

The Hungarian 34th Laszlo Bercsenyi Special Forces Battalion: Great Capabilities with Greater Complications

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The Hungarian 34th Laszlo Bercsenyi Special Forces
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Submitted by Captain Sandor Fabian
CG#12, FACAD: Major K. B. Ellison
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Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the global security environment has become increasingly complex, significantly less stable and potentially more dangerous than in the past. Recent operations have demonstrated the new and complex challenges facing the democratic countries all over the world. In this non-conventional environment, every nation has to have a multi-capable, widely employable unit to meet the newest challenges of the asymmetric warfare.

The establishment of the Hungarian Special Forces Battalion revolutionized the capabilities of the ground forces in Hungary. The Special Forces battalion brought to the Hungarian Defense Forces (see HDF later) the ability to conduct military operations on the entire spectrum of conflicts. As a result, the HDF possess a unique, well-trained, highly motivated unit of warriors for the first time in history.

Unfortunately, some constitutional restrictions prevent the unit from achieving and maintaining its full potential. To utilize the full capabilities of the newly established unit, the Hungarian parliament must reduce the constitutional restrictions on employment of the military outside of the NATO and UN alliance system and relax the strict medical standards that currently exist.

Background

In 1989, after forty years under a communist political system, the Hungarian Republic was re-established and the country started a long journey to create a western style political, economical and military system. Because of its significant progress to build up a democratic nation, Hungary at first gained membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace Program, then joined NATO in 1999, and finally five years later became a member of the European Union. During the last sixteen years, because of the new alliance system and the changed national security requirements, the HDF have had to go through an extraordinary change process.

This process was conducted in three stages. During the first stage, from 1991 to 1994, the number of the defense forces was reduced dramatically from 200,000 to 40,000. The second stage, from 1994 to 2000, was devoted to creating the new national military doctrine, to defining the new requirements and the necessary capabilities for the ground and the air forces. During the last stage, from 2001 to 2004, the government started to enhance those traditional military capabilities that had already existed and to create new capabilities such as the ability to conduct peacekeeping operations within

an international environment. At some point in this process the decisionmakers determined that the HDF needed to possess the capability to conduct operations from low-intensity non-military actions to the traditional, large-scale combat operations¹. This desire led to the transition of the 34TH Laszlo Bercsenyi Long Range Reconnaissance Battalion to the Special Forces Battalion.

While this process did not bring many significant changes in the training system or in equipping the battalion, the unit has had to become familiar with several new tactics, techniques and procedures, such as anti-terrorist, hostage-rescue, and anti-drug operations in order to meet the requirements of its new mission. At end of 2004, the Laszlo Bercsenyi Special Forces Battalion reached the full capability to be deployed anywhere in the world, under any conditions; however the creation of the military capability is illusory without political.

Constitutional Restrictions

While the HDF has established the capability to conduct non-conventional operations on the modern non-contiguous battlefield; Hungarian politicians have also restricted this ability by keeping the very strict constitutional limitations on the employability of

Hungarian units at home or abroad. Hungarian soldiers can not be deployed in the homeland with one exception, disaster relief operations². Thus, while the battalion has the ability to conduct counter terrorist operations, counter-drug operations, hostage-rescue operations, etc. It can not be deployed in the homeland. Instead, those responsibilities belong to the Hungarian Police Forces. Military leaders knew these restrictions when the special forces unit was established; however, they believed that the political leaders would understand the need to change the constitution and to exempt this unit.

Infact, the deployment of the Special Forces battalion with the police forces would greatly assist law enforcement efforts against organized crime and drug trafficking. At the same time, such a combined effort would show extremist or terrorist groups that the government is serious about deploying whatever force is necessary in order to deter them from operating in Hungary.

Moreover, the law determines the specific conditions under which a Hungarian unit can be deployed abroad: If Hungary receives a NATO (5th article) or UN request, the government can send troops anywhere for six months without the approval of the parliament. After six months

the government has to ask the parliament to extend the time in accordance with the request of the international organization. The second possible way is to send troops at the request of an allied country, but in this case only with the approval of the entire parliament³. Under this system, no authority in Hungary has the ability to authorize any special capable unit deployment without a long approval process.

The political timeline and the military's own mission specific timeline are inseparable in the deployment of the special capable units. The Special Forces Battalion was created to react quickly to any non-conventional threat to protect Hungarian citizens and Hungarian interest⁴. The time is always one of the most important considerations in every conventional military operation and even more so important in special operations. To conduct any mission successfully, every commander needs to make timely decisions. With the current constitutional restrictions, the political leaders prevent the Special Forces Battalion from conducting its core mission. The time taken to make the political decision is greater than the time required to accomplish the desired end state.

Of course, no democratic nation in the world, would expect a political leader to use military force without approval of an additional, higher political power. However, in most countries, the president or the prime minister has the authority to make the decision, after he has discussed the deployment of the forces with his National Security Council. Hungary should follow this example and give more authority to the president or the prime minister to deploy the special capable forces; however at the same time the president or the prime minister must be more accountable to the parliament and to the nation.

Medical Requirements

Unfortunately, complications regarding the deployment of special forces do not end with the constitution. Additional recruitment factors complicate the use of this new capability. When the headquarters of the HDF formed the Special Forces Battalion, they decided to establish high standards for recruitment, especially with respect to physical requirements. While setting high standards sounds consistent with establishing and maintaining the best and most unique force in the history

of the Hungarian Army, the result has created difficulties.

According to the law, every person, who applies to the unit, has to go through several medical examinations and they have to have a spinal X-ray⁵. The result of this examination can not show any deformation. Last year eighty-two people tried to join the battalion, but only twenty-three passed the X-ray. Twelve of the twenty-three failed other examinations, so the final number was eleven⁶. The problem is that most of these people did not have any idea, that they had had any spinal problem. Most of them led very active lives, had been involved in sports, but never had had any problems. The most remarkable note here is that they all passed the two-week, physically demanding selection course without any medical problem.

The other side of the coin is that the present members of the unit also have to have an X-ray examination every five years, and the same rule is applied for them⁷. However every member of the unit has to conduct fifteen or more billet dependent parachute jumps every year, which is very demanding on their spines. Consequently the unit loses from fifteen to thirty members every three to five years⁸. The importance

of medical readiness for a special capable soldier, not withstanding the strict medical requirements are at odds with the time and cost of training one individual soldier.

Moreover, leaders of the unit must decide to whether or not train their soldiers in the most realistic environment or to substitute the "classroom" education in order to keep these soldiers in the Special Forces community as long as possible. Consequently this process makes the recruitment and the replacement of unit members very difficult. Being a soldier is not the most popular job in Hungary. The national security strategy and the good relationship the country enjoys with its neighbors do not make the young generation feel the importance of maintaining national defense force and most care even less about Hungary's international military responsibilities.

Conclusion

Existing constitutional and medical restrictions prevent the Special Forces Battalion from achieving and maintaining its full potential. If the leaders of the country have the courage to meet the requirements of the international treaties and the modern asymmetric

battlefield, then they need to move one more step forward and fully support changes, which will allow the full exploitation of this highly capable unit.

¹ The Deed Of Foundation Of The 34th Laszlo Bercsenyi Special Forces Battalion, Szolnok, 1 January 2005, 1.

² The Constitution of the Hungarian Republic 1949. XX. Budapest, 1949, 93rd Section 2.Paragraph.

³ The Constitution of the Hungarian Republic 1949. XX. Budapest, 1949, 93rd Section 4-5th Paragraph

⁴ The Deed Of Foundation Of The 34th Laszlo Bercsenyi Special Forces Battalion, Szolnok, 1 January 2005, 1.

⁵ The Law About The Hungarian Professional And Contract Soldiers' Rights and Obligations 1993. CX., Budapest, 1993, 102nd Section, 1st Paragraph.

⁶ Personal interview with the battalion S-1 Officer, 2004 march 21

⁷ The Law About The Hungarian Professional And Contract Soldiers' Rights and Obligations 1993. CX., Budapest, 1993, 102nd Section, 2nd Paragraph.

⁸ Personal interview with the battalion S-1 Officer, 2004 march 21

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