

Like a bolt of lightning a Patriot missile, right bursts from its weapons container as it screams into the sky faster than the speed of sound. Seconds later it intercepts and destroys its target over the Cretan Sea. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Queen, 69th ADA Brigade Public Affairs)

A BOLT OF LIGHTNING **5-7 ADA Puts Training to Test on Crete**

Story and photos by Staff Sgt. John Queen
69th ADA BDE Public affairs



SOUDA BAY, Greece – There is no doubt that one of the most spectacular things anyone can experience in the Army is a Patriot missile battalion conducting a live-fire exercise on the Greek island of Crete.

In the blink of an eye white hot flames erupt from the missile's exhaust as it ignites and punches through its protective weapons canister with a loud bursting pop. A fraction of a nanosecond later the missile is locked on target and screaming down range faster than the speed of sound, leaving only a billowing trail of white smoke behind. Within seconds the missile intercepts and destroys its target thousands of meters above the sapphire blue Cretan Sea.

"This was definitely one of the most exciting things I've ever seen in my life," exclaimed Pfc. Robert Brown, a Patriot crewman assigned to Bravo Battery, 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery, after witnessing the Patriot launch. "Seeing the missiles fire – there is nothing like that. It was pretty extraordinary."

Brown along with nearly 100 other Soldiers from the 69th ADA Brigade traveled to Crete in late March to conduct the exercise on the NATO Missile Firing Installation (NAMFI) near the port city of Souda Bay.

According to Chief Warrant Officer 5 Donald Hendricks, from the brigade's Headquarters Battery and the officer in charge of the overall mission, the exercise was the culminating event of more than four months of training by Soldiers of 5-7 ADA.

"All of the certification these guys go through – the Table VIII's, the Table XII's," he said, "This is the capstone to that – the icing on the cake."

Soldiers from the Hanau, Germany, based 5-7 ADA began training for the live-fire exercise in October 2007.

Hendricks explained that the training was an intense and sometimes stressful process that is over-watched by the battalion's Electronic Missile Maintenance Officer. During this process the launching system crews take various practical tests on crew drill procedures in accordance with the Patriot missile systems training and standards manual. These tests are laid out as training tables, or diagrams, and cover everything from the systems march order and emplacement, to actually firing the missiles.

In order for a Patriot crew to be eligible for the opportunity to go to Crete and participate in the live-fire exercise, each has to pass the training and be certified.

"For a crew to be able to fire the system it must Table VIII certified," Hendricks said. "In this case we had two units that were not only Table VIII certified, but Table XII qualified as well."

The Table XII certification is an advanced version of the standard crew drill covered in the Table VIII and encompasses training in times of limited visibility and while wearing the full chemical protective suit and protective mask.

This exercise, which ran from March 20-29, was the first time the battalion has fired a missile in the past three years.



At left, two Soldiers from 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery, talk with a dock worker as they stand by and wait for their equipment to be unloaded from a ship at the port in Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete. The cargo ship took nearly a month to arrive after leaving port in Germany. At right, Soldier from 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery uses a tag line to help keep a missile canister steady as a crane moves it into position to be loaded on to a launcher. (U.S. Army photos by Staff Sgt. John Queen, 69th ADA Brigade Public Affairs)

Hendricks explained that according to the Army Standards in Training Commission, every Patriot fire unit (battery) should fire one missile every two years, if missiles are available.

"The last time we did a live fire was in 2005," he said. "There were two live-fires scheduled since then, but due to budget constraints with the Global War on Terrorism we were unable to make the needed logistical preparations."

Hendricks went on to say that this year they were able to make missiles available and Lt. Gen. Kenneth Hunzeker, V Corps commanding general, pushed the exercise for the brigade.

"He thought it would be a good to do it – which was a good thing for us," Hendricks said. For this live-fire the brigade was able to obtain ten missiles. These missiles however, were designed prior to Operation Desert Storm and originally manufactured to serve an anti-aircraft role.

"We're using these missiles because they are no longer part of our wartime inventory," Hendricks explained. "We have a stockpile of them which would otherwise have to be destroyed."

"Its important to note," he added, "that any of the tactical ballistic missile engagements we performed represent a large success since we exercised these missiles to the limits of their capabilities."

The battalion fired at two types of aerial targets during the exercise and was able to successfully engage each. The first four were Supersonic Target Rockets (STARs) which were designed to mimic an incoming tactical ballistic missile. To counter these, the launching systems fired two Patriots one right after the other in what is called a "modified ripple" fire.

The systems also engaged drone targets with one single-shot launches and a two-missile salvo.

This live-fire exercise mirrored an exercise conducted by the Dutch and German air forces several months ago, unfortunately, theirs was not as successful.

"This was something the Germans and the Dutch were trying to do," Hendricks explained. "This is the exact same range and the exact same targets the Germans and the Dutch used last October. The one shot the Dutch did get off was a newer missile. Nobody doubted the ability of the newer missile."

"The Germans were not able to get a single missile out against that target after a full week of trying," he added.

"To get ten missiles out in one day – seven of them against the TBM style target," Hendricks said. "I think that says a lot right there."

The range was a huge success said Hendricks. "I think it went outstanding. There were no

problems at all – little glitches here and there, but no significant problems.”

Many of the launcher crewmen agreed and said that this was by far the best live-fire event they had ever experienced.

“This is my second time to Crete and my fourth live-fire,” said Sgt. Trevor Howard, a launcher crewman with Bravo Battery, 5-7 ADA. “I would say it was the best out of the four. The fact that we fired 10 missiles in one day, I believe that is the first time a Patriot unit has done that.”



At left, Pfc. Robert Brown of Bravo Battery, 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery, attaches a grounding wire to a Patriot missile canister after it has been loaded on to an ammunition truck at the NATO Missile Firing Installation on the Greek island of Crete. With the final turn of a torque wrench, Pfc. Michael Hibdon, right, of Delta Battery, 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery makes sure the missile canister safely secured to the launching station. (U.S. Army photos by Staff Sgt. John Queen, 69th ADA Brigade Public Affairs)

Sgt. Matthew Johnston, a launcher section chief with Bravo Battery, elaborated by saying the change in scenery was a plus. “Over the water you can see the birds fly a lot better than you can normally see in Texas in the desert, so I liked it here a lot more.”

For many of the younger Soldiers the exercise gave them a new perspective on their jobs and how important their role is to the overall effectiveness of the unit.

“We’ve been practicing for this for a long time,” said Brown. “The one thing that told me this was a live fire though was as soon as we took the missiles out of the crate and loaded them up on to the launching stations – that really got me going.”

Pfc. Michael Hibdon of Delta Battery, who served on one of the batteries’ “hot crews”, said the exercise was an outstanding opportunity for him.

“I actually got to do my job and see what my job really entails,” he said. “I did missile reload, I helped out on the crew drill with the live missiles. I served on the hot crew I was actually able to lock and unlock live missiles.”

“It was kind of scary – the fact that they are live birds” Hibdon laughed. “But it was pretty fun though.”

The trip to Crete served as more than just a live-fire for the brigade, it was actually a five phase exercise that validated the battalion’s readiness. It included pre-deployment activities, deployment of Soldiers and equipment to Crete, the live-fire itself, redeployment back to Germany and final recovery after the mission.

This live-fire exercise is likely to be the last conducted on Crete by the brigade headquarters itself. While 5-7 ADA is staying in Germany under 7th Army, the 69th ADA’s headquarters is relocating to Fort Hood, Texas, in June.

