

3rd NATO Mountain Warfare Congress - #Personnel Recovery in Mountainous Terrain

During peacetime, emergency, crisis, missions and war, individuals may become isolated from their group, or the group itself may be lost or fall victim to some disaster, with no possibility of making it to safety. In such a case there is a pressure, an obligation and a moral responsibility upon leaders to make every effort to recover captured, isolated, injured and/or missing personnel. There is an obligation for Personnel Recovery (PR) and a responsibility to leave no person behind who served on behalf of others. Thus, every Personnel Recovery operation must be a “no-fail-mission”. In mountainous terrain, there are many adverse features which may hamper such an operation.



To provide the Mountain Warfare community of interest with state-of-the-art of recognized knowledge and experience concerning the spectrum of possible features, the topic of the 3rd NATO MW Congress was “Personnel Recovery in Mountainous Terrain”. Under the punchline *“Learning from others’ expertise and experience, improves the quality of decision-making and, in turn, the outcomes”*, an ensemble of 11 speakers from 7 different nations and backgrounds were engaged. All of them are recognized practitioners and scientists who do not refer first to knowledge from books; more than that, they share their real-life experiences because “they are the books”.

The Congress was opened by the Director General of Defence Policy of Slovenia, Mr. Uros Zorko, and also the Brigadier General Ilmars Lejins from Allied Command Transformation (ACT) spoke a greeting word as starting point for this years’ Congress and topic. The substantial concept of Congress was to stress the typical features of mountainous terrain from 8000m in altitude to 1000m deep into sub-terrain mountainous areas. So to say, it was a practical orographical top-down principle embedded in insights from science and experience.



Fig 1. Georg Kronthaler
“Body Recovery from Broad Peak”



Fig.2 Robin De Schepper;
“SERE”



Fig 3. Steven Holland
Military Personnel Recovery
“Case Jessica Lynch”

The first man in the world to plan and conduct a body recovery from over 8000m (Broad Peak 8071m), Georg Kronthaler (AUT), shared his experiences in planning, training for and executing such a challenge.

Professor Markus Tannheimer PhD (DEU), experienced in high-altitude expeditions, emphasized the importance of improvised rescue skills, based on the real-life case of a seriously injured soldier at high altitude during a military expedition.

Steven Holland (USA) from Army South Personnel Recovery Coordination Section shared the deeper knowledge and ground truth he gained in 13 turns of combat and 6 military Personnel Recovery operations. He gave a very tangible and evidence based report about the “Jessica Lynch recovery operation” in Iraq, in which he was a participant.

Franco Vodopivec (SVN) related to his lessons learned from the recovery operation at Chaperi Ghar (3072m) during his ISAF mission in 2005.

The glacier and winter features were highlighted by Sabrina Grillitsch (AUT), who did the South Pole Race in 2014 and stated that “*minus 35 degrees do not forgive any mistake*”.

The subterrain features of PR in mountainous terrain was stressed by Andreas Wolf, from Bergwacht Bayern, who was deeply involved in what is considered to be the biggest cave-rescue operation so far, the “Riesending” joint operation where a seriously injured speleologist was recovered from a 1000m deep cave in an international 7-day joint-rescue-operation.

Apart from these real-life cases, the bigger picture of Joint Personnel Recovery was drawn by LTC Tommaso Barone (ITA) from the Joint Air Power Competence Centre (JAPCC). The NATO MW COE Speaker, LTC Reinhold Ramesberger showed the general doctrinal situation within NATO and made the link to Mountain Warfare. Clinical psychologist Uros Rosker (SVN) referred to the constructs of fear and hope and what happens in our brains. The scientist Andrezej Tomczak (POL) shared his research results concerning motor skills under stress and sleep deprivation, and SERE Instructor Robin DeSchepper (BEL) completed the body of knowledge with information and explanations in his domain.

In addition to the keynotes and lectures a poster session and an industrial exhibition were also offered. A special highlight was the field trip with a live hands-on demonstration in a static and a dynamic display. The dynamic presentation involved the tactical activity of a stability scenario: an international patrol (DEU/SVN/GBR) was ambushed by hit-and-run tactics and after controlling the situation a wounded soldier had to be rescued from a 50m deep mountain gorge in very difficult mountainous terrain. The patrol leader, SFC Kolbl (MW COE), decided his team would conduct this by their own means under own protection. As part of the tactical scenario, the state-of-the-art means of combining high-tech assets with conventional Mountain Warfare skills was practiced. Thus, locating the injured soldier and the overwatching of the enemy situation was carried out by the use of a small drone. Based on the achieved situational overview, the patrol leader decided to conduct a CASEVAC and ordered his team to

construct a crane-system in order to lift the wounded soldier in a safe and comfortable way to a safe place. After the injured person was brought to the medic team, an infusion was needed. The patrol leader called to the Command Post for this and it was brought across this rough compartmentalized mountainous terrain by a flying supporter (Rocket Man) in an extremely rapid way, well adapted to the terrain.



Fig. 4.: Situation brief for the spectators.



Fig 5. Multinational patrol clears the situation



Fig. 6.: Construction of the crane system



Fig 7. CASEVAC

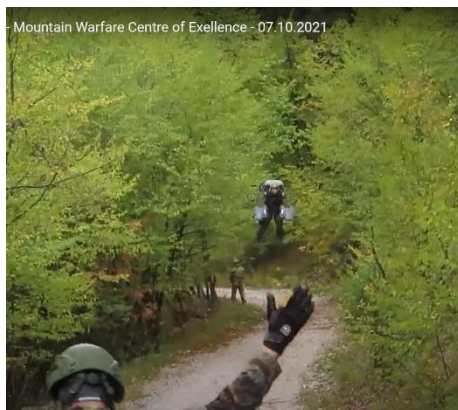


Fig. 8.: Flying supporter



Fig 9. Delivery of infusion and medicine by flying supporter

Summary:

In summary, it can be stated that: *“A variety of inputs and impulses correlated to the topic Personnel Recovery in mountainous terrain were given and it is the hope of us all that this may improve the quality of future decisions and, in turn, the outcomes”.*

Subsequently, a Congress Book will be published which will contain the contents of lectures in written form. Likewise, it is planned to make an enhanced eBook available on the NATO MW COE WEBSITE.



Fig. 10: Mission accomplished: 74 Congress participants from 15 Nations and local politicians attended the field trip

“Personnel Recovery in mountainous terrain is not a mission expected to be given on a frequent basis, but when it is given, it is a “no-fail-mission”.