



Ohio Adjutant General's Department

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Ohio National Guard and Hungary: 'Graduate-level' state partnership

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BUDAPEST, Hungary, (9/15/10) -- Back in 1993, Hungary was emerging from behind the Iron Curtain. The National Guard's new State Partnership Program was announcing a third pairing of a state with a nation. And Army Lt. Col. Gregory Wayt was about to become the Ohio National Guard's desk officer, nurturing a new international relationship.

Fast-forward 17 years. Hungary is now a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. Its troops stand side-by-side with Ohio National Guard Citizen-Soldiers, jointly deployed in Afghanistan. The National Guard's 62-nation State Partnership Program will soon celebrate its 20th anniversary. And Army Maj. Gen. Gregory Wayt is now the adjutant general of the Ohio National Guard.

Sitting in a second-floor business center overlooking the lights of Budapest on Wednesday evening, he marveled at how much has been accomplished in less than two decades.

"Think back 17 years," Wayt said. "Could anybody have ever imagined that we would be jointly deploying to Afghanistan to train the Afghan National Army in the middle of war?"

Wayt was here leading a delegation of Ohio National Guard members for SPP activities, including an after-action review conference focused on joint operations in Afghanistan and an exchange addressing issues related to chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high yield explosives weapons.

Hungary formally asked to deploy to Afghanistan in joint Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams with the Ohio National Guard. The fourth Hungary-Ohio OMLT is currently serving in theater, and a fifth team is now training here for deployment.

“It’s amazing to think how far we’ve come in this partnership, to a professional army here in Hungary, an army that’s well-respected in Europe and in NATO, to partner with them, and to deploy with them to a combat zone in Afghanistan,” Wayt said. “This is graduate-level work.”

“It’s important on so many different levels,” said U.S. Ambassador Eleni Tsakopoulos Kounalakis. “Hungarians and Americans have so much in common in terms of our shared values.”

The SPP is “very helpful and very successful,” Kounalakis said. “Both sides gain so much from the partnership.

“The Hungarians are very disciplined people by nature. They’re very determined. They’re very sincere. They do what they say they’re going to do. They’re committed people.

“There is an element to the success of this partnership that goes to the character of the young [National Guardmembers] who come here and the young [Hungarian] men who participate in the training with them.”

The Hungarians have transformed their armed forces from the Soviet military model – officer-heavy, not encouraging initiative, emphasizing doctrine – to a Western model, in part with help from their SPP pairing with Ohio, in the form of exchanges, such as NCO development programs.

Today’s Hungarian forces are smaller in numbers, have more NCOs and are better-equipped than 17 years ago.

The OMLTs are a NATO mission led by Hungarian commanders, usually with about a 50-50 mix of Hungarians and Ohio Guardmembers.

Ohio Soldiers tell Wayt that they are proud to serve alongside the Hungarians, who they view as professional, justifiably proud and disciplined and from whom they learn as much as they teach.

On Sept. 15 in a ceremony at Tata, Hungary, about an hour north of here, Wayt pinned 28 Ohio Commendation Medals – a state award – on Hungarian soldiers, recognizing their OMLT service in Afghanistan.

Hungary has sacrificed in Afghanistan: The day Wayt arrived here, the nation honored a fourth soldier who died from injuries sustained over there serving on a Provincial Reconstruction Team.

“The support in the nation, the support in the press for their military was huge,” Wayt said. “The outpouring from the community this week has been very large.”

Ohio was selected as Hungary’s SPP partner in part because the largest population of Hungarians outside Hungary is in Cleveland, Ohio.

“The time that I have spent out in the field with the Ohio National Guardmembers has been some of the most wonderful time that I’ve spent in Hungary,” Kounalakis said. “They’re such impressive, strong, smart young men, who are so determined to do their job and do it well.

“What they bring -- just when they walk into the room – what they bring along with them is the confidence and experience and training and discipline that is noticeable from the very first moment. Noticeable to me, and – frankly – it’s noticeable to the Hungarians, who learn so much from them.”

In 1993, SPP relationships were run from state headquarters. Today, a National Guard bilateral affairs officer is forward-deployed at the U.S. Embassy in the partner nation as the adjutant general’s eyes and ears on the ground.

Ohio now has two state partnerships, adding Serbia – Hungary’s neighbor – in 2006.

“One of the nation’s goals of Hungary is stability in the Balkans,” Wayt said. “More importantly, the Serbian armed forces wants to benchmark from Hungary because ... Hungary has previously gone through many of the same things that they’re going through right now.

“We do a lot of exchanges together between Serbia, Ohio and Hungary,” he said adding that he met with the defense chiefs of both nations in Ohio in February.

Serbia now plans to deploy to Cypress with Hungary for a joint peacekeeping mission. “That partly was brought on because of the SPP,” Wayt said. “Our ability to all work together has helped facilitate that deployment. There’s still a lot that we’re doing in Hungary.”

“They appreciate it,” Kounalakis said. “They value the partnership ... because of what they learn, because of the training that they get. ... It’s such an extraordinary opportunity, because many of them won’t have the chance to go to the United States for training. The United States comes here.

“General Wayt coming here is an opportunity for the Hungarians. They see him as having such an amazing success story in his own right for what he’s done with the Ohio National Guard that they absolutely focus on the opportunity to talk with him, to gain advice and knowledge on how they can expand and improve and strengthen their armed forces.”

Among contributions Wayt said Ohio can offer: More OMLTs; assisting with the transformation of Hungary’s Special Forces; conducting joint NATO exercises; and offering the National Guard’s 373 years of experience as Hungarian leaders consider adding a reserve component to the Hungarian Defense Forces.

“They know that the National Guard is an efficient operation inside of defense budget,” Wayt said. “They’re very interested in forming a professional reserve component.”

This week, the Ohio National Guard had seven SPP events underway in Serbia even as it simultaneously ran events in here in Hungary.

“The SPP is having an impact on national security for the United States,” Wayt said. “It’s assisting [U.S. European Command] initiatives. It’s assisting our ambassadors and their country teams.

“This SPP is having an impact not only on the national security of the United States but the national security of these two countries.

“We all want a more stable world for our kids. This program is going to help facilitate a more stable world and provides an opportunity for our Soldiers to train together with their soldiers, learn how to operate with different cultures. It’s got many huge advantages for all of us in this together.”

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Army. Maj. Gen. Gregory Wayt, the adjutant general of the Ohio National Guard, awards the Ohio Commendation Medal to Hungarian Defense Forces soldiers who served in a joint unit with Ohio National Guard members in Afghanistan at Tata, Hungary, on Sept. 15, 2010. A delegation of Ohio National Guard leaders was in Hungary for National Guard State Partnership Program activities. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jim Greenhill) (Released)

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: The Ohio National Guard Public Affairs Office at 614-336-7000 or Capt. Matt Molinski at 614-336-7449.