

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Joining Forces Over Afghanistan: The EPAF "Experiment"

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From 2002 to 2003, F-16s of the Royal Netherlands Air Force, the Royal Norwegian Air Force and the Royal Danish Air Force flew side by side in the hostile skies over Afghanistan. United under the wings of the European Participating Air Forces (EPAF), a unique, trinational alliance, they represented their countries' flying contribution to the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Each country deployed six F-16 fighter-bombers, together forming one squadron-sized detachment. In theory at least, the EPAF enabled the smaller European air forces to make a proportionally greater contribution to OEF than they could have done individually. By joining forces, the participating air forces made optimal use of their limited resources – a typical small powers strategy enacted by the three countries to overcome the structural limitations of their military capabilities in a long-standing allied arrangement. This article is a comparative study of the experiences gained concerning the cooperation between the three air forces and the interoperability of the EPAF detachment within the larger OEF coalition; its conclusion is that, although working within the trinational framework revealed differences on the political, military-operational, tactical-technical and personnel level, most of these problems were eventually overcome. All things considered, the EPAF did offer these smaller countries an instrument to demonstrate their solidarity with the United States and provide a significant contribution to the Global War on Terror, making it a prime "operational" example of effective small or middle power strategy to mitigate (combat) limitations in an asymmetrical multinational relationship vis-à-vis the United States.

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**Keywords:** Royal Netherlands Air Force; Royal Norwegian Air Force; Royal Danish Air Force; European Participating Air Forces; Enduring Freedom; coalition warfare

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## Introduction

From 2002 to 2003, F-16s of the Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf), the Royal Norwegian Air Force and the Royal Danish Air Force flew side by side in the hostile skies over Afghanistan. United under the wings of the European Participating Air Forces (EPAF), a unique, trinational alliance, they represented their countries' flying contribution to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Operating from Manas airbase, Kyrgyzstan, the EPAF F-16s flew combat missions on a daily basis, mainly providing air support to coalition troops on the ground. On a number of occasions, live weapons were dropped on enemy combatants or their infrastructure and fighting positions. Building on a partnership that had its roots in the joint procurement of F-16 fighter aircraft in 1975, each of the three allied countries deployed six F-16 fighter-bombers, together forming one squadron-sized detachment. In theory at least, the EPAF enabled smaller European air forces to make a proportionally greater contribution to OEF than they could have done individually. By collaborating, the participating air forces made optimal use of their limited resources – a typical small powers strategy, conducted by the three participating countries to overcome the structural limitations of their military capabilities in a long-standing allied arrangement.

Whether the EPAF concept would work under combat conditions, however, was anybody's guess until 2002, when the cooperation was put to the test for the first time in Afghanistan. How did EPAF fare under combat? Was the concept successful and what lessons were there to be learned for possible future deployments?

Research in (formerly classified) Dutch governmental and military archives allows a retrospective comparison of the experiences gained concerning the cooperation between the three air forces and the interoperability of the EPAF detachment within the larger OEF coalition. This will be conducted below from the perspective of the Royal Netherlands Air Force, which led the allied detachment during its baptism of fire over Afghanistan. It is important to recognise the risk of introducing bias into the article by leaning heavily on Dutch sources. For a truly comparative, multinational history of the EPAF contribution to the Afghan conflict, and all the complexities and opportunities such a coalition arrangement entails, one ideally needs access to classified Norwegian, Danish and American archival material as well; this article should be seen as a starting point for fellow researchers to follow with studies of the EPAF detachment from their national points of view for the picture to be completed.

### ***Scandinavian Friends***

For the Royal Netherlands Air Force, no stranger to operating as part of a coalition force after having been active over the Balkans for many years in the 1990s, participation in Operation Enduring Freedom in 2002 meant fitting into a coalition led by the United States. Pooling their scarce personnel and equipment assets with the Norwegian and the Danish air forces, the RNLAf considered cooperation as part of the EPAF coalition the most appropriate means for a relatively small coalition partner to nonetheless make a cost-effective, relevant contribution to the campaign. The EPAF, in turn, was integrally incorporated into the 376th Air Expeditionary Wing of the United States Air Force (USAF), resulting in a high level of integration. Much like the EPAF, the embedding of coalition units into an American wing in this way had never been done before (Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 7).

Initially, the Netherlands offered the Americans their F-16s in a purely non-combat role. Flying reconnaissance missions, mapping out refugee camps and flows, the six fighter aircraft would, according to the government, contribute to the goal shared by the United States and other allies of causing as few civilian casualties as possible, helping the coordination between the intended military and humanitarian missions (Parliamentary Records, 2001, November 9). This limited role fitted in well with the cautious approach that the Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok had adopted in the wake of 9/11. By mid-December 2001, when the Netherlands committed an infantry (air assault) company to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Kok revoked his earlier decision. Despite initial reservations about assigning combat tasks to the Dutch F-16s, the prime minister, along with the other members of his government, did not want a repetition of the air support fiasco that sealed the fate of the Dutch-controlled UN Safe Area Srebrenica in July 1995 (NIMH, 2010). With the participation of Dutch ground units in the stabilisation force in mind, the Cabinet decided to no longer provide the F-16s solely in a reconnaissance capacity, but to make them available for close air support and interdiction missions as well. In doing so, The Hague secured contingency air support for the Dutch infantry company in ISAF. Unlike the Netherlands, the Danish and Norwegian governments offered their F-16s in an offensive role right from the start (Parliamentary Records, 2002, January 24, p. 17).

With cabinet approval now sealed, followed by the green light from Dutch parliament on 22 December, 2001, the Staff of the Royal Netherlands Air Force sought contact with their Nordic counterparts to explore and work out the options for joint operations. All three were of the opinion that the EPAF provided the best framework to make a collective contribution to the Global War on Terror. In the last week of 2001, air force representatives from the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway sat around the table for the first time to plan the deployment of their F-16s. They agreed that the RNLAf would assume command for the first three months, after which the Danes and then the Norwegians would take on the role of lead nation (Janssen Lok, 2003, p. 44). The jets would be stationed at Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan, a civilian airfield that met most of the requirements and required only minimal logistical support. However, the taxiways and runway at Manas were in such a poor state they had to be reconstructed before F-16s could safely fly from the base. Consequently, the planned start date was moved back, from 1 July to 1 October, 2002 (Netherlands MOD, 2002, May 2).

### ***Agree to Disagree***

In June, a reconnaissance team under Dutch command visited the former Soviet base to review the facilities and take stock of what could be taken over from the resident French and American detachments, which the EPAF contingent was to replace (Netherlands MOD, 2002, June 20). Their findings would form the basis for determining the exact size of the EPAF detachment, consisting of flight, technical and logistic personnel and six F-16s from each country, supplemented by a Dutch KDC-10 tanker aircraft. It therefore came as a great surprise when Norway announced a month later, and without prior consultation, that it would be

reducing its personnel contribution from 132 to 101. The RNLAf Deputy Chief of Operations reminded his Norwegian colleague of the agreement to evenly share the contribution of their personnel. The Norwegian reduction had direct consequences for the tasks and size of the Dutch and Danish detachments. After much toing and froing, the latter two agreed to a revised Norwegian contribution of 113 persons, a number that was both politically and financially motivated, on the condition that they would not have to increase their own contributions (Netherlands MOD, 2002, July 24; Netherlands MOD, 2002, July 31; Janssen Lok, 2003, p. 46). The Danish F-16 detachment totalled 139 persons (Schaub, 2015, pp. 20–21). The Dutch contribution totalled 169 persons, 30 of which made up the KDC-10 detachment. In the run-up to and at the start of the joint deployment, more cracks appeared. Cooperation with the Norwegians proved “difficult,” reported the Dutch senior national representative in September. Norway designated numerous aspects as “national items,” which caused frustration both within the EPAF detachment and for the Norwegian detachment commander (Netherlands MOD, 2002, September 18).

Another subject on which the three countries could not agree, and which would have a significant impact on the deployment, were the rules of engagement (ROE's). In comparison to the (American) rules of engagement issued by United States Central Command (CENTCOM), the Dutch rules of engagement were stricter on some points. The area of operations for the F-16s, for example, was strictly limited to Afghanistan, and the Netherlands set more stringent requirements for the identification of a target, for which their F-16s were equipped with targeting pods. If there was any doubt as to whether a target met the criteria, the pilot would refrain from weapons deployment (Netherlands MOD, 2003, May 16; Helfferich, 2003, p. 14; Boddens Hosang, 2020). Denmark and Norway also took a very cautious approach to targeting. They took heed of the Royal Netherlands Air Force, who had already gained valuable experience in attacking ground targets in operations over the Balkans, particularly during Operation Allied Force against Yugoslavia in 1999 (Frost-Nielsen, 2013, pp. 63–66). Although the EPAF countries were all in agreement regarding the targeting guidelines, they differed in opinion with respect to the rules of engagement. From a military viewpoint, having common ROE's that were agreed by all the EPAF countries was not a necessity. As it became clear that having unanimous rules of engagement was neither legally nor politically feasible, the EPAF countries operated, to the confusion of the Americans, according to three different sets of national restrictions within a single detachment (Netherlands MOD, 2002, September 28; Frost-Nielsen, 2013, pp. 75–78). Of the three, Denmark had the most restrictive rules of engagement (NIMH, 2003, September 3; Norwegian MFA and MOD, 2018, p. 174).

### ***A Rough Start***

On 23 September, 2002, the main body of the Dutch F-16/KDC-10-detachment departed to their new “home base,” where the majority of Danish and Norwegian personnel had already landed a day earlier. Four days later, after a night-time stop-over in Turkey, the first nine F-16s (three per country) arrived. With just one KDC-10 tanker accompanying them, not all of the aircraft could complete the eight-hour trip at the same time. A second batch of nine therefore followed on 7 October via the same route. On their arrival the next day, the detachment was at full strength (Janssen Lok, 2002, p. 18; van der Mark & Visser, 2004, pp. 52–53).

The first operational EPAF mission was scheduled for the night of 1 October. With a view to strengthening the spirit of the coalition, the other EPAF partners had granted the Norwegian request to fly this mission, so it only added salt to the wound when the required transfer of authority from Oslo did not arrive in time (Netherlands MOD, 2002, September 30). In consultation with the Ops Group, the decision was taken to have the Netherlands fly the mission instead. The pilots were raised from their beds, and following brief preparations they successfully completed the first operational tasking – the escort of a convoy. The F-16s were refuelled in the air several times by the KDC-10, which could thus also record its first mission from Manas (Netherlands MOD, 2002a; Netherlands MOD, 2002b; Netherlands MOD, 2002, October 2). After the false start, the Royal Norwegian Air Force clocked its first flight hours above the Afghan landscape the next day, as did the Royal Danish Air Force. The EPAF detachment seemed to have just got into the swing of operations, when on 11 October, the Dutch detachment commander was confronted with the Danish decision to stop flying for the time being (Netherlands MOD, 2002, October 13). It transpired that the Danes did not have the correct diplomatic clearance to fly over Tajikistan, which separates Kyrgyzstan from Afghanistan. Initially, Danish F-16s circumvented this problem by using American and Norwegian clearances. However, when the coalition countries were no longer willing or able to provide Denmark with waivers, the Danish detachment commander decided to suspend all Danish F-16 operations – a decision with far-reaching operational consequences. Until the Danes restarted their flight operations, the Dutch and Norwegian air forces together took on the execution of all missions assigned to the EPAF, which ran the risk of exhausting both

pilots and aircraft in a very short space of time. By some way of compensation, the Danes removed the targeting pods from their F-16s and made them available to the EPAF partners. This was particularly helpful for the Norwegian air force, as it did not have targeting pods itself. In a strongly worded letter, the Danish detachment commander informed his superiors that he was afraid that the inadequate contribution would damage the credibility of the EPAF contribution as a whole, and that of the Danes in particular (Netherlands MOD, 2002, October 11; Netherlands MOD, 2002, October 14; Netherlands MOD, 2002, December 10).

The lack of diplomatic clearance, which kept the Danish F-16s grounded until 21 October and saddled the Dutch and Norwegian detachments with around 250 additional flight hours, was not the only surprise Denmark had in store for its EPAF partners (Netherlands MOD, 2002, October 21; Netherlands MOD, 2002, October 27). It turned out the Danish pilots did not have the necessary means or training to operate in the dark, which meant that their Dutch and Norwegian colleagues also had to take on all night missions (Netherlands MOD, 2002, October 13; Netherlands MOD, 2002, October 27). This lack of capability to conduct night missions, combined with the strict ROEs and the absence of a brake chute in their F-16s, meaning they had fewer alternatives for landing than the Dutch and Norwegians due to the minimum runway length required, imposed further restrictions on the Danish deployment (NIMH, 2003a). Lack of cooperative pre-deployment training meant that these problems, which had the potential to seriously undermine the mission, only came to light with the aircraft in theatre and flying operational missions in support of coalition troops that depended on them.

### ***Flourishing Cooperation***

With the legal implications in the event of weapons deployment in mind, the EPAF F-16s always operated over Afghanistan in single-nation pairs. Their standard loadout consisted of two fuel tanks, two laser-guided GBU-12 bombs, two radar-guided air-to-air missiles and a LANTIRN targeting pod. Although a specific work-up programme was not considered necessary, in the run-up to the deployment the RNLAf pilots had focused their attention on the operation of the targeting pod and flying with night vision goggles (Jansen Lok, 2002, pp. 15–16). Norway had prepared its pilots in a similar manner, with a focus on the use of LANTIRN and air support missions, by day and night (Bothun, 2019, February 19). As the long sortie length of six hours on average was extremely tiring for the pilots, the RNLAf command decided to rotate them every four weeks. An added advantage of a rotation schedule was that the operational experience and flight hours were spread out over a greater number of pilots. In this way, the RNLAf ensured that its pilots who solely performed close air support tasks over Afghanistan kept current in other disciplines, such as air-to-air combat and operating in large flight packages. Norway and Denmark also rotated their aircrews (Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 7).

Reflecting on the first weeks of the deployment in their midterm sitrep of 7 November 2002, the Dutch detachment commander and the senior national representative painted a positive picture of the operations and of the living and working conditions. International cooperation within EPAF, they concluded, was growing. After a difficult start, with the countries having to learn to overcome their differences in culture, language, customs and working methods, the partnership had grown to such an extent that they now worked in an integrated manner where possible (Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 21; Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 22). The joint Norwegian-Dutch repair team that flew to the Kyrgyz city of Osh on 1 November, 2002 on an Italian C-130, protected by a Danish security team, to repair a stranded Dutch F-16 with engine trouble, was proof enough that the cooperation had indeed flourished (Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 1). The first Norwegian detachment commander confirmed the initial start-up problems.

It seemed like a lot of the coordination for the cooperation was missing when the operations started. I believe we thought we were more interoperable than we proved to be. ... We were to cooperate and to the outside world EPAF should look as one fully functional organisation. This was not as easy as it sounded – due to a lot of unsolved and undiscussed issues that emerged as the operations started. ... National rules and regulations gave us challenges (Bothun, 2019, February 19).

Regarding the cooperation with the Americans, the report had nothing but praise. The embedding of coalition units in an American wing was satisfactory to both parties, so much so in fact that the American commander praised this new form of cooperation as an example for future coalition operations. All in all, concluded the midterm sitrep, the European detachment was performing just as it should. Their tasks were executed in a “professional yet sober manner with little fuss”. The presence of airpower alone effectively con-

tributed to the allied operations on the ground and thus to making Afghanistan a more stable and secure place, concluded the Dutch detachment commander (Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 7).

### ***Variable Rules of Engagement***

At the end of December 2002, an incident near the Pakistani border, where two Dutch F-16s responded to an immediate request for air support by coalition ground forces only to be called off when two hurriedly scrambled American AV-8B Harrier fighter-bombers arrived at the scene, revealed an American reluctance to deploy the Dutch fighter jets in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area because of the rules of engagement under which they were operating (NIMH, 2002, December 30; Netherlands MOD, 2002, December 31). In comparison to the American ROE's, the Dutch rules were more strict on some points. For example, Dutch F-16s were not permitted to cross into Pakistani airspace, even for reasons of self-defence. The fact that their ROE's allowed the Norwegian F-16s to fly over Pakistan, while the Dutch and Danes could not, showed that the interpretation of self-defence differed greatly even within the EPAF (Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 19; Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 25; Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 26; Norwegian MFA and MOD, 2018, p. 174). It also meant that effectively two thirds of the potential of the EPAF was underused. Whenever the Combined Air Operations Centre, tasked with planning all fixed wing operations over Afghanistan, expected a request for air support near the border, it called upon Norwegian (or American) aircraft (Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 25; Netherlands MOD, 2002, November 26). The allocation of combat missions in the border area to the Norwegians not only led to an uneven distribution of the effort within the EPAF but resulted also in reducing the relevance of the Dutch and Danish contribution. After a long and heated debate, the Dutch detachment commander finally got his superiors to amend the Dutch ROE's to incorporate the possibility of providing air support inside Pakistani air space in the event of a direct threat to coalition troops, for as long as the enemy posed a threat, interpreting the right of self-defence in the same way as the Norwegians did (Netherlands MOD, 2003, October 3; NIMH, 2002, December 23; NIMH, 2004; Parliamentary Records, 2004, July 12, p. 31; Norwegian MFA and MOD, 2018, p. 174).

F-16s from the Norwegian detachment had the equivocal honour of being the first EPAF aircraft in Afghanistan to support coalition troops by means of weapons deployment. After having rapidly lost terrain in the previous months, Taliban forces had regrouped in the Adi Ghar mountain region near the border town of Spin Boldak in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar. By means of Operation Mongoose, the coalition meant to drive them out of their mountainous hiding places. On 27 January, 2003, Norwegian F-16s dropped their first bombs of the campaign (and, incidentally, the first weapons since the Second World War) when they targeted a bunker with two GBU-12s (Norwegian MFA and MOD, 2018, p. 55). On 3 February, Danish F-16s also dropped their first bombs, destroying a cave complex with four laser-guided GBU-12s (Norby, 2018, p. 151). The RNLAF followed suit. In the early morning hours of 4 February, two Dutch F-16s took off from Manas equipped with one GBU-12 laser-guided bomb under each wing (Netherlands MOD, 2003, February 5; Trouw, 2003; Reformatorisch Dagblad, 2003; Stand By, 2003, p. 13). The attack resulted in three hits and one miss (Netherlands MOD, 2003, February 4).

Six days later, the EPAF F-16s came into action again, this time in the south-western part of Afghanistan. In the dead of night, an American reconnaissance unit was ambushed in the Lejay Baghran valley in the province of Helmand. Two Dutch F-16s, charged with the protection of the American convoy, attacked a suspicious looking vehicle with laser-guided bombs (NIMH, 2003a; Luchtvaart Nieuws, 2003b). In the ensuing engagement with enemy combatants, which lasted for 43 hours, the special forces repeatedly called in air support. On the instructions of a forward air controller, a Danish F-16 bombed targets and carried out a strafing pass with its 20mm onboard gun (NIMH, 2003b). The next day, Norwegian and Danish F-16s once again targeted enemy forces, while American bombers also joined the fight (NIMH, 2003c; NIMH, 2003, February 12). After almost two days of fighting, calm finally returned to the valley. The allies did not suffer any fatalities. The insurgents licked their wounds, but the ambush did show that they were still far from defeated. In fact, with spring rapidly approaching, a growing number of signs suggested the enemy was preparing for a new offensive.

### ***Taking Stock***

As early as November 2002, only a month into the deployment, the United States had already requested that the Netherlands extend their EPAF contribution to 1 October, 2003 (Netherlands MOD, 2003, March 5). The Dutch government decided to grant the request. Only the KDC-10 tanker aircraft returned to the Netherlands (Parliamentary Records, 2003, February 14). Denmark followed suit, agreeing also to stay for

another six months. The government in Oslo, however, decided to terminate the Norwegian contribution as of 1 April, mainly for financial reasons (Norwegian MFA and MOD, 2018, p. 71).

With the departure of the Norwegian detachment at the start of April, which marked the end of the half-year EPAF deployment term originally agreed, it was time to take stock of the EPAF “experiment” and the interoperability of the multinational detachment within the larger coalition effort. In general, the cooperation between the EPAF partners, after a difficult start, had grown closer over time. Weekly meetings, within the detachment and with the American wing of which it was part, helped smoothen things out before they could become problems. The partners showed understanding for each other’s national limitations or impossibilities, which, where possible, were solved by one of the other nations. Nevertheless, despite prior agreements to fairly share the burden, countries did not always honour their commitments. The Danes, in particular, did not make themselves popular with the other partners when it became clear that their F-16s could not be tasked for night-time missions. On top of that, for ten days, the Danish F-16s effectively did not participate in any of the EPAF flight operations because they lacked an overflight clearance for Tajikistan. Furthermore, in mid-December, after a landing accident at Bagram, Afghanistan, when a Danish F-16 seeking an alternate airbase skidded on the wet runway and came to rest in a minefield, countless flights were again scrapped because the Danish F-16s, which were not equipped with braking chutes, could no longer use Bagram as an alternate in case of emergency (NIMH, 2002, December 20; NIMH, 2002, December 27).

The most significant operational shortcoming of the Norwegian contribution to the EPAF was the lack of targeting pods, for which the Norwegians were reliant on the Dutch and Danes (Bothun, 2019, February 19). While both lent out their pods, the lack of the necessary American third-party declaration meant the Dutch equipment could be used in Norwegian (and Danish) F-16s only several weeks into the campaign. Lessons learned specific to the RNLAF were that the ROE’s, in the opinion of both pilots and liaison officers, were too restrictive; the initial estimate of the inventory of spare parts was inaccurate, meaning the Dutch found themselves reliant on the generosity of the Danes and Norwegians in this regard; and the duration of deployment within the EPAF, with Dutch and Danish ground personnel serving twice as long as their Norwegian colleagues, was widely inconsistent. The greatest operational limitation from the American point of view was that while the EPAF operated as a single unit, it did not adhere to the same rules of engagement. On top of that, as the EPAF did not form a legal entity, each of the countries had to separately enter into the necessary agreements with, among others, the Kyrgyz, Tajik and local authorities (NIMH, 2003).

Operationally, the countries worked together very closely where possible, although, as has been mentioned, aircraft solely flew in national pairs because of legal implications. Despite the inherent benefits, there were also disadvantages to cooperating within the EPAF framework and its integration in an American unit. Relying on personnel and equipment from other nations for carrying out tasks evidently meant loss of control. Take security, for example. On the basis of national experience, each country had its own philosophy about force protection. Norwegian law prescribed that Norway should focus its attention on securing its communications equipment, the Netherlands focused on safeguarding their primary weapons systems (i.e., their F-16s), and, following 9/11, the American policy was mainly concerned with protecting American personnel. This mix resulted in a security plan for Manas that meant that the RNLAF had to temporarily accept a “negative security return” for its F-16s. Furthermore, the lack of a national intelligence cell meant the Netherlands was dependent on intelligence collected by the Americans and Norwegians, who only shared their information on the basis of exchange. It became clear that different rules applied to cooperation between the countries in relation to intelligence matters. On top of that, the partnership also ran operational risks when one of the members decided to (partially) withdraw from a current operation, as Norway’s departure on 1 April, 2003 made clear (NIMH, 2003; NIMH, 2003a).

### ***Reassignment of Roles***

The Norwegian F-16s returned home with 488 missions and 2,953 flight hours over Afghanistan under their belt (van der Mark & Visser, 2004, p. 55). After a fresh look at the need for air support means in the Afghanistan war theatre, it was clear to the Combined Air Forces Component Commander that the remaining twelve Danish and Dutch F-16s, together with the coalition aircraft stationed at Bagram, were sufficient to meet the needs of the OEF campaign. (Parliamentary Records, 2003, April 28, p. 5). The departure of Norway did cause some disruption, however. Within the EPAF, the Norwegians managed the communication and information systems, which they sold to the EPAF after they had said their goodbyes. The handover of these systems was, however, excruciatingly slow. In addition, once the deployment of the Norwegian personnel ended, the former partners were confronted with a Norwegian “unwillingness” to ensure that the network was expedi-

tiously back in the air. This had a major impact on the start of the new deployment period, which was very chaotic (Netherlands MOD, 2003, May 16; NIMH, 2003, September 3).

Once the last cables had been connected and both the new computer network and the telephone exchange were operational, the Dutch-Danish mission gathered steam. Cooperation went well, although in reality the two detachments “worked more alongside one another than truly together,” according to the Dutch commander. Both shared equipment, such as targeting pods (for which the RNLAf had to regularly call upon their Danish colleagues as theirs suffered from serviceability problems), but there was no real integration. For the most part, the countries were self-sufficient. Attempts to take an integrated approach to work in several functional areas did not sufficiently get off the ground, with the notable exception of aircraft maintenance and security. In other areas cooperation was downright poor, such as in the EPAF kitchen. Another point of contention was that the lead nation, Denmark, did not fully honour its commitments regarding personnel. The medical service remained understaffed, for example, while the Danish senior medical officer also seemed to lack the right qualifications (NIMH, 2003, September 3).

After the Norwegians left, all the night-time missions and tasking on the Pakistani border fell to the RNLAf, while, because of their more restrictive rules of engagement, the Danes flew the remainder of the missions. Danish F-16s could not cross the border under any circumstances, so given the large number of requests from special forces that were mainly active in the border area, the RNLAf was assigned most of the dedicated close air support requests. On top of that, on several occasions, missions assigned to the Danish F-16s had also to be taken over by the RNLAf (NIMH, 2003, September 3). In June, anticipating on a winding down of the operational tempo, the Americans informed the EPAF that their contribution could be reduced from twelve to eight F-16s, effective immediately. The fighter jets were evenly split between both air forces.

### ***Cleared Hot***

As far as operational deployment goes, the fourth and final Dutch rotation, arriving in theatre at the end of July 2003, was in luck. The ground operations Haven Denial and Warrior Sweep entailed an increase in the number of air support requests. As the Danes could not be deployed for all missions, the RNLAf detachment bore the brunt of this effort. During one of these missions, on 20 August, 2003, weapons were again used, as one of the Dutch F-16s performed a so-called hot strafing pass, firing 160 rounds to help out a convoy that had been ambushed in a valley east of Urgun, the largest city of Paktika province (NIMH, 2003, August 21; Lockhorst, 2004, p. 83). Nine days later there was another troops-in-contact situation, when Dutch F-16s supported coalition troops with air strikes north-east of Kandahar-city. In a twenty-minute period, they dropped three GBU-12s on a mountaintop, from where enemy snipers were firing at coalition troops below (Netherlands MOD, 2003, August 29; NIMH, 2003, August 29). Subsequently, they carried out two more strafing runs, firing around 400 rounds (van Joolen & Schoonhoven, 2019, pp. 144–147; Lockhorst, 2004, pp. 83–85; Luchtvaart Nieuws, 2003a). (Although highly detailed, the account of the pilots recorded in Joolen, van & Schoonhoven 2019 differs from the official documents found in the archives on a few crucial points, including the date). The next day, 30 August, the Dutch once again found themselves in the thick of the action, when a two-ship of RNLAf F-16s each performed three strafing runs at the request of the forward air controller, expending almost all of their 20mm ammunition in the process (NIMH, 2003, August 31).

As detachment commander (detco) and commander of the EPAF detachment as a whole, the Dutch detco always had a double role to play. One of the issues confronting the Dutch detco of the fourth rotation was that Dutch military personnel were ranked lower than their coalition partners in a number of key positions. In aircraft maintenance, for example, the Dutch chief support was a first lieutenant, while his international colleagues held at least the rank of major. The real problems started, however, when a new Danish detachment commander, who had the rank of colonel, took over. Despite the experience and the diplomatic skills of the Dutch detachment commander, the Danish colonel, who outranked him, largely ignored the Dutch officer and did not obey his orders or instructions. Although the Dutch-Danish cooperation improved in efficiency in certain areas, both coalition partners retained their own identity and responsibilities, which translated into differences in rules of engagement, procedures, regulations, and even legislation. As a result, presenting the EPAF as a single entity, with one commander, one face and speaking in a single voice proved to be a constant struggle (NIMH, 2003, October 3).

### **Conclusion**

On 30 September, 2003, the EPAF detachment flew its last mission over Afghanistan. Concluding their twelve months of wartime deployment over Afghanistan, it was time for a final evaluation. Over a year, Dutch F-16s had clocked 4,640 flight hours in 804 sorties, accounting for 39% of the total efforts of the

EPAF (just under 12,000 flight hours in 2,035 sorties). The Royal Danish Air Force was not far behind with 4,341 hours (743 sorties), and up to 1 April 2003, the Royal Norwegian Air Force had clocked 2,953.5 hours in 488 sorties (Marchand, 2003, p. 12). During the 2,035 combat sorties flown by the EPAF detachment, the RNLAf expended weapons on five different occasions, Royal Danish Air Force F-16s dropped 19 laser-guided bombs and fired their guns in anger in the course of 8 different missions, while the Royal Norwegian Air Force dropped 8 GBU-12s and performed one hot strafing pass with the gun during their six-month deployment.

Operating thousands of kilometres away from home posed challenges which the three European air forces would have had difficulty tackling alone. Cooperation in the EPAF coalition provided a solution. Although the first experiences of operating within this framework were not wholly positive, in the long run the mission in Afghanistan showed that the EPAF concept worked. It enabled its members to provide a proportionally greater contribution to the Afghanistan campaign than they could have done individually. By joining forces, the participating air forces made optimal use of their limited resources and were able to punch above their weight. The RNLAf and Royal Danish Air Force lent out their targeting pods, Denmark contributed vehicles, while Norway provided maintenance tents and communication and information systems to the detachment (Anrig, 2011, pp. 235–236). Not every aspect of the allied partnership proved to be ideal, however. Problems arose during both the preparatory discussions and planning sessions at staff level and during actual operations (NIMH, 2004, April 2).

Several lessons can be distilled from the EPAF “experiment”; these can arbitrarily be broken down into the political, military-operational, tactical-technical and personnel. At the political level, there were the problems of diplomatic clearances, diverging rules of engagement and the need to formulate a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding. The Danish Air Force in particular wrestled with the diplomatic clearances, effectively curtailing its flying operations for a week and a half, while Danish F-16s were already limited in their operational deployment by more restrictive rules of engagement. Although to a lesser degree, the Royal Netherlands Air Force shared this last problem. Limiting ROEs greatly impacted the tasking of Dutch fighter-bombers in the first few months. Further, the complexity of a partnership like the EPAF, integrated within an American wing, meant that negotiating a common MOU took a long time to complete. As the EPAF did not constitute a legal entity, each participating country had to negotiate contracts with US, Kyrgyz, Tajik and local authorities separately. Countries looked differently at matters like medical care, occupational health and safety and environment issues (asbestos, radiation, noise and water quality). In particular, the presence of white asbestos at Manas airbase revealed differences in national reactions. The Netherlands set higher demands than the United States, Denmark and Norway, which was not always understood by the partners. To wrap up the issues at the political level, although agreeing to share the burden, for diplomatic reasons it remained precarious to press countries too hard on any failure to honour their commitments.

On the military-operational level, surprises like the Danish forces’ inability to fly night missions could have been unearthed sooner had the EPAF partners conducted cooperative pre-deployment training beforehand. Lacking a drag chute, which reduced the number of alternate airbases in case of an emergency, further hampered Danish F-16s in their operations. All flying operations were led from a single EPAF Ops Room, which greatly facilitated coordination, while the technical debriefing of pilots after every mission was done at the Netherlands debrief office. Although this form of debriefing constituted a change of procedure for Norwegian and Danish pilots, it helped guarantee commonality and the flow of information. Operationally, countries worked together very closely where possible, in the case of force protection and in some areas of aircraft maintenance even resulting in true integration. For example, Norwegian and Danish sheet metal specialists were authorised to work on Dutch F-16s, while Dutch engine specialists were authorised to perform test-runs on Norwegian aircraft. Further integration of maintenance activities could reduce the overall number of personnel required, although this would require the participating nations to authorise their technicians to sign off work on each other’s aircraft. In other operational areas, most notably intelligence collection, cooperation was non-existent.

Turning to tactical-technical matters, the Norwegian force was fully dependent on an already limited number of Dutch and Danish targeting pods. Furthermore, each country took many identical items with them in their fly away kits, which meant that resources were not used in the most economical way. For future operations, a common EPAF kit could hold the key. On the positive side, being trained to operate according to NATO Standard Operating Procedures, meant that on a tactical level the Dutch, Danish and Norwegian F-16 fliers all spoke the same language.

This was certainly not the case in a literal sense, however. This brings us to the fourth and final category – personnel. Dutch, Danish and Norwegian detachment members had to learn to overcome their differences



in culture, language, customs and working methods to function as a team. Diverging skill sets, qualifications and regulations also caused problems on occasion, as did differences in hierarchical and rank structures. Furthermore, Denmark and Norway did not fully meet the agreements regarding the staffing of medical and logistic elements, respectively. Also hampering the EPAF cooperation were the frequent changes in the Norwegian composition of the EPAF detachment. In contrast to their Dutch and Danish air force colleagues, who were not replaced during their deployment, part of the Norwegian personnel was rotated, while the remainder got a 10 day leave period. This hampered further integration. One lesson for future EPAF operations could be that participating countries synchronise their deployment durations.

But despite their differences, the EPAF did offer the countries an instrument to demonstrate their solidarity with the United States and provide a significant contribution to the United States-led Global War on Terror, making EPAF a prime “operational” example of effective small or middle power strategy to mitigate (combat) limitations in an asymmetrical multinational relationship vis-à-vis the United States. When the Canadian military historian Sean Maloney in 2013 asked United States Air Force personnel at the Air Support Operations Centre in Bagram for their opinion on the EPAF fighter pilots, they classed them as “top notch”. “The U.S. Army was reluctant to use EPAF CAS missions at first but quickly determined that having access to the EPAF was just as good as having USAF CAS in support” (Maloney, 2005, p. 116).

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For reasons of empirical foundation and scientific verifiability, this publication contains a near-complete list of sources used. This naturally concerns all references to public documents, interviews and correspondence with key participants involved. In accordance with Dutch law, for previously classified documents up to and including *Staatsgeheim Confidentieel* (State Secret Confidential), the validity periods (of one, three, five or ten years) have long since expired. Also, at their time of expiry, these formerly classified sources were not (visibly to researchers) assessed and extended by the archival authorities or security coordinators of the ministries. Should fellow researchers wish to request them for verification or personal use, the decision on whether or not to grant access to these sources is of course a matter for the relevant archival authority.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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