The changes made to the PAF over the last 30 years have resulted in a military force with new capabilities to perform tasks related to the defence of Polish airspace against reconnaissance and air strikes, which is a capability unforeseen before we began the transition. In times of crisis or war we are also prepared to dominate the airspace, support combat operations of other services, and conduct reconnaissance and air transport wherever required. It is clear, however, that Poland cannot afford to have a combat aviation force capable of independently performing all the tasks related to its use in combat and 'non-military' operations.

The first Polish comprehensive aviation modernization programme was the purchase of C-295M medium tactical transport aircraft in 2003. This was at a time when the expeditionary military was a priority

in air force development and Poland was very much engaged in combat, stabilization and peace missions. The introduction of the CASA aircraft was an absolutely new level of quality at that time in Polish aviation. It was not only the glass cockpit, but it gave us new possibilities to achieve transport tasks. The C-295M aircraft replaced the worn-out soviet era An-26. I defined this change by 'a factor of two'; twice as far, twice the capacity and twice as cheap.

However, the real revolution in the Polish aviation was in 2006 with the introduction and training of the new aviation elite – the F-16 Fighting Falcon. These multi-role aircraft formed the backbone of the PAF combat aviation and are designed to perform defensive, offensive and reconnaissance tasks. Using AGM-158 JASSM ER cruise missiles, they can attack enemy point targets outside the range of air defence systems at distances up to 1,000 km. The F-16s are the first combat aircraft fully compatible with allied air units, using the same armament, communications systems, tactical data transmission systems and procedures.

Today, we build situational awareness on the basis of on-board systems, but for this you need appropriate knowledge, which when supported by experience, sets the standards of professionalism.

I am convinced that without NATO this would have been impossible.

Does your current position as Deputy Commander CAOC help in promoting the proactive Polish attitude as reaction and response to the provocative and offensive actions of the Russian Air Force?

Poland has delegated responsibility for conducting Air Policing (AP) missions to NATO, which manages the NATINAMDS system and one of the links in this system is CAOC UEDEM. However, each country has its specific limitations caused by the characteristics of the threats we face. Poland, as mentioned above, is a border state of NATO, but is also a member of the European Union and this situation may give rise to threats that do not exist in other regions. In the Polish airspace we observe the violation of our borders by small aircraft, such as drones, paragliders and ultra-light planes regularly. In the vast majority of cases, this is related to criminal activity and in order to counteract this, Poland deploys additional forces and resources as elements of a strengthened national air defence system, which cooperate directly with other institutions and agencies, such as the Border Guard.

I think it is worth considering countering drones especially those flying at low altitude, in light of not only security responsibilities but also having the ability to detect and counter surveillance activities.

My position as Deputy Commander of CAOC UEDEM absolutely makes me an ambassador of the PAF in NATO. However, in my everyday activity, I focus on carrying out missions for which CAOC UEDEM is tasked in its AP area of responsibility.

Poland borders the Russian Federation (RF) through the Kaliningrad Oblast, the area which has always been of great military importance due to its location. What consequences and limitations does this bring?

Poland is a NATO frontline state on an easterly direction. It is bordered by the Russian Federation and Belarus, and the alliance of these states is potentially the greatest military threat to NATO and to Poland. The unstable situation in Ukraine poses some additional challenges and certainly does not increase security in the region. In light of Russia's active policy





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as a global player with a wide array of military tools in its arsenal, ranging from sophisticated nuclear forces through conventional forces using increasingly advanced technologies in the land, sea, air, space and cyber domains, to a centralized system for deciding on their use. It is the eastern flank that will be where the direct interests of NATO member states and Russia will clash. In the current geopolitical situation, the narrow Suwałki corridor, a 70 km long strip of land connecting NATO countries with the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, assumes particular importance.

Poland wants to be a credible NATO member and realizes that this credibility depends on having its own national defence capabilities and political will, which translates into ensuring adequate funds for military expenditures.

In 2020, Poland allocated over 2.3 % of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to national defence, dedicating a portion of these funds to technical modernization,

including the purchase of F-35 aircraft, M-346 Master Advanced Jet Trainer (AJT) aircraft and the IBCS/PATRIOT air defence system.

The PAF actively participates in allied operations, exercises and training. Since 2006, our air contingents have participated in Baltic Air Policing and later Enhanced AP operations. In 2021, a contingent of Polish F-16s will for the first time support an AP operation in Iceland.

I am convinced that Polish pilots are perfectly prepared to carry out tasks in times of peace, crisis or war. A very important element of maintaining high morale is the cultivation of traditions, and for aviators, a special motivation is the reference to the legend of Polish airmen fighting in the Battle of Britain.

Professionalism supported by high morale and full readiness to carry out missions is, in my opinion, the highest value of our contribution to NATO. ●

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Brigadier General Sławomir Żakowski

is the Deputy Commander of Combined Air Operations Centre in Uedem. He graduated as a pilot in 1986 and has accumulated over 3,000 flying hours in TS-11, MiG-15, MiG-21, Su-7, M-28 and C-295M. He has commanded at squadron, base and wing levels throughout the PAF. He served as the Deputy Commander of Polish Air Operations Centre and Air Component Command prior to his current assignment. Furthermore, he is a graduate of the Polish National Defense Academy in Warsaw and the United States Air Force Air War College in Maxwell and as well as the Jagiellonian University in Cracow.

