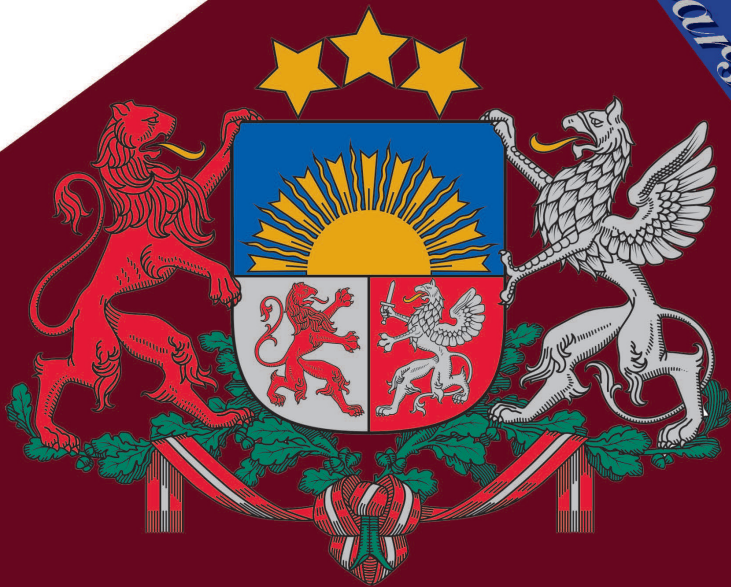


MICHIGAN
LATVIA

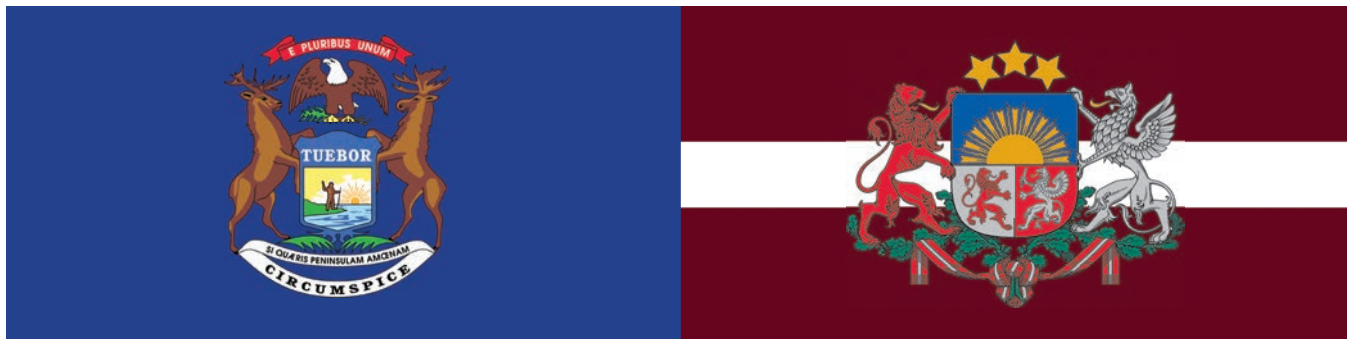
25 Years





Michigan – Latvia 25 Years of Partnership

*Produced by the Public Affairs offices of the Michigan National Guard,
Republic of Latvia Ministry of Defence Media Relations Section and
Republic of Latvia Youthguard and Information Centre*



Index

<i>Foreword by President Raimonds Vējonis</i>	6
<i>Foreword by Governor Rick Snyder</i>	7
<i>Introduction by Ambassador Nancy Pettit</i>	8
<i>Chapter One: The Ties that Bind: Latvia–Michigan Relations Before 1993</i>	10
<i>Chapter Two: The Starting Point: Latvia Regains Independence</i>	16
<i>Chapter Three: Foundations of Partnership</i>	20
<i>Chapter Four: Building Stability: SPP in the 1990s</i>	26
<i>Chapter Five: Latvia and NATO</i>	32
<i>Chapter Six: The Partnership Goes to War</i>	40
<i>Chapter Seven: The Fight Continues</i>	52
<i>Chapter Eight: Sustaining the Partnership: Recent Engagements of the SPP</i>	62
<i>Chapter Nine: The Key to Success: Relationships</i>	76
<i>Chapter Ten: The Future of the Partnership</i>	82
<i>For Further Reading</i>	89



Cooperation between Latvia and Michigan began 25 years ago, at a time shortly after restoration of the independent state of Latvia, when National Armed Forces of Latvia were being formed.

Back then, Latvia had big dreams and ambitious goals such as to rebuild its own state and become a member of the most powerful military alliance in the world, the NATO. To achieve these goals, Latvia had to rely both on the desire and determination of the Latvian people and the support of its trusted friends.

We are grateful to the Michigan National Guard for being a good partner and ally of the National Armed Forces throughout the last 25 years, and actively contributing to better security of Latvia and the whole region. Michigan National Guard had helped us develop our voluntary self-defense force, the National

Guard, and build crucial, unique self-defense niche capabilities like joint attack terminal controllers and joint fire observers. Together we have upgraded the skills of our combat engineers and artillery. Michigan National Guard have also supported development of air base of Latvian Air Force.

Soldiers of both countries have fought shoulder to shoulder during joint military missions in Afghanistan, and the memory of Latvian and Michigan Guard troops who lost their lives there will forever remain in our hearts. There had been numerous joint service trainings at Ādaži, Grayling and Alpena camps, as well as cyber security training platforms, which nowadays constitute a vital part of our defense systems.

Latvia has followed through on its commitment to bring the defense spending to 2% of the GDP in 2018. We have clearly showed that we take our international obligations very seriously. Extra funding will help us bring the development of Latvian army to a new level and broaden international cooperation.

Development of defense and deterrence capabilities is a routine task, which has to be tackled together. We need to efficiently strengthen the individual states, promote mutual trust, learn from each other and go in combat together to be able to better face modern security challenges.

Looking forward to continued close cooperation as we defend the freedom of our countries and people, as well as democratic values all over the world!

Sincerely,

Raimonds Vējonis
President of Latvia



Greetings-

This year, as we remember the 25th anniversary of the State Partnership Program, we look back not just on a successful security agreement between the Michigan National Guard and the Republic of Latvia, but also a deep and meaningful relationship between the people of these two entities. The mutual trust established by this program cannot be developed in a week, or a month, or a year. This relationship has spanned an entire generation.

Michigan has a vested interest in the future of Latvia. Nearly five thousand Latvians and Latvian descendants live in our state, many of whom never thought they would see a free Latvia. And yet, today Latvia is not only free; its Defense Force and National Guard have developed at a speed no one imagined possible. It boasts some of the world's best Joint Terminal Attack Controllers. It mechanized its infantry in a matter of months. It has sent warfighter to Afghanistan, and Iraq, and has used its experience as a fledgling military to mentor other nations learning to defend themselves.

The lessons the Michigan National Guard has learned from this partnership are innumerable. The commitment to excellence shown by the Latvian military ignites a passion in our soldiers and airmen to better themselves as their awareness of a parallel culture grows. As they begin to understand the story and struggle of the Latvian people, it sparks a reminder that the freedoms we enjoy in this country can never be taken for granted.

Through 25 years of change and development, Michigan has been proud to stand behind Latvia. We have been honored to assist where we could, and we are excited to be in the front row to watch Latvia succeed.

The past 25 years have been a testament to the medication of the Latvian people to sovereignty, and the State of Michigan is proud to support the independence of our Latvian brothers and sisters in every way we can.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rick Snyder". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Rick Snyder
Governor of Michigan





The United States and Latvia share a long history of friendship and cooperation that has endured through even the darkest days of the Soviet occupation. Throughout those dangerous times, the United States' commitment to a strong and free Latvia never wavered. We always looked forward to the day when the Cold War would end and Latvia would once again be free. This year marks the 100th Anniversary of Latvia's Declaration of Independence on November 18, 1918. It also marks the 25th Anniversary of the establishment of the State Partnership Program (SPP). This bilateral agreement between the United States and Latvia was signed on April 27, 1993. This historic event, pairing the recently restored nation of Latvia with the Great State of Michigan, initiated a special relationship that has grown in depth and strength with each passing year.

Following the restoration of Latvia's Independence in 1991, a request from the Latvian government for assistance in developing a military, based on the National Guard's citizen-soldier model, initiated the creation of a program known as the State Partnership Program (SPP). Under the SPP, states were chosen based upon a number of factors, one of which was the access to U.S. ethnic-heritage communities. Partially due to the large Latvian diaspora in Michigan that had retained much of its cultural and language identity, Latvia and Michigan were paired together as the first SPP partnership in 1993.

Since those early days, Latvia and Michigan have formed a relationship that is viewed as a model for what is possible. Generations of Michigan and Latvian soldiers have forged bonds of friendship that stand the test of time and combat. With every bilateral engagement that group grows ever larger. Overall, the list of accomplishments is too long to be fully detailed here, but key among them are the establishment of a strong, civilian-controlled military, the accession of Latvia into NATO, the co-deployment of Latvian and Michigan soldiers to combat zones in support of U.S. and Coalition activities, the establishment of niche capabilities, such as the Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC), a tri-lateral security cooperation effort between Latvia – Liberia – Michigan, and a host of others. Latvia has always reciprocated the friendship with the United States by actively working to fulfil our shared goals. I believe this friendship is absolutely due in part to the relationships begun under the SPP banner.

It is clear that for the past 25 years, Michigan has been the perfect state partner for Latvia. For me, this relationship has a personal side as well, since I am a graduate of the University of Michigan and a grandmother to young Michiganders. The rich cultural ties between Latvia and Michigan – dating back decades to the brave Latvians that immigrated to Michigan – form a backdrop that makes this partnership all the more fitting.

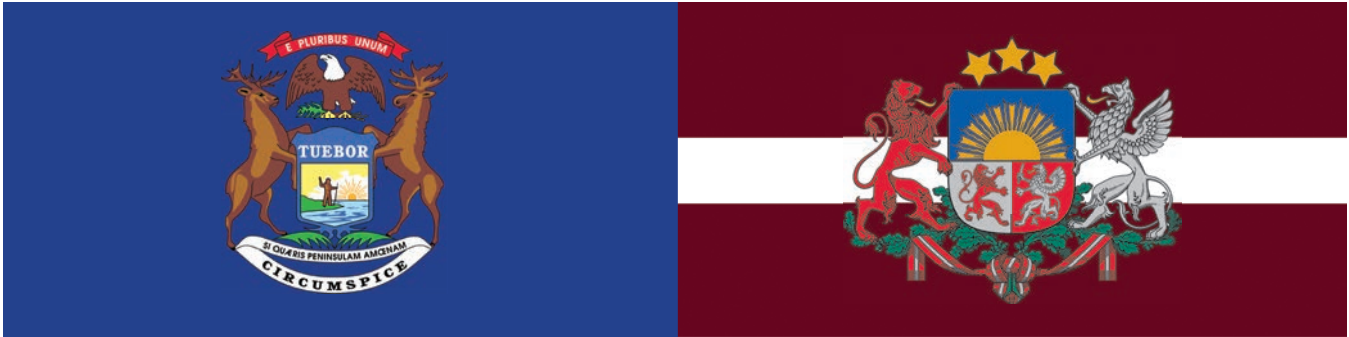


I can attest that Latvia is an ally and true friend with a fundamental commitment to NATO, Euro-Atlantic values, and an enduring commitment to the principles of democracy. Just as the United States championed the cause of Latvia as an independent state and as an aspirant to NATO and the EU, we can support and reinforce Latvia as a stable, growing democracy. As we celebrate Latvia's 100th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, as well as the 25th Anniversary of the Latvia – Michigan State Partnership Program, let us not forget that determination, sacrifice, and a deep and abiding understanding built on honest friendship is the bedrock of our shared success.

Nancy Pettit
U.S. Ambassador to Latvia



CHAPTER ONE



The Ties that Bind: Latvia–Michigan Relations Before 1993

In November 1992, dark clouds of Cold War were clearing over the European lands once occupied by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which had fallen in August 1991. In their place shone new rays of opportunity as vibrant with promise as they were rife with challenges and unknowns.

In Riga, capital city of Latvia – a Baltic nation, which, like many other countries in that region, was teetering on the cusp of a new era of freedom – a delegation converged to discuss a budding program to assist the militaries of former Soviet countries as they embarked on a new journey toward freedom. These 38 envoys represented the National Guard Bureau (NGB), United States European Command (USEUCOM), the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), U.S. Department of State (DOS), plus defense attaches from each of the three Baltic republics.

This initiative would soon be known as the State Partnership Program (SPP), a major DoD security cooperation that has endured for the last quarter of a century.



Lt. Gen. (ret) John B. Conaway

Effectively the brainchild of Lt. Gen. John B. Conaway, Chief, National Guard Bureau, the SPP would capitalize on Conaway's vision of citizen-soldiers and airmen as goodwill ambassadors amid the fragile security environment wrought in the Soviet Union's rubble. The SPP would



also serve to underscore the National Guard's relevance to overseas operations well beyond its traditional roles of homeland defense and domestic support. A National Guard concept paper drafted in September 1992 described the goals of the SPP:

“...The idea of a community based-military force functioning in peacetime under the immediate control of the civilian state governor, yet training to go to war when called by the President, is uniquely American. The degree to which the U.S. National Guard concept can be adapted by Latvia is for them to decide; we can assist by providing information and experience, which enables them to apply in-place civil defense capabilities to the entirely new [Latvian] Home Guard.”

Conaway, along with the Baltic delegation, received a warm welcome from Latvian leadership, including Chief of Defense Col. Dainis Turlais, Chief of Staff Col. Arvaldis Lilientals, and National Guard Chief of Staff Mr. Ģirts Valdis Kristovskis, during their initial discussions of security cooperation. Conaway himself participated in festivities for Latvia's November 18th Independence Day observance, laying a wreath at the foot of Latvia's iconic Freedom Monument in Riga. Few present for the occasion could have known that this act of respect for Latvia's history of struggle and occupation would signal the beginning of a warm and productive relationship that would ultimately touch the lives of thousands – perhaps millions – of Latvians and Americans alike.



Lt. Gen. John B. Conaway (center) lays a wreath at the Freedom Monument in Riga, Latvia on November 18, 1992, Latvian Independence Day. This visit to the Baltic states would serve as a prelude to the start of the State Partnership Program, which formally began on April 27, 1993



The Perfect Partnership

Though Conaway's team would travel on to Lithuania and Estonia – Latvia's fellow Baltic states – the die had been cast first for Latvia's inauguration to the SPP. The image of this fledgling collaboration was further clarified when Maj. Gen. E. Gordon Stump, adjutant general of the Michigan National Guard, saw the opportunity for Michigan to become one of the first states to sign-on with the SPP.

“When General Conaway came back, he put out a notice that they were looking for partnership states for Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia,” said Stump. “I had some connections with Latvia: my executive assistant, Dace Mason, was of Latvian decent and spoke Latvian. One of my best friends and his wife were also born in Latvia. So I had an awareness of the country. Then, talking to both of them, I found out that we also had a very large Latvian-American population in Michigan, so the idea of the Michigan National Guard working with the Latvian armed forces really seemed to be the perfect partnership for us.”



Maj. Gen. E. Gordon Stump

Stump tasked Army Lt. Col. Tim Everett to develop a case for Michigan's partnership with Latvia that would then be presented to the National Guard Bureau. “Tim did a great job and put a whole program together, highlighting that there was a large Latvian population in Michigan,” said Stump. “We took that to Washington, but had to go a few different times to convince them. Finally, the National Guard Bureau said, ‘we give up, you can have Latvia!’”

Michigan and Latvia: Deep Bonds

Stump was correct about Michigan's Latvian-American population. Dr. Silvija D. Meija writes in her book, *Latvians in Michigan*, that over five thousand Latvians found their way to Michigan during the late 1940s and early 1950s as refugees from Soviet oppression in their homeland. “Latvians in Michigan have contributed to the culture and economy of the state far more than their numbers might suggest,” writes Meija. “They established new roots and tried to perpetuate their cultural heritage while establishing new lives.”

Their reason for coming to Michigan was as grave as it was courageous: already decimated by the brutal Eastern Front combat of World War II, the Red Army staged a relentless occupation of Latvia beginning in 1940. Private land and assets were stripped away from ordinary citizens while families were forced to live and work in state-owned farms and factories. By 1953, approximately 120,000 Latvians had been killed, imprisoned, or deported at the order of the Soviet Union. A further 750,000 Russian “immigrants” were forcibly introduced to Latvia, resulting in a period of intense Russification, which threatened many of Latvia's cultural institutions and traditions.

For many Latvians, the hope for a life of peace seemed only to exist in the world beyond their homeland. Thousands, like Dace Mason's family, chose to flee to Sweden or Germany, where they lived in camps for “displaced persons” until their futures could find a compass. These camps,



organized by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), took many forms including makeshift tent cities, old prison camps, or abandoned army buildings.



Dace and sister Ilze, November 1950

“My parents were both from Latvia and when the Communists were coming in, they were fleeing,” said Mason. “They basically took nothing with them and ended up going to Germany, where we lived in a displaced persons camp.” Dace was born in 1950. Soon afterward, her parents received sponsorship to make the voyage to the U.S., where the community of Latvian refugees was already thriving. Although their long-term goal was to return to Latvia when the Soviet occupation ended, ultimately – like many who shared their refugee experience – Dace’s parents were destined to never see their homeland again.

Kalamazoo, Michigan: “Little Latvia”

The guiding spirit of Michigan’s Latvian-American community was Jānis Laupmanis, who had emigrated from Latvia around 1937, married a local woman, and began serving as a Methodist minister in the city of Kalamazoo. In 1948, another Latvian, E. Dīvalds, settled his family in Kalamazoo and joined Laupmanis’s congregation. Dīvalds had been working for the UNRRA at a displaced persons camp in Valka, Germany. Together, the two men developed a vision to preserve pieces of Latvian families –

and their cultural heritage – in Kalamazoo. They started by sponsoring transit for a Latvian choir Dīvalds was familiar with, “Shield of Songs,” that had been formed at the camp where he had worked.

The decision to bring a Latvian choir to Kalamazoo held strategic symbolism and humanitarian pragmatism for the Latvian-American community. Folk music, an essential component of Latvian culture, held the power to inspire sponsorship contributions from Latvians and non-Latvians alike, generating resources for the safe relocation of more families. There was also an educational aspect, as the Rev. Laupmanis pointed out:

“One of my goals is to use the choir (and short speeches) as a tool to fight communism and awaken the American people from a deep sleep, so that they may see the tricks communists play.”

In Michigan, Laupmanis traveled widely with the choir, presenting musical selections as well as heartfelt lectures illustrating the struggle of the Latvian people against communism. Slowly, sponsorship was secured not only for the choir members, but for many of their families as well. The presentations were effective in their goals: by the mid-1950s, sponsorship had been secured for nearly 2,000 Latvian settlers in the greater Kalamazoo area alone.

“We had one goal—achieve a free and independent Latvia, as it was before World War II. That was our motivation because we owed it to our ancestors.” – Janis Kukainis

Kalamazoo Latvian Association

In 1950, the Kalamazoo Latvian Association was established as a formal arbiter of culture in the Latvian-American community. “Under the umbrella of this organization, various activities



blossomed,” writes Meija. “Establishing their own cultural and ethnic activities filled the need to continue and pass on their rich heritage.” Significantly, a Latvian school was established, as well as an iconic Latvian center and summer camp not far from Three Rivers, Michigan. Formerly a Girl Scout camp, this 170-acre parcel was purchased in 1965 and became known as “Long Lake,” or in Latvian, “Garezers.” Still active to this day, the Long Lake camp is divided into several sections, including a children’s camp, a high school area, a rental area, an outdoor amphitheater, and museums of Latvian folk art and scouts.



Long Lake Camp, Three Rivers, Michigan

Institutions like Long Lake were – and still are – key to the preservation of ethnic Latvian culture, a paramount concern to the generation of refugees who began new lives as Americans, but wished for their children and grandchildren to grow up with an understanding of their cultural heritage.

Jānis Kukainis, now a resident of Kalamazoo, came to the United States as a child when his mother and aunt fled Riga amid the bombings of World War II. A pillar of the Latvian-American community, he has served as president of the American Latvian Association and the World Free Latvian Association. He is also a former president of the Long Lake camp.

“The main thing, before Latvia re-acquired independence in 1991, was to maintain our

language and culture,” said Kukainis. “That was really the basis of our organizations because we had one goal – achieve a free and independent Latvia, as it was before World War II. That was our motivation because we owed it to our ancestors.”

Kukainis also points out that the drive to preserve Latvian culture was a natural course for many of the refugees who settled in Michigan. Because the Soviets were seeking to purge Latvia of its native intelligentsia, the typical Latvian immigrant was well-educated and politically aware.

“They left because they were the ones that had something to lose,” said Kukainis.

In Michigan, their efforts to maintain a Latvian identity were not in vain. The connections fostered by common heritage at places like Long Lake created an intimacy that stayed with the children of these immigrants for the rest of their lives.

“I had never been to Latvia but my family was very involved with the Latvian community,” recalls Dace Mason. “We went to the Latvian Lutheran Church. We had Latvian summer camps, where we spoke Latvian exclusively, as we also did in the home. Latvia was always a kind of ‘promised land’ that was glorified and exalted and talked about. It was very much a part of my life.”

At one point, Latvian influence in the Kalamazoo area extended to the academic world, also. In 1981, Western Michigan University opened the opportunity for students to receive both majors and minors in Latvian – with courses in Latvian composition, literature, and culture. The only academic program of its kind outside Latvia, the program graduated over 1,000 students before its disbandment in 1993.

Today, the Kalamazoo Latvian Association is still alive and well. “We are here to maintain



the culture of the local Latvian community,” said Maira Bundza, the association’s current president. “We hold various events throughout the year, including visiting theater groups or concerts. Really, we are here to hold the community together.”

Although Kalamazoo is one of Latvia’s unofficial capitals abroad, other communities in the state developed vibrant Latvian enclaves as well. Latvian populations range into at least the hundreds in cities such as Detroit, Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Lansing, Grand Haven, and Ann Arbor. As Silvija Meija writes, what powered the Latvian immigrant’s drive to preserve their cultural identity in these various locations was ultimately their desire to return to a free homeland.



Latvian Song and Dance Festival, 1963 (Middle, Dace Mason, age 13)

“They worried that by the time this happened, communist rule would have stifled and desecrated the Latvian cultural identity,” writes Meija. “Thus, those who returned to their native land would need to bring with them the preserved heritage of their country, to instill and redevelop a flourishing economy and rich cultural identity.”

So it was a remarkable moment of serendipity when, in the late autumn of 1992, Dace Mason heard rumblings of a National Guard Partnership with the newly-independent Baltic states. Fate had placed her in the right moment to witness the very origins of a relationship that would shape the new freedom of her family’s long-lost homeland.

“I remember General Taylor [Brig. Gen. Robert

Taylor, Assistant Adjutant General – Army] saying that they were talking about partnering with a country,” said Mason. “I think he actually mispronounced it, and I said, ‘Well, is it Latvia?’ I really didn’t think it could be, but in fact it was. Then, General Stump and I took such an active role in trying to get that country for us - for Michigan.”

When that partnership was certified by Lt. Gen. Conaway and U.S. European Command on April 27, 1993 – along with the Maryland-Estonia and Pennsylvania-Lithuania agreements – Mason remembers that the emotions were as intense as they were innumerable: “It was amazing to be a part of it,” she said. “I never imagined that [Latvia] would ever be free, but it was.”

The Promised Land

In July, 1993, soon after the solidification of the Michigan National Guard’s partnership with the Latvian military, Stump led the first engagement from Lansing to lay the groundwork for a working relationship with Latvian counterparts.

As translator, he of course brought along Dace Mason.

“I remember landing in Latvia and when I got off the plane I had this incredible feeling,” said Mason. “It was a revered place; should I kiss the ground? I mean, I never imagined that I would ever see it.”

Dace was finally able to meet her cousins in Riga for the first time. As they were touring the heart of Old Town, taking in its rich architecture and vibrant history, their elderly guide stopped in his tracks when a particular question was posed.

“Someone mentioned something about us Americans coming in, and then asked how he felt about it,” recalls Mason.

The man’s response has stayed in her heart for the last quarter of a century:

“We’ve been waiting fifty years for you,” he said.



CHAPTER TWO



The Starting Point—Latvia Regains Independence

Adoption of the Declaration of Independence (1990–1991)

Opponents of Latvia's independence became active after Latvia adopted the Declaration of Independence on May 4, 1990. One such force was the U.S.S.R. (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) army units located in the territory of Latvia and their command, its officers and cadets. One of the first events directly involving soldiers that took place against the independence of Latvia was on May 15, 1990, at the building of the former Republic of Latvia Supreme Council (now the House of Parliament [Saeima]). A great number of Soviet army cadets and officers took part in this event, dressed in civilian clothes. The restless crowd was trying to break into the Supreme Council building during the Council's plenary meeting. This attempt was thwarted by the arrival of the Riga OMON (Otrjad miļiciji osobovo naznačenija - special militia task force), which drove the intruders away with clubs. Unlike times before, the OMON unit took the side of Latvia's statehood.

In autumn and winter of 1990, the activities of the Soviet soldiers became more pronounced. Armed trucks and other military equipment drove through the central streets of Riga, army helicopters hovered above the city – Soviet soldiers demonstrated their power and in several cases used it as well. For example, in Liepāja, the Soviet marines guarded the Vladimir Lenin monument located in the center of Liepāja with the help of armored personnel carriers, to prevent the implementation of the municipal decision to take down the monument.

On May 15, 1990, yet another political organization was established that made the fight against the independence of Latvia its objective – the committee for the protection of the constitutional and civil rights of the U.S.S.R. and L.S.S.R. (Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic). The initiator of the committee and the coordinator of its operation was the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party, led by Alfrēds Rubiks. At the end of 1990, this organization was turned into the All-Latvian





An "all-Latvia" manifestation in Riga for the support of Lithuania

Public Rescue Committee. The activities of the Committee were closely linked to the U.S.S.R. State Security Committee, the command of the Soviet Army Baltic military region and OMON force. The OMON force had refused to comply with the instructions of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia since September 1990, engaging in armed, systematic violent campaigns against Latvian independence and citizens. The All-Latvian Public Rescue Committee sent an invitation to Moscow to U.S.S.R. president Mikhail Gorbachev to introduce direct presidential rule in Latvia.

On November 14, 1990, the Republic of Latvia Supreme Council adopted the decision to terminate the material supply of the U.S.S.R. army located in Latvia.

Days of the Barricades

In January 1991, the central power in Moscow began military character campaigns to restore its influence in the Baltic Republics. On the evening of January 12 to 13, the Soviet army and specialized units attacked unarmed civilians at the television tower in Vilnius, Lithuania, killing 14 and injuring 110 civilians.

At 04:45 on the morning of January 13, in a radio address, Dainis Īvāns, leader of the Popular Front of Latvia, invited people to gather at Dom Square in Riga in order to avoid a similar scenario.

Around 500,000 people gathered on January 13 for the demonstration on the embankment of the Daugava River, organized by the Latvian



Popular Front in Riga to express support to Lithuanians and to demonstrate their readiness to continue the path to the restoration of the state independence. Barricades were put up during the day around the major state and public buildings and streets and access roads to strategic buildings were blocked by heavy-duty equipment. The non-violent civilians stood on the barricades, proving to the world their readiness to sacrifice their lives to defend Latvian independence.



"Advocates of the Barricades" in the Old Town

Since most of the significant buildings were located in Old Town Riga, its territory became the central gathering place of the defenders of the barricades. The narrow streets were blocked by heavy machinery and concrete blocks, leaving only narrow paths to travel through. There are stories about Baltic Military District Commander General Fyodor Kuzmin's reply to the question of why he did not give orders to the army to take control over Old Town. He is said to have evaluated the strength of those defending the barricades as being equal to three infantry divisions and had forecasted mass casualties if conflicts were to arise between the army and the defenders of the barricades. Advocates of the Soviet power could no longer afford such results

because events in Vilnius and Riga had sparked wide interest in the Western countries.

"We had the will and determination to be independent, and to be able to defend that independence. I think this was to our advantage because we were open to innovations and new structures."

—Lt. Gen. (ret.) Raimonds Graube

The Restoration of Independence in Latvia and the Formation of Defense Institutions and National Armed Forces (1991)

From August to September 1991, after international recognition of its independence, Latvia, like the other two Baltic countries, was able to implement an independent security policy and begin the work of building a new state defense system. Though the state's system of self-defense had its beginnings in 1991 during the "Days of the Barricades," on January 24th, 1991, the Public Security Department was established. The state's defense institutions began to form after the official restoration of independence.

In November 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia passed the decision to establish the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Latvia. The members of the Supreme Council did not desire to restore the former name – the Ministry of War – because they were afraid of being misunderstood by the Soviet Union and the world at large. On November 13th, a majority of the members of the Supreme Council voted for the establishment



of the Ministry of Defense. On November 19th, the Supreme Council appointed Tālav Jundzis as the first Minister of the restored Ministry of Defense. The first Commander of the Defense Forces was Col. Dainis Turlais.

The Ministry of Defense was formed on the remnants of the former Public Security Department, taking over its assets and employing most of its staff. Other institutions, such as the state defense forces, the National Academy of Defense and other entities related to state defense, were subordinated directly to the Ministry of Defense.

On August 23, 1991 the law “National Guard of Latvia” was passed, stating that the National Guard is a voluntary, military organization of society. The next day, August 24, the Chief of the National Guard passed an order to start registering National Guard candidates in regions. In September, the forming of battalions after the regional principles started, and the National Guard headquarters was formed. The 35 territorial battalions enlisted more than 10,000 National Guardsmen in only the first few months; after one year, the National Guard was 17,000 strong.

On September 10, 1991 the Law on Conscription was passed. Soon afterwards, on November 11, 1991, in Riga Brethren cemetery the first solemn oath of enlistment after regaining independence was given.

The first Latvian National Guardsmen were of different ages and educations, representing different professions. They lacked training and equipment, but they had a unified purpose – to serve their country – and they did it wholeheartedly, gaining the trust of society. At that time the saying was born – “The National Guard isn’t a profession, it’s a lifestyle.”

Challenges – and Opportunities

After the occupation, the National Armed

Forces of Latvia were disbanded and soldiers were arrested, deported, or forced to retire. The only formalized military force after occupation was the Soviet Army.

The process for mobilizing and training the new Latvian military would be a massive undertaking.



Lt. Gen. (ret.) Raimonds Graube

“When we regained independence in 1991, we started from scratch,” said Lt. Gen. (ret.) Raimonds Graube, Latvia’s Chief of Defense from 1999 to 2003 and 2011 to 2017. In 1991, Graube was a young soldier in a Latvian militia unit, stirred by his country’s struggle for independence and the hope that a new government represented. “We had the will and determination to be independent, and to be able to defend that independence,” he said. “I think this was to our advantage because we were open to innovations and new structures.”

The National Guard, like other state organizations and institutions of Latvia, lacked specialists with professional preparation. For this reason, the education and creation of a military training system was set as one of the priorities of the new government. The development of Latvia’s National Guard cannot be imagined without the support of international partners, especially its close cooperation with the Michigan National Guard.



CHAPTER THREE



Foundations of Partnership

When Lt. Gen. John Conaway visited Latvia in November of 1992, the country was still in the throes of its transition to independence. Occupied by Russian military forces but pursuing their own freely-elected government, it was an exceptionally unique time for the Latvian people.

In 1993, Guntis Ulmanis, a council member of the National Bank of Latvia, was elected president of Latvia by the national parliament (Saeima). Ulmanis was burdened with the task of leading his people through a tumultuous moment in history with no blueprint for what a post-Soviet democracy could look like.

“This was a heavy, emotional time,” said Ulmanis. “The Soviet strength was still there, but at the same time, our people were standing up on their own feet. Russia was confused; they didn’t have time to worry about the problems in Latvia, so as Latvians, we started solving them ourselves. We did it very thoughtfully and with much conviction.”

Ulmanis admits it was a situation that required fast-paced learning and a healthy dose of courage.



President Guntis Ulmanis

“I was elected president completely unprepared. I didn’t know what it was to be a president. One day, I just had to start the work.”

—President Guntis Ulmanis



As president, Ulmanis's first priority was to build relationships with other countries. The agreement between Latvia and the Michigan National Guard was a major part of this foundation because it created a sense of security that offset Latvia's tenuous backdrop during that period.

As Gundars Zaļkalns wrote in a Baltic Defense Review article, "The Development of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Latvia," Michigan's partnership with Latvia "not only demonstrated tangible western support for the fledgling Latvian Defense Forces, but also sent a clear international political signal...it introduced an alternative, western way of looking at military planning, force structures, and leadership."

Latvian Defense Forces and National Guard

In 1993, Latvia essentially maintained two distinct militaries, each reporting to separate Latvian institutions and the Russian military forces still occupying the country. The Home Guard – which, in 1993 changed its name to the National Guard, or in Latvian, "Zemessardze" – was headed by Ģirts Kritovskis, a subordinate to the Chairman of the Highest Council under the President. Conversely, the active-duty Defense Forces, Naval Forces, and Air Forces were subordinate to the Minister of Defense.

The differences between the Zemessardze and the Defense Forces were many. Comprised mainly of Latvians with military experience in the Soviet army, the Defense Forces were richer in technical capability but were ultimately challenged by their former immersion in the Soviet command system. "Many of them, after 20 or more years in the Soviet system," writes Zaļkalns, "tend to envision the evolving Latvian defense forces in the 'face and likeness' of the heavy, inflexible, massive Soviet forces they are familiar with."

On the other hand, the Zemessardze was

observed by Zaļkalns to have leadership, who, "although nationalistic and well intentioned, lacked the discipline and managerial skills needed to effectively organize and lead large military units."

In 1993, Maj. Raimonds Graube was serving as deputy commander of the Zemessardze's special operations unit. Graube would eventually rise to the rank of Lieutenant General, commander of Latvia's National Armed Forces. Speaking of those times following Latvia's independence, he indicates that the future of the Latvian military was clearly at a crossroads.

"We had to make a decision on which way to go: to be more like the west or more like the east," said Graube. "But it wasn't even a decision as much as it was a rhetorical question, because we have always felt that we are more a part of the west culturally and linguistically. So we decided to go with the west, and we pursued all of the western economic and security cooperations."

Priority One: Perfecting the National Guard Model

From the very beginning of the State Partnership Program, the advantages of the US National Guard's citizen-soldier model were of special interest. According to many officials, the tense security environment in Eastern Europe during the early 1990s made the National Guard's engagement with the SPP a near-necessity.

"The State Department thought [the SPP] was a great idea because at the time, it was probably going to be a little touchy with the Russians if we brought in active duty forces on the ground," said Maj. Gen. E. Gordon Stump. "With the National Guard, we were less likely to [escalate tension]."

However, with Stump's first visit to the country in July, 1993, it became evident that the challenges to building a partnership with Latvia would be plentiful. Military infrastructure was



minimal and the Russian forces still in-country would clearly be of no assistance in establishing a new command model.



Riga's Freedom Monument, circa 1993

“We stayed in Jūrmala, where the Russian officers had stayed before,” recalls Stump. “The hot water wasn’t all that great; they actually boiled the hot water and sent it through the pipes to the homes.”

One of Stump’s first objectives was to meet with counterparts to prioritize initial collaborations. It was here he discovered that although the USSR was no more, grudges of the Cold War were still icy.

“The head of the military in Latvia still had a background in the Soviet army. He wasn’t all that keen about the program, but we did meet with him,” said Stump.

During this initial engagement, Stump learned that the Latvian Zemessardze served as the primary arm of the Latvian military. Although there were many National Guard units sprinkled throughout the country, there was little continuity in equipment, uniforms, and professional military education – which was not emphasized under the Russian command model, especially in the non-commissioned officer ranks.

“It was ripe ground for us to start working together,” said Stump.

Aiding the Latvian Zemessardze in their transition to a western-style chain-of-command structure was identified as the first priority of the Latvia-Michigan partnership.

“The talk wasn’t about rockets and weapons,” said Ulmanis. “It was about how to learn – how to make a defense...and the State of Michigan had something to show.”

To aid in the establishment of administrative relations between Latvia and Michigan, a full-time Military Liaison Team leader from the Michigan National Guard was installed in Riga. Stump’s choice for this position was Army Col. Owen Moon. A Michigan National Guard soldier of Latvian descent, Chief Warrant Officer Verners Šulcs, was also tasked to form the first office of cooperation in Riga. As a Latvian speaker, Šulcs had a special talent for making the logistics of the operation a smooth process. Lt. Ivars Sika, a Latvian-speaking Michigan guardsman, was also involved in early engagements as a translator.

“Owen began acting as our liaison, helping to set things up for our soldiers to go over there and their soldiers to come back here,” said Stump. “He started working with the State Department to get slots in our military schools for the Latvian National Guard soldiers, which was the beginning of a great exchange.”

Moon recalls that Latvian leaders were given a wide breadth of freedom to determine how –





From left: Gundars Zalkalns, presidential advisor; Army Col. Owen Moon, and a U.S. military defense attache

and what – they wanted to focus the efforts of the partnership on.

“We brought in specialists from the Michigan National Guard at Latvia’s request, and it didn’t take long for it to become fairly routine,” said Moon. “One of the major problems was that the fighting of World War II had terribly scarred their lands, and there was still unexploded ordnance almost everywhere. They asked us for help with that, so we had teams come in that first year to survey the land and begin removal.”

The Personal Factor

Another priority of these initial engagements was so simple it nearly came as a surprise to leaders on both sides of the partnership: the establishment of trust. Just a few years removed from a tense Cold War environment, a chasm of cultural differences lay between the partners. In order for pragmatic solutions to be exchanged and received on both sides, these differences had to be overcome and understood – and not just at the levels of higher leadership. The answer was the pursuit of genuine personal relationships between counterparts on both sides.

“We needed to talk not just about military things, but about how we lived, personally,” said Ulmanis. “One reason I got along with General Stump was that he came to Latvia each time

with a concrete suggestion about what should be done to solve a problem that we were facing. The second reason was that Stump didn’t just work in Latvia – he enjoyed life there. In fact, many Michigan soldiers enjoyed it.”

Sometimes, the exchanges would reveal similar backgrounds that overlapped in interesting ways. One Latvian officer Stump met had been conscripted into the Russian Air Force and flew MiG-21s from North Vietnam during the same months Stump had piloted F-102s from South Vietnam.

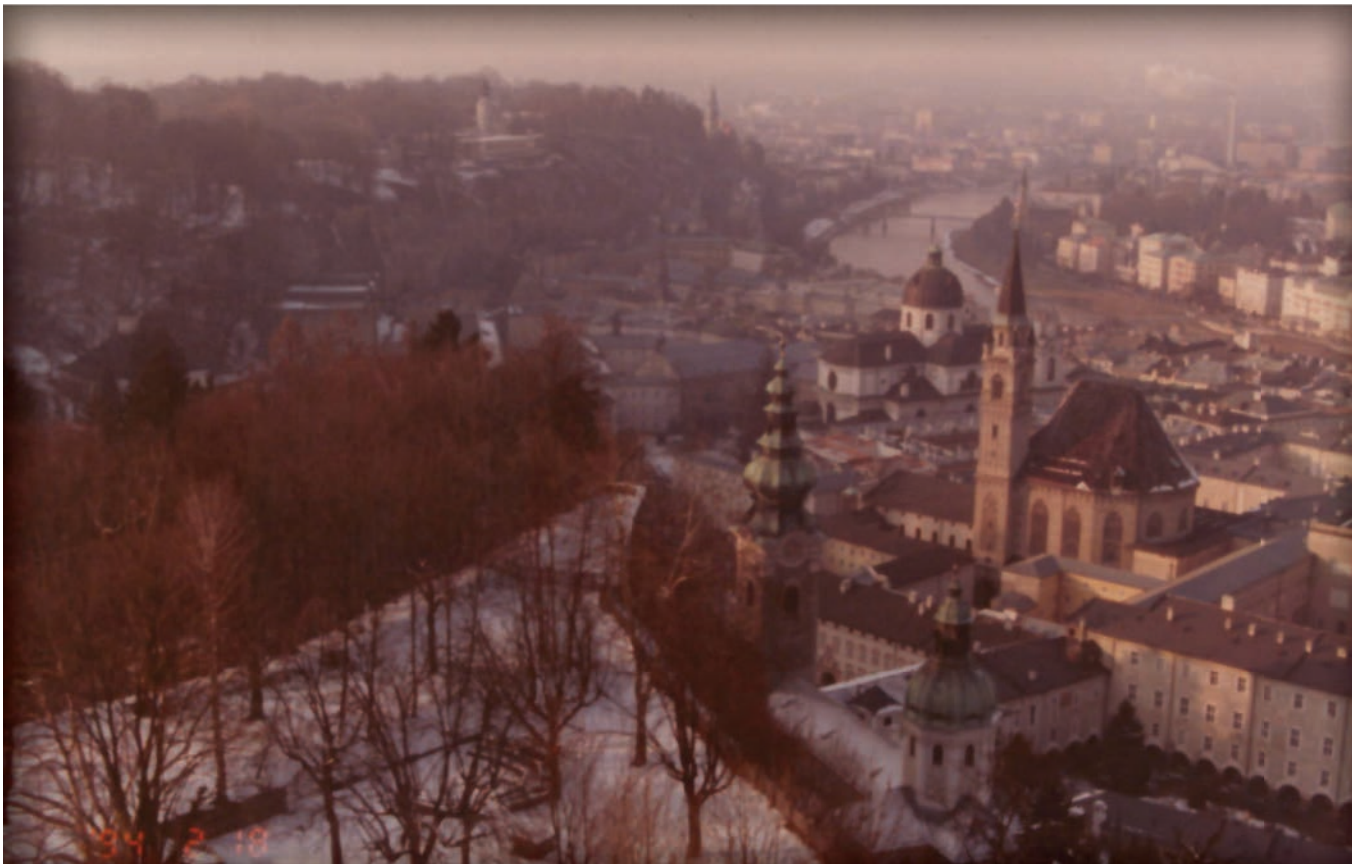
Despite the gravity of the work being done in Latvia, these interpersonal exchanges opened the door for experiences that were as culturally enlightening as they were fun.



Maj. Gen. E. Gordon Stump and President Guntis Ulmanis, early pioneers of the partnership

“One time while I was over there,” said Stump, “I was asked to come fly one of the old Latvian AN-2 biplanes, which was pretty much all they had for their air force. So I said, ‘ok.’ We got in the biplane and in the back, they had stools for people to sit on. There were no such thing as seatbelts! So off we went, and it was really kind of neat because all of the airspeed and altitude instruments were in metrics. I flew the biplane out to a lake and went ice fishing.”





Old Town Riga, circa 1993

Moon remembers a particularly warm experience that occurred on Latvia’s summer solstice holiday, Jāņi. At an open-air theater in Riga, performers stopped the show to extend a heartfelt gesture to Moon and his American colleagues.

“Before the third act began, one of the actors came down into the audience. They had these beautiful woven hats, which were a part of the performance, and he came over to me and placed one of these hats on my head. I was wearing my uniform, and it was met with a lot of applause. It was very moving because we hadn’t been there that long, but people in Riga still knew what we were trying to do for them.”

Of course, the Americans had other, starker reminders that the land they were working in had only recently escaped the darkness of communist occupation and oppression.

“We used to send Owen salsa and chips because he couldn’t get anything like that,” said Dace Mason. “One day he called me and he said, ‘I think I’ve died and gone to heaven. They built a gas station with a little mini-mart and now I can buy anything I want!’ But to watch the transition from going from a country that had nothing, to a country that was building malls and restaurants was really incredible. It was just a completely different way of life there.”

Mason also recalls a story recounted to her by former Michigan National Guard Public Affairs Officer, Maj. Jim McCrone: “He was in a building looking out, and the Latvians wanted to take him somewhere and show him something. They said ‘You wait here, and we’ll go and get everything ready.’ And he saw them siphoning gas out of all of their personal cars to fill up one car so that they would be able to take him out. They made so many sacrifices as a part of daily living.”



In addition to the opportunity for cross-cultural relationship building, the partnership delivered tremendous symbolic value from the very beginning. For the Latvians, even a glimpse of an American soldier working alongside a member of the Zemessardze gave hope for their new, western-style institutions. For the Michigan National Guard, exposure to the story and resiliency of the Latvian people gave inspiration and a reminder that democratic liberties could not be taken for granted.

“We understood that we had a lot of support and belief,” said Ulmanis. “There was an American general in Latvia! Stump didn’t have to do anything – just show up – and it meant something.”

Latvians Come to Michigan

As the initial cautions of the partnership relaxed, it was decided that the best way for the Zemessardze to gain exposure to American-style policy, structure, and institutions was for them to see it for themselves. In the summer of 1993, Moon led the first Latvian delegation to Michigan, where various meetings were staged between Zemessardze officers and leaders of Michigan’s government and private sectors.

“The purpose of the visit was to provide an overview and example of civilian control of the military. We wanted them to see all of the institutions that support the military here,” said Moon. “There were about 20 Latvians on the trip, and for many of them, this was their first look at an established democracy, so I think it was really a positive eye-opener.”

The trip included private audiences with Michigan Governor John Engler and U.S. Senator Carl Levin. The Latvian delegation also toured hospitals, schools, and Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) campuses throughout the state.

“We really tried to get our partners out into the community,” said Moon. “I think it gave them a

better idea of the character of the U.S. military.”

These type of exchanges continued until members of the Zemessardze were invited to actually participate in military exercises in Michigan.

“We started our cooperation with familiarization tours by bringing in Latvians to observe our exercises, as well as explaining the aims and tasks of our organization,” said Stump. “Eventually, this expanded until we had all three Baltic SPP countries at Camp Grayling a couple years later.”

Clearly, the State Partnership Program was making an impact on the global stage. In Washington, D.C., the SPP was earning a positive reputation for bridge-building – not just with Latvia, but in other former Soviet-occupied nations as well.

“The program was getting great support from the State Department,” said Stump. “All the ambassadors saw the relationships we were building. It was clear that we were really making great progress.”

By the end of August, 1994, tensions eased significantly when the Russian military fully withdrew from Latvia, finally leaving the country’s defense in the hands of its own people.

“After they left, it was open arms,” said Stump. “We went over there not knowing what to expect, except that it was the beginning of our State Partnership Program. We got a lot of publicity because they were excited to see the U.S. military there, but it really was mutually beneficial from the perspective that it meant a lot to our soldiers to work with the Latvians and to see how dedicated they were.”

Despite challenges, the groundwork for a positive, long-term collaboration between Michigan and Latvia had been set.



CHAPTER FOUR



Building Stability: SPP in the 1990s

As the calendar turned to 1995, the State Partnership Program focused on a new, annual initiative for joint tactical field training: GuardEx. Held at Camp Grayling in Northern Michigan, the exercise gave six members of the Latvian Zemessardze an opportunity to develop proficiency alongside Michigan counterparts that year.

GuardEx continued to expand in 1996, with 49 Latvian Armed Forces representatives on hand from the Zemessardze Special Task Unit, Suzi Airborne Reconnaissance Battalion, Adazi Mobile Riflemen Brigade, National Armed Forces/National Guard training centers, National Defense Academy, plus National Guard command and operational planning specialists.

Throughout the two-week exercise (June 16 to 29), Latvians from the Airborne Reconnaissance Battalion teamed with a US Ranger company to hone survival and reconnaissance skills in adverse conditions. The Zemessardze's Special Task Unit trained with Michigan military police units in convoy operations, counter-terrorism operations, and prisoner-of-war operations.

The increasing synchronization of Michigan



U.S. and Latvian soldiers participate in exercise Baltic Challenge-96

and Latvian National Guard forces mirrored progress credited to the State Partnership Program at large. By 1995, the program had expanded to include fourteen countries in Europe and Eastern Asia. In written remarks delivered at the Marshall Legacy Symposium, held at George Washington University in January 1996, U.S.



President Bill Clinton touted the SPP's role in fostering global security:

“We must support cooperative efforts and mentoring programs with these countries to help ensure the success of democratic reform. Forming partnerships with many of the newly independent countries of Europe, US states have become leaders in this concept. The United States is reaching out through the Partnership for Peace and the National Guard State Partnership Program to help shape democratic institutions where totalitarianism once ruled.”

The SPP Fights for Justification

Despite making huge strides toward global security – with the added value of enriching personal relations, the State Partnership Program had to fight an almost constant battle to justify itself in an environment of tightening government budgets.

“About the second or third year of the SPP, we almost lost all of the funding for the program,” said Maj. Gen. (ret.) E. Gordon Stump. “There wasn’t very much spending on it, and I understood that they might have to shut the program down. I talked to U.S. Senator Carl Levin and I said, ‘you know, this is really a great program, it helps the State Department and we’re making a lot of progress.’ So he put a couple million dollars into it to keep it going.”

With additional funding secured, the program continued to surge with many more countries signing on. “In 2018, we have over 70 countries now involved with the State Partnership Program,” said Stump, “But it all started with our buddies from Latvia.”

The Partnership for Peace Program

One of the primary objectives for Latvian defense post-independence was to secure acceptance into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). When reacting to the new security environment and geo-political situation, NATO founded the North Atlantic Cooperation

Council (NACC) on December 20, 1991 to collaborate with potential partners. Latvia also participated in the NACC foundation session, becoming a Member State of the forum.

In subsequent years, cooperation between Latvia and NATO became even more intense. In 1994, Latvia joined the Partnership for Peace program (PfP) established in the same year, which made it possible for NATO civil and military specialists to provide consultations and practical assistance in development of the Latvian defense system.

On January 7, 1994, a draft document outlining Latvia’s participation in the PfP program included one of the first official statements regarding Latvia and NATO:

“Latvia considers its active participation in this program as the first step toward full-fledged member status in the political and military structure of NATO.”

On February 14, 1994, all three Baltic States joined the PfP at an official signing at the NATO headquarters in Brussels.

In 1995, participation in the PfP program also allowed Latvia to join in the NATO Planning and Review Process that eventually facilitated compliance of the Latvian National Armed Forces with those of NATO Member States.

Working in parallel with the State Partnership Program, the PfP and the SPP are sometimes confused because they share similar objectives. PfP is a NATO-specific program to prepare emerging nations for entry into NATO. The SPP is a program of the National Guard Bureau to enhance bilateral security cooperation between partner countries – including modernization and professionalization of their militaries – which also increases their ability to meet NATO standards.

For the better part of the next decade, Latvia’s ascendance to NATO would be a primary goal of both programs.





Exercise Baltic Challenge-96 was a major milestone for the U.S.-Latvia collaboration

State Partnership Exercises Continue

In 1997, GuardEx featured 29 Latvian military participants, with seven more acting as observers. According to the Latvian military journal, *Tēvijas Sargs*, “soldiers learned the whole concept of the exercise planning process at National Guard brigade, battalion, company, and platoon levels; they also learned about the organization of an infantry battalion headquarters exercise, the procedure of briefings, how to conduct after action reviews, etc.”

These type of collaborations continued throughout the rest of the decade. From 1996 to 1998, Michigan soldiers worked side-by-side with their Latvian colleagues in a number of exercises abroad, including Baltic Challenge-96 in Latvia, Baltic Challenge-97 in Estonia, plus Baltic Challenge-98 and “Medieeur 2-98,” both held in Lithuania. The exercises were aimed at developing proficiency in peacekeeping operations for both U.S. forces and those of the Baltic States. Guardsmen received in-depth knowledge about peacekeeping and other operations as well as

improving military interoperability.

One area of special cooperation between Michigan and Latvian forces during Baltic Challenge-96 was with Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD). Latvian EOD teams had ample real-life experience in working with and disposing of Soviet ammunition and explosives while their colleagues from Michigan were still gaining experience with hands-on application of training.

“In my view, not all countries in Europe can be proud of such a strong and fruitful relationship as the one between Latvia and Michigan.”

—President Guntis Ulmanis

With over 300 American, 80 Latvian, and 70 Lithuanian participants, Baltic Challenge-96 was significant as the largest exercise in the Baltics since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the first to involve partnership forces on Latvian





Latvian soldiers at exercise Baltic Challenge-96

soil. Planned and executed according to existing procedures in NATO countries, Latvian military leaders gained experience which would assist in future planning for NATO membership.

“It was a good lesson in international cooperation, testing the ability of Latvian government agencies to cooperate amongst themselves,” said Col. (ret.) Juris Eihmanis, co-commander of the exercise.

In Michigan, the annual GuardEx maneuvers would ride again at Camp Grayling, but in 1998, GuardEx was special for another reason: it marked the fifth anniversary of the partnership between Latvia and Michigan.

In an interview with the Michigan National Guard Public Affairs office, President Guntis Ulmanis reflected on the occasion: “First, let me congratulate the National Guard with the 5th anniversary of this highly-successful cooperation,” he said. “In my view, not all countries in Europe can be proud of such a strong and fruitful relationship as the one between Latvia and Michigan.”

“GuardEx 1998” – Reprinted From *Tēvijas Sargs*, July 16-31, 1998:

28 National Guard members from all regions of Latvia successfully integrated into the infantry units of the 3rd Battalion 126th Regiment of the 46th Brigade of the Michigan National Guard. Latvian soldiers worked side by side with their US counterparts. At the initial stage of the exercise it was required to obtain a weapons qualification for the M16 rifle which is a part of the U.S. Army’s weaponry. Our men succeeded.

The exercise was a success because it was a great exchange of knowledge and experience. Latvian National Guards (NG) gained more in-depth knowledge about anti-tank ambush, whereas Americans praised Latvian professionalism in clearing buildings.

At the final stage of the exercise a competition among sections was held, where also three National Guard sections competed in orienteering, firing the M16 rifle and a 10km road march. We can proudly mention that the section led by NG Lieutenant Janis Daudze took the first place in this competition and received a cup.

In the solemn closing ceremony (which is characteristic of the U.S. Army) the NG formed a separate unit. It was a pleasure to watch the NG under the NG Lieutenant Rudzitis' command march with great discipline and precision, building esprit de corps within the Latvian Armed Forces.

Computer-Assisted Exercise

Among the participants of this exercise were the observers from the National Guard HQ and battalions. This group was given an



opportunity to see nearly all the units that took part in the exercise, and to get acquainted with the work of the staff, units and their commanders, as well as observe separate training exercises.

Observers were involved in the brigade headquarters activities to gain experience for further use in their service in the National Guard.

As the group of observers concluded, the brigade HQ exercise was the most valuable training. None of the elements were conducted in the field; all the activities were computer simulations. The computer software that had been designed specifically for this exercise cost 1 million USD.

Computer simulation provides an opportunity to plan the course of battle development in space and time. In a computer simulation all the variables are brought as close to the real situation as possible, which is often less feasible with actual troop movement. The commander of the 46th Brigade, Michigan National Guard, Col. Gregory J. Vadnais explained that a computer cannot be deceived, for instance, it will not allow to move a unit in a shorter period of time than it is actually possible because of the specifics of the terrain, and it will not allow to continue the battle if the ammunition or fuel supplies have been exhausted.

Michigan National Guard Logistics

Observers from various National Guard logistics structures also participated in the exercise. Representatives from Latvia were introduced with various types of installations for logistics needs of military bases, including water and electricity supply and purification systems.

At the final stage of the exercise logistics specialists from Latvia were given an opportunity to take a driver's qualification test with vehicles from a Hummer family. In the U.S. Army they are currently replacing Chevrolet SUVs that are also well-known in Latvia.

One of the highlights was the task for the NG Provisions specialists to draw up a menu for the exercise "Guard Ex 1999." A food show was held, during which a great variety of food was offered for tasting, while proposals for varying the menu were accepted. One such suggestion was made by Latvian soldiers. This means that next year one of the meals might consist of traditional Latvian food – potatoes with meat, cold soup and fruit.

Midsummer's Night Celebration

A midsummer's night celebration was organized right at the training area. Michigan National Guard command kindly allotted a site on a hill right next to the main flag pole and cannon, which was fired to wake up the participants of the exercise every morning.

The mood of the celebration was upbeat and fun, several Latvian Americans participated in the event as well, but unfortunately, the majority of Latvians from Michigan had left for their home country to attend and participate in the Latvian Song and Dance Festival.

At midnight, at the culmination of the celebration, nearly all the NG command joined the participants. Another proof of the sincere relationship between Americans and Latvians in Michigan was the fact that to attend the Midsummer's night celebration General Taylor even missed an event in his own officers' club. ■



Civic Leader Engagements

In addition to military bilateral relationships, in the late 1990s the State Partnership Program facilitated several “Civic Leader Engagements,” where Michigan community and business leaders were offered the opportunity to observe Latvian businesses and develop an overall understanding of commerce in Eastern Europe.

“One of the things we were able to do in 1998 was to take a group of civilians who owned businesses here in Michigan to visit with the Latvian equivalent of the Chamber of Commerce,” said Stump. “We also went to Brussels to the NATO headquarters and discussed the State Partnership Program with the people there. We took the civilians with us.”

Future Adjutant General of the Michigan National Guard, Maj. Gen. Gregory Vadnais, was one of the participants in the Civic Leader Engagement, representing his civilian business experience in the energy industry.

“I remember that when we were in Brussels, they said the Latvians would never be admitted into NATO,” said Vadnais. “We sure showed them.”

Stabilization of Baltic Region

Another exercise, “Partners Challenge-99” took place in Michigan in 1999. Conducted “in the spirit of partnership for peace,” representatives from all three Baltic States were present. The Latvian Zemessardze was represented by soldiers hand-picked as their 25 best guardsmen.

By now, the annual exchanges of Latvian and Michigan soldiers had become fairly routine, serving as a reminder that the security environment had steadied considerably in the Baltic region.

“When I started as president, the Cold War had just ended,” said Ulmanis. “In 1999, when I left office, it was more peaceful than that – much more balanced and stable.”

At the end of the decade, the relationship with Latvia and Michigan was nearly seven years old. Despite the tranquility that had descended over the Baltic States, the next seven years would prove to bring challenges and triumphs to the partnership beyond any possible foreshadowing.



Maj. Gen. Gregory J. Vadnais (left), the adjutant general of Michigan, speaks with paratroopers from the U.S. Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade and Latvian 1st Infantry Battalion, Land Forces Infantry Brigade following a training exercise May 25, 2014, at Military Camp Ādaži, Latvia. Vadnais has been involved with the Michigan-Latvia partnership since the early 1990s.





Latvia and NATO

*A*s the 2000s began, Latvia’s quest to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) dominated the theme of engagements held under the State Partnership Program and the Partnership for Peace Program (PfP).

Latvia’s long-anticipated acceptance into NATO was a complicated, multi-layered process. Maj. Gen. (ret.) E. Gordon Stump remembers that the procedure was not just one of organization and training, but also one that involved economic and developmental factors.

“To get into NATO, one of the requirements was to have a defense budget,” said Stump. “Then, a lot of it is to show leadership. To show that you have an organization that can defend itself.”

Latvia’s increasing defense proficiency since regaining independence in 1991 was clear. The summer “GuardEx” engagements at Camp Grayling continued to be a showcase for the development of the Zemessardze’s capability, with the exercises themselves evolving to become more multi-dimensional. In 2000, GuardEx focused on collaboration between the Zemessardze and Michigan military police units.

2001’s exercise brought a platoon of Latvian guardsmen to Michigan. They were exposed to the tactics of motorized infantry, with both U.S. and Latvian participants performing tasks with armored personnel carriers at the platoon, company, and battalion levels. The GuardEx engagements would continue in this pattern until 2004.



The 126th Army Band in Latvia

August 2001 marked a milestone for both Latvia – and the spirit of partnership-building – with the celebration of Riga’s 800th anniversary, for which the Michigan National Guard’s 126th Army Band gave three combined





Maj. Gen. E. Gordon Stump, President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, Gen. Raimonds Graube

concert performances in Latvia with the Latvian National Armed Forces Staff Band. One of these concerts, held in the town of Tukums, benefitted children from a local rehabilitation center and orphanage.

“One of the people who had gone with us on the civic leader tour donated a bus that we were able to get some military airlift to send over,” said Stump. “These were kids that had deformities and had been abandoned by their parents, so it was very nice to see some of our community leaders open up their pocket books.”

During the visit, Stump participated in a wreath-laying ceremony at Riga’s Freedom Monument, which included President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, who succeeded Guntis Ulmanis in 1999.

Following the terror attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001, the Michigan National

Guard faced an increasing operations tempo, supporting numerous deployment taskings in Afghanistan and later, Iraq. Despite these new requirements, emphasis on the State Partnership Program remained strong.

The 9/11 attacks brought a new intensity to the global security environment, and are credited by security literature with speeding up the process for NATO enlargement. Seeing the U.S. as a critical ally, Latvia was poised to follow the U.S. into military action in the Middle East, especially after U.S. President George W. Bush made his vision for U.S. relations with the Baltic region known in June, 2001: “All of Europe’s new democracies, from the Baltic to the Black Sea and all that lie between, should have the same chance for security and freedom...I believe in NATO membership for all of Europe’s democracies that seek it and are ready to share the responsibilities that NATO brings.”



Latvia's NATO Member Action Plan (MAP)

The guiding document for Latvia's path to NATO membership was a product of the April, 1999 NATO summit meeting in Washington D.C. It was there that NATO suggested a way forward for Latvia and the other eight candidate states by establishing an individual Member Action Plan (MAP) for participation in NATO, reflecting the entire preparatory process and measures for participation in NATO. A MAP would permit the states to receive additional consultations, support and practical assistance from NATO Member States. In the framework of this process, Latvia managed to form professional armed forces that comply with modern security requirements and are able to participate in collective defense and crisis prevention measures. Included in Latvia's MAP were the following points relating to the development of its military capability:

- [1] Establish a command, control communications, computers and intelligence system (C4I), in accordance with NATO standards;**
- [2] Establish a personnel management and training system in accordance with NATO standards;**
- [3] Create and train a professional NCO and officer corps;**
- [4] Establish a logistics system corresponding to NATO standards;**
- [5] Acquire equipment for modernization of the National Armed Forces (NAF) and the mobilization forces;**
- [6] Establish a mobilization system consisting of mobile and regional battalions;**

- [7] Develop interoperability and compatibility with NATO capabilities; gradually introduce NATO interoperability requirements force wide.**

While Latvia's MAP also included chapters on political and economic factors, security, and legal issues, its section on defense/military development was most robust. Latvia received assistance from other NATO partners such as the U.K. and Germany in achieving these goals, but the long-term relationships fostered by Latvia's partnership with Michigan have been cited by many officials to be a major building block of the MAP's success.

"It was kind of a puzzle, where every piece matters – a lot of pieces had to come together to get the full picture of NATO acceptance and a very important piece was our ability to show military readiness," said Lt. Gen. (ret.) Raimonds Graube. "Without Michigan's piece, the picture wouldn't be complete; I believe Michigan has helped save many, many lives through our international cooperation to this end."

"When Latvia regained its independence in 1991, it was like right had finally won. For an independent country such as Latvia, a security agreement – like with NATO – has nothing to do with pride. It's absolutely necessary. It's survival." -Jānis Kukainis

Grassroots Support from the U.S.

In 1998, leaders from the United States, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania met in Washington, D.C. to sign the United States-Baltic Partnership Charter, which committed all



sides to work toward the inclusion of the Baltic states in Euro-Atlantic institutions. Recognizing the U.S. government's influence with NATO, a network of activists in Baltic communities across America mobilized to lobby U.S. representatives for strong support of that commitment as Latvia continued its quest for admission into NATO. Several members of Michigan's Latvian-American community played a critical role in this grassroots effort to support the homeland of their ancestors with political backing.

Jānis Kukainis, of Kalamazoo, served as president of the American Latvian Association (ALA) and the World Federation of Free Latvians (WFFL) during the early 2000s as this campaign crested its peak. For his efforts on behalf of Latvia, Kukainis has received the Order of the Three Stars medal.

“When Latvia regained its independence in 1991, it was like right had finally won,” said Kukainis. “For an independent country such as Latvia, a security agreement – like with NATO – has nothing to do with pride. It’s absolutely necessary. It’s survival.”

Mission Accomplished

On November 21, 2002, at the meeting of NATO Heads of State in Prague, Czech Republic, Latvia and six other candidate states were invited to join NATO. This marked the beginning of the last stage for Latvia in becoming a NATO Member State, which officially took place on March 29, 2004. On May 1, 2004, Latvia also joined the European Union (EU).

At the NATO summit in Prague, President Vīķe-Freiberga set the tone for Latvia's engagement with the alliance, speaking from the heart before an assembly of world leaders:

“Our people have been tested in the fires of history; tempered in the furnace of suffering and injustice. They know the meaning and the value of liberty. They know that it is worth every effort to support it,



President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga in Prague, 2002.

to maintain it, to stand for it, and to fight for it. We make a solemn pledge and a commitment here today on this historical and solemn occasion that we will strive to our utmost to do our part to contribute not just to the strength of the alliance but to do whatever needs to be done to create a world where justice and liberty are available to all.”

Indeed, there was unanimous agreement that the credit for Latvia's acceptance into NATO lay squarely on the shoulders of Latvians themselves. Maj. Gen. (ret.) Thomas G. Cutler, who succeeded Stump as Adjutant General of the Michigan National Guard in 2003, happened to be in Latvia that momentous spring and recalls the sense of triumph that swept the country:

“Latvia got a lot of assistance from the European Command and NATO; there were a lot of people that believed in their cause, but nobody could do it for them,” said Cutler. “The Latvians absolutely had to do it for themselves, and I think that’s why they took such great pride in it. They were pretty teachable, but they did all the heavy lifting themselves – we were only there to assist.”

Latvia: A NATO Force-Multiplier

In the years since its accession to NATO, Latvia has become involved in the transformation of



NATO by strengthening NATO capacities in international operations, as well as security-sustaining measures executed by the alliance.

Since 1996, when Latvian soldiers first participated in operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina managed by NATO, Latvia has been involved in NATO operations in the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In the NATO-led international mission in Afghanistan, Latvia participated by means of contingent armed forces, while civil experts of Latvia were involved in Afghanistan's reconstruction and stabilization process. Participation in international operations tests the compatibility of the Latvian National Armed Forces with those of other Member States and brings indispensable working experience for its soldiers. Practical involvement of Latvia in operations led by NATO continues to increase effectiveness of operations and maximizes the political influence of Latvia in the NATO decision-making process.

The Latvian National Armed Forces are ready not only to participate in international operations, but also to receive NATO forces in the territory of Latvia. As a receiving country, Latvia continues to elaborate its support system for foreign armed forces to accommodate the foreign assistance in case of threat to the state or a natural disaster. Such cooperation between Latvia and NATO serves as a critical basis for the security and defense of the country.

Latvia and NATO — Facts and Figures:

Latvia's Path to NATO:

- **14 February 1994:** Latvia joins the NATO program “Partnership for Peace,” which offers an opportunity to receive support from NATO and its member countries for the development of security systems
- **23 April 1999:** During the NATO Washington summit, Latvia and six other candidates start

developing the NATO Membership Action Plan

- **21 November 2002:** During the NATO summit in Prague, Latvia receives the invitation to join the alliance
- **29 March 2004:** Latvia becomes a fully-fledged member of NATO; NATO aircraft start policing over the airspace of the Baltic States

Participation in NATO Operations:

Latvian soldiers have participated in NATO operations

- IFOR/SFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1996 – 2004)
- AFOR in Albania (1999)
- KFOR in Kosovo (2000 – 2009)
- ISAF in Afghanistan (2003 – 2014)
- “Resolute Support” in Afghanistan (2003 – 2014)



A Latvian Naval Forces Flotilla minehunter participates in the naval exercise Squadex 2014 organized by the Baltic Naval Squadron (Baltron) in the Baltic Sea.

Participation in the NATO Response Force:

Latvian soldiers — explosive ordnance disposal experts, military policemen, staff officers, as well





The opening ceremony for exercise Steadfast Jazz, Nov. 3, 2013.

as marines specializing in mine hunting — have served in the NATO Response Force since 2006.

Participation in NATO Military Exercises:

On 2 – 9 November 2013, Latvia hosted one of the largest NATO exercises in recent years, “Steadfast Jazz 2013,” with its headquarters in Latvia.

NATO exercises – many of which are organized in Latvia annually – improve various skills: crisis management (NATO CMX exercise), operation planning and management (Steadfast Jazz, Steadfast Pyramid/Steadfast Pinnacle exercises), air patrolling (BRTE air policing exercise).

NATO Air Policing:

The airspace over Latvia has been guarded by allied forces’ aircraft since 2004. This is

one of the expressions of solidarity of the allied forces and proof that they can share their resources in order to improve defense. In 2013, NATO member countries agreed that air policing over the Baltic States would be a long-term commitment. This military operation has been carried out by 14 countries, some of them repeatedly. The airspace over the Baltic States has been guarded by air force units from the USA, Belgium, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Turkey, and Germany.

NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communication

The NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communication began operations in Latvia in 2014. The center provides support to NATO and its member countries in improving their strategic communication capabilities — it studies communication processes, gathers and analyses



the experience of the member countries, and builds a common understanding among the member countries about the framework, process, and role of communication.

Exercise Summer Shield

As Latvia enjoyed its first full year of NATO membership, new opportunities emerged for participation in international security operations. When Latvia's 2nd Infantry Battalion was called to deploy to Iraq, 35 members of the Michigan National Guard's 46th Infantry Brigade traveled to Latvia to help prepare the Latvian soldiers for their tour of duty. It was a unique moment, rich with significance: just twelve years after regaining their own independence, Latvians would themselves be exhibitors of democracy in a newly-liberated country.

This collaboration would become known as exercise "Summer Shield," held annually from then on as a pre-mission training opportunity geared toward units readying for service in international peacekeeping missions. During the first installment of this two-week exercise, the partners focused on military operations in an urban environment, patrolling in that urban environment, checkpoint operations, and convoy security. The soldiers also gained experience working with local governments, crowd control,



Latvian and U.S. soldiers conducting urban operations training

reacting to snipers and ambushes, and clearing buildings of insurgents.

Along with Exercise RESCUER/MEDCEUR 2004, Summer Shield was among the first major collaborations between Latvian and U.S. forces after Latvia's accession to NATO.

“Just 15 years ago, an exercise like this would have been virtually impossible. Countries once considered adversaries now work as allies. Our nations are bound together in a global effort against terrorism.”

-Col. Michael McDaniel



Convoy operations at exercise Summer Shield





Exercise Summer Shield focused on pre-deployment readiness

**Exercise RESCUER/MEDCEUR 2004
– From the Michigan National Guard
publication *Wolverine Guard, Autumn,
2004***

True to their state partnership with Latvia, Michigan troops led joint military exercises simultaneously in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia during Rescuer-Medical Exercise Central Europe.

The Michigan National Guard had the lead role in RESCUER/MEDCEUR 2004, an anti-terrorism exercise hosted by the Baltic States. The two-week event tested an international task force on its ability to face disasters and medical emergencies.

Col. Michael McDaniel, Michigan's assistant adjutant general for Homeland Security, served as task force commander during the exercise, which was headquartered on a Latvian army base in the small town of Aluksne, near the Russian border.

“Just 15 years ago, an exercise like this would have been virtually impossible,” said McDaniel. “Countries once considered adversaries now work as allies. Our nations are bound together in a global effort against terrorism.”

A total of 18 countries took part in the exercise, marking the first large-scale operation undertaken by the Baltic States since becoming NATO partners in March 2004.

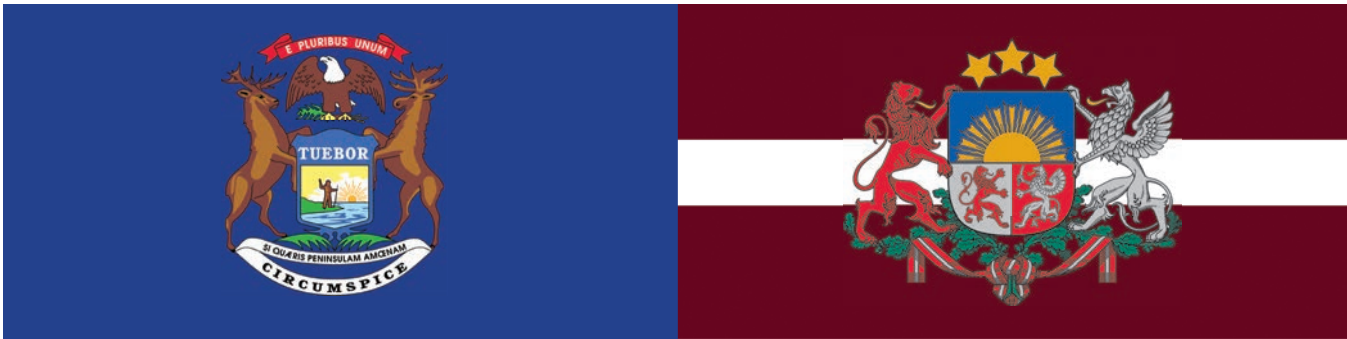
McDaniel and roughly 30 other Michigan Guardsmen served in various roles during the exercise. The computer-driven scenario prompted simulated disasters that troops in neighboring Lithuania and Estonia had to react to in real time.

“This was a complex operation with a lot of moving parts,” McDaniel said. “A lot of lessons were learned and a lot of new friendships were formed.”

Soldiers from the Michigan National Guard 107th Engineer Battalion also renovated a local school. The exercise concluded July 29th. ■



CHAPTER SIX



The Partnership goes to War

*B*y 2007, the Latvian military had developed to a point where some began to discuss a “graduation” phase of the State Partnership Program. Now a fully-fledged NATO member country, the professionalism and readiness of the Defense Force and Zemessardze had clearly progressed lightyears from their starting point in 1993.

Michigan Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Thomas G. Cutler, was not among the voices calling for a rethinking of the SPP’s place. A strong proponent of the partnership, he believed there was still plenty of uncharted territory for it to conquer.

“One of the things I had a sense of was that we needed to put a little more meat into the partnership because those early challenges had pretty much been met,” said Cutler. “So I started to talk to them about doing some sort of joint deployment.”

The opportunity to pursue this vision came during a visit to Michigan by Latvia’s Chief of Defense, Maj. Gen. Juris Maklakovs, in 2007.



Maj. Gen. Juris Maklakovs



During their time together, Maklakovs, having recently assumed duty as head of Latvia's national defense, shared with Cutler the magnitude of his new responsibility. Of particular concern to him was an upcoming NATO tasking for Latvian soldiers to advise and train Afghan National Army soldiers in a dangerous combat environment.

"He said to me, 'We've been asked to go to Afghanistan and be part of this Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team. We'd like to do that, but we need help,' said Cutler. "Well, that sounded like a joint deployment, so I said, 'Yes, we'd like to do that.'"

Immediately, Cutler knew that the obstacles to a combat partnership between Michigan and Latvia would be myriad. Chief among these would be gaining permission from the proper authorities to send Michigan soldiers as augmentees to what was essentially a Latvian mission.

Cutler recognized that a formal letter of request from Maklakovs, Chief of Defense for a sovereign nation, would carry much more weight with the powers-that-be than if Cutler himself initiated the request through the National Guard Bureau. At Cutler's suggestion, Maklakovs began drafting a memorandum addressed to General Bantz J. Craddock, commander of U.S. European Command.

"Maj. Gen. Maklakovs wrote the letter and it went to the commander of EUCOM, who called Lt. Gen. Steven Blum, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, and said, 'Hey, got a great idea here,'" recalled Cutler. "Then Lt. Gen. Blum called me and said, 'Hey Tom, got an idea here – are you willing to do it?' "Naturally, I said, 'yeah, I think we'd be willing!'"

Cutler admits that it was an ambitious proposal. To be ready for the November 2008 deployment date, training – of both American and Latvian participants – would have to begin almost immediately.



Maj. Gen. Thomas Cutler and Maj. Gen. Juris Maklakovs

Tactical Capability – From the Back of a Napkin

Not long after the Michigan-Latvia deployment collaboration was approved – known from this point as the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) – a Latvian delegation traveled to Michigan to identify capability objectives of the team as well as the exact skillsets required to fulfil them. Specifically, the team was attempting to problem-solve the Latvians' lack of ability to coordinate close air and artillery support.

Then-Lt. Col. Andrew Roberts, commander of the Grayling Air-to-Ground range, sat in on a meeting with the Latvian guests, along with his fellow Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC), Master Sgt. Alan Van Pate.

Eventually, the discussion turned to the



OMLT's fledgling manning document and the team's requirement to deploy with JTAC-certified individuals. Defined as the directors of combat aircraft engaged in close air support and other offensive fires from a forward position, the JTAC capability would be a crucial link for top cover as the OMLT operated as a small entity in a remote area.

"One of the Army Guardsmen in the room said, 'Hey, there's this JTAC thing, but we can't do that,'" said Roberts. "I said, 'That's interesting, because I'm a JTAC,' and – MSgt Alan VanPate was with me – 'he's a JTAC, too.' We had actually been instructors at the Navy SEAL course out in Fallon, Nev. together."

In that meeting, the idea for an organically-developed Latvian JTAC capability was first broached. This initiative would prove to have significant impact, not only on the ultimate

success of the OMLTs, but Latvia's larger defense strategy as well.

"What we came up with very quickly was that we could teach the Latvians to be JTACs, legally, if they developed a program of their own and signed up with the Joint Close Air Support Memorandum of Agreement," said Roberts. "We thought that would be a very good capability, not only for the OMLT on deployment, but something for Latvia to develop within their country, if you looked at the threats that they were facing. That plan, quite literally, started on a napkin at the officer's club at Camp Grayling."

The JTAC Program Takes Shape

Beginning in January 2008, Roberts set up a training plan for the Latvian OMLT participants, introducing them to the fundamentals of JTAC operations. It started with a two-week course in



Col. Andrew Roberts (second from left) with Latvian JTACs





Sgt. Voldemārs Anševics

Latvia where the academic phase of the standard U.S. JTAC course was taught, followed by a phase of practical training at Camp Grayling. Roberts' intent was to give every Latvian member of the OMLT a shot at earning their JTAC rating, but in the end, only the best two would be selected to go to formal training.

Along the way, Roberts faced the challenge of pitching the criticality of this training to officials on both sides of the partnership who could provide support but had little previous exposure to the concept of JTAC operations, if any. Critical in that was Maj. Ilmārs Lejiņš, now the Land Forces Mechanized Infantry Brigade Commander for Latvia, who was one of the first in Latvia to recognize not only the requirement, but also the long-term advantage of having an organic JTAC capability in Latvia.

“The Joint Terminal Attack Controller’s job is to integrate air power with ground power. They are the nexus for combined fires,” said Roberts. “When we started out with the Latvians, a good way to explain it was, ‘Yes, you’re in the Army. Yes, you have this machine gun and that’s great. As a JTAC, your bullet weighs 500 pounds.’ And that’s what you’ve got to think about – large impact, highly lethal, very precise ability to take on enemy forces.”

“Volde” and The Wolf

Latvia’s first two certified JTACs emerged at the end of this initial training phase: Sgt. Voldemārs Anševics and Maj. Edmunds Svenčs.

Sgt. Voldemārs Anševics was a larger-than-life personality who embodied the traits of a



classic non-commissioned officer. Stocky, tough, and a trove of tactical knowledge, Anševics was universally admired by those who served alongside him.

“Voldemārs was a reconnaissance soldier, highly intelligent,” said Roberts. “His English was middle-of-the-road at the beginning, so he always had this giant Latvian-English dictionary with him, and he’d be sitting there taking these complicated, technical exams having to look things up. We really became good friends.”

1st Sgt. Shawn Menard, a Michigan Guardsman who served on the first OMLT, likewise remembers Anševics for both his tactical skill and his good-natured spirit off the battlefield.

“Voldemārs was the best soldier I’d met in any Army, anywhere. He was just an amazing guy. His field craft, his knowledge of tactics were amazing – he could kill you with anything! But he was extremely humble and I learned a ton from him. I learned more from Volde than probably anybody in my career.”

“Voldemārs was really the perfect complement to the officer, Maj. Svenčs,” said Roberts. “He was kind of the senior NCO piece to that first team. We trained him up, and he technically was the first Latvian JTAC – he passed his first check before Svenčs did.”

There was another Latvian who also made an early impression on his Michigan colleagues: Pfc. Andrejs Merkuševs. Tall, lean, and steely-eyed, Merkuševs was an expert sniper who the Michiganders took to calling “The Wolf.”

“Andrejs was very quiet and humble although he had done really well in international sniper competition,” said Menard. “He taught me a lot so that when I became a sniper, I kept those things with me. He didn’t say much, so when he said something, you’d pay attention – probably a good personality trait for a sniper.”



Pfc. Andrejs Merkuševs

Merkuševs was also tough as nails.

“Andrejs had actually been shot during close-quarter combat training right before we arrived in Latvia the first time,” said Roberts. “It was kind of funny, because one of the other Latvian OMLT guys had a broken arm. We were always like, ‘Why are you giving us a guy with a broken arm?’ and the Latvians were like, ‘Well, we shot the other one’ You couldn’t stop these guys.”

OMLT 1 – A Groundbreaking Collaboration

As the JTAC component of the first OMLT was solidifying, so were the dynamics of the rest of the team. With approximately forty members, 75% of whom were Latvian, there were many obstacles to overcome in setting up a cohesive, cross-cultural chain-of-command.

“Basically, it was a Latvian-led mission with about ten of us from Michigan plugged in to act as advisors to the advisors,” said Menard. “It was





Latvian Army Cpl. Deniss Makarous shows an Afghan National Army Soldier how to use a sniper rifle at Observation Post Bari Alai near the village of Nishagam, in Konar province, Afghanistan, March 18, 2009

really interesting because we built the model, so we had a lot of freedom to put the team together.”

Though the Michigan National Guard members of the team would not be part of the JTAC training, they were still introduced to the Latvians' program almost immediately.

“We met the JTAC guys early, right when this thing kicked off, and they were great,” said Menard. “Then, we had a pretty intensive training program together here at home. A lot of it was based on what the Latvians were going to do. What they needed help with was integrating with the U.S. systems – how to use our combat multipliers and how to navigate the U.S. military structure.”

One thing that was clear from the beginning was that the Latvian team members – most were

highly-trained reconnaissance soldiers – had much to teach the Americans in practical field craft.

“They were phenomenal soldiers – the best soldiers that I worked with from in any army, anywhere,” said Menard. “They were extremely professional at what they did.”

Lt. Col. Ģirts Savins, a senior company advisor on the first OMLT, similarly recalled that the first OMLT was a unique consolidation of experience and aptitude: “It was Latvian officers, together with the Michigan National Guard senior NCOs, and it was so interesting to see it work out when we began our joint training.”

After a developmental portion for the entire team in Michigan, a follow-up phase was held in Latvia, where the OMLT continued to jell



as standard operating procedures, tactics, and techniques became like second nature. Their pre-deployment phase culminated with a block of mountain warfare skills in the Republic of Georgia, including a climb to the 16,000-foot peak of Mount Kazbek.

“To give you an example of what these guys were like, only one other American and I finished the climb, and we’re the last ones down – it was that tough,” said Menard. “So we came back from the peak to the base camp and all the Latvians are lined up, basically standing at attention with their packs. They had already been released but they weren’t going anywhere without us. So we walked the gauntlet and they all hugged us, kissed the tops of our heads, and said they’d have a cold beer waiting for us when we got down from the mountain.”

Rough Neighborhoods Abroad

In October 2008, the OMLT departed for NATO certification in Germany. Within a month, the unit was completing its initial bed-down in Kunar Province, working with the 6th battalion of the Afghanistan National Army (ANA).

It was clear from the beginning that the Latvian OMLT members were totally dedicated to the task at hand. Although the attacks of 9/11 happened in New York City, the investment of the Latvians was no less than if the twin towers had fallen in Riga.

“It was not only an American fight,” said Savins. “It was the fight of NATO. We were partners before, and we were partners then.”

At first, the OMLT focused on familiarization with the dynamics of local political and security situations. One of their early assignments included security provisions for voter registration in district centers.

“We did a lot of key leader engagements, just trying to get our finger on the pulse of that area

of operations,” said Menard. “Just trying to figure out who the local bad guys were and what that network looked like.”

More so than the later OMLTs, this first team was heavily reliant on the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) forces to accomplish mission objectives.

“Sometimes it would be just me with fifteen other ANA guys,” said Menard. “In that neighborhood, we often found ourselves outnumbered, outgunned, and frankly, the Taliban could outmaneuver us, too. They could fly like ghosts through the mountains.”

Eventually, the OMLT would be relocated to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Bostick, also in Kunar Province, before being dispersed in small pockets to smaller outposts (OPs) and combat outposts (COPs) including OP Bari Alai and COP Keating, where heavy fighting would take place later in 2009.

OP Bari Alai

On the evening of April 30, 2009, a force of approximately 200 Taliban fighters equipped with small arms and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers assembled in the Helgal and Tsunel valleys, preparing for an attack on Observation Post Bari Alai, a hilltop position with commanding overwatch of the surrounding area.

“It looked like everybody in the whole world was shooting at [Bari Alai]. There were tracers flying in from seven or eight positions. There were recoilless rockets just one after another hammering into the camp.”

-1st Sgt. Shawn Menard





OMLT members Maj. Jim Hickman and Latvian Army Maj. Juris Abolins, patrol through the village of Nishagam, in Kunar province, Afghanistan alongside members of the Afghan National Army, March 18, 2009.

Inside Bari Alai was a garrison of three Americans, four Latvians, and a platoon of ANA forces.

Staff Sgt. William Vile, the camp's ranking American, was an active duty troop picked up by the OMLT after the unit arrived in-country. With him were Sgt. James Pirtle and Spc. Ryan King, active duty communications specialists assigned to the outpost as support personnel. Also representing the OMLT were Voldemārs Anševics, the charismatic JTAC sergeant, and Pfc. Andrejs Merkuševs, with two other Latvian support personnel, Sgt. Solvita Levane – a medic – and Pfc. Aleksandrs Pisarevs. The three OMLT personnel had been making progress with the training of their Afghan counterparts until recently, when descriptions of escalating tension between the ANA and coalition troops

had begun dominating reports from the outpost.

“We had really good intelligence as far as what was shaping up and what was going to happen,” said Menard, who had been part of the Bari Alai garrison until being called to another outpost about a mile-and-a-half north in late April. “A couple of days before, things became really heated and the Afghans were openly talking about killing us. Everyone was sleeping with a claymore clacker in one hand and a pistol in the other.”

At approximately 4:30 a.m. on May 1st, the Tsunel valley erupted with a rain of fire as hellacious as any seen to date in the war in Afghanistan.

From his perch further north in the valley, Menard could see the attack unfold, but sat too





OP Bari Alai after assault, May 1, 2009

far out of range to provide any assistance. He was horrified by what he saw.

“It looked like everybody in the whole world was shooting at [Bari Alai]. There were tracers flying in from seven or eight positions,” said Menard. “There were recoilless rockets just one after another hammering into the camp.”

Inside Bari Alai, the ANA forces provided suspiciously little firepower support, leaving defense of the garrison primarily to Vile, Pirtle, King, Anševics, and Merkuševs. Vile, radioing for artillery and air support while firing the outpost’s automatic grenade launcher, gave reports as Taliban fighters began pouring into the camp via the ANA compound.

“Billy [Vile] called on the radio at some point and he was pretty frantic,” said Menard. “Just put the rounds on us, there’s too many of them,” he said.”

Meanwhile, Anševics and Merkuševs were stacking Taliban bodies high outside a bunker where the rest of the U.S. and Latvian personnel were positioned. Over a twelve-minute period, the fight intensified as the enemy completely overran the outpost. Anševics continued a stalwart defense of the compound, even after he was severely wounded.

“At some point in the fighting, Voldemārs was wounded, and he ran across the courtyard through a hail of gunfire,” said Menard. Inside



the bunker, Levane patched Anševics up enough that he returned to the fight, holding down the doorway of the bunker until he was killed by enemy bullets.

“He fell outside the doorway in the courtyard,” said Menard. “That’s where we found his remains.”

Merkuševs moved into the bunker’s doorway to take Anševics’s place while Vile continued to fight and report on the radio despite also being wounded. All the while, the RPG and mortar fire got thicker.

“I remember the mortars walking in,” said Menard. “They scored a couple of direct hits on the OMLT hooch and then they finally got one inside. We had a weapon system called a Carl Gustav [recoilless rifle] and we had a stockpile of rounds stored in the hooch, so when the mortar penetrated the roof, there was a sympathetic detonation of those Gustav rounds, which was just a huge explosion.”

With the blast, the bunker collapsed, leaving Merkuševs and an Afghan interpreter dead. Levane, the Latvian medic, survived the explosion but was buried beneath the rubble. Shortly after the blast, an RPG round struck Vile directly. His last radio call was “we are blowing up.” Sgt. Pirtle and Spc. King, the other two Americans in the camp, were killed by enemy small arms fire moments later.

With all of the defenders dead or seriously wounded, the Taliban forces ransacked the compound. By this time, Apache attack helicopters and F-15 Strike Eagles had arrived and were engaging nearby enemy positions. Fearing a counterattack, the Taliban withdrew from Bari Alai, leaving behind Levane, Pisarevs, and four ANA soldiers who were later recovered.

The attack on OP Bari Alai was over. Though two Latvians, three Americans, and five ANA soldiers had lost their lives, the enemy’s cost

was much higher: approximately twenty Taliban bodies would be counted in and around the outpost.

“There was a running gunfight down the Helgal Valley the rest of that day,” said Menard. “It was fairly late in the afternoon when it came across the radio, what we all knew: ‘these are the KIAs.’ That was a sobering moment.”

“It was one sad day,” said Savins. “[It] was under my responsibility.”



Latvian OMLT members, Hindu Kush mountains, 2009, Sgt. Voldemārs Anševics (far right)

Two days later, the OMLT would get their revenge. When Menard’s OP East was similarly attacked by a company-sized element, he, along with two other OMLT troops (Lt. Agris Robežnieks and Cpl. Chris “Jack” Daniels), six soldiers from the 6/4 Cav C Troop, and a handful of ANA forces, held them off in an hour-long duel, which left 15-40 Taliban dead with only a few minor coalition injuries.

Legacy of the Fallen

After Bari Alai, both the Latvian and American dead were remembered as heroes by their respective governments. Staff Sgt. William Vile was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for gallantry, while the families of Sgt. Voldemārs





A street is named in honor of fallen Latvian army soldier, Sgt. Voldemārs Anševics at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Mich.

Anševics and Pfc. Andrejs Merkuševs both received the Grand Cross of the Order of Viesturs.

Personally, the death of Anševics and Merkuševs shook their colleagues in Latvia and Michigan to the core.

“...it reminded all of us just how important our partnership was, and the fact that both countries had been asked to spill the blood of their soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. It certainly created a stronger bond between our countries and between our two militaries.”

-Maj. Gen. Thomas Cutler

“To me, the Voldemārs piece was a turning point for a lot of us, because it really brought home the importance of what we were doing,” said Col. Andrew Roberts. Our JTACs have accomplished much since then, but always overhanging that is the remembrance of Voldemārs and what he did with just a few weeks of training. That’s the thing – it shows that you’ve always got to be ready to do your job, and I think we’ve kept that in our hearts and minds ever since.”

For Lt. Gen. Leonids Kalniņš, now Latvia’s Chief of Defense, the tragedy that befell OMLT 1 on May 1, 2009 brought the relationship between Michigan and Latvia to a new level of solidarity. “It means we are connected by their blood,” said Kalniņš. “And that is the most powerful kind of friendship in the world.”

Indeed, the remembrances of Anševics and Merkuševs in Michigan are many. Memorial photographs of them hang to this day in the corridor of the Michigan National Guard Joint



Force Headquarters in Lansing, side-by-side with photographs of Michigan soldiers killed in action. In 2017, a street was also named in Anševics' honor at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center.

“The street naming actually got a lot of play in the Latvian press, because this is probably the only street in the U.S. named after a Latvian,” said Roberts, who with Kalniņš, helped unveil the sign. “So Voldemārs is still a piece of this partnership to this day, very missed over time.”

Roberts also pointed to a memorial golf outing held for Voldemārs' family as evidence of the impact his death had in Michigan.



Michiganders at the Sgt. Voldemārs Anševics Memorial Golf Outing

“We wanted to do something to help his widow and family,” said Roberts. Through this fundraising event, approximately \$20,000 was raised to help support them. It was a story Roberts told often while serving as Bilateral Affairs Officer in Latvia from 2011 to 2014.

“When I lived in Latvia, I’d visit local schools and I always showed a picture of these Michiganders on a golf course, standing there with their clubs,” said Roberts. “I’d ask, ‘who

are these people?’ The Latvian students would say, “Well, they’re Latvian Americans,” or “They were in the military before.” Actually, I have no idea who these guys were – we just put posters up saying that we were raising money for the family of a fallen Latvian soldier who had served with the Michigan Guard, and they all came out in support.”

For Maj. Gen. Thomas Cutler, the losses were a tragic pall that dampened the thrill of the OMLTs groundbreaking success. He personally traveled to Latvia to attend funeral services for both Anševics and Merkuševs, expressing condolences to their families on behalf of Michigan.



Col. Andrew Roberts and Maj. Gen. Thomas Cutler were among the U.S. military personnel who attended the funeral of Sgt. Voldemārs Anševics

“The OMLTs were a wonderful thing that we were privileged to be a part of, but it was also very awful because both had trained here in Michigan and we had gotten to know them,” said Cutler. “But it reminded all of us just how important our partnership was, and the fact that both countries had been asked to spill the blood of their soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. It certainly created a stronger bond between our countries and between our two militaries.”

That bond would be necessary, for the common fight of the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams was only beginning.



CHAPTER SEVEN



The Fight Continues

The members of OMLT 1 returned home from Afghanistan with heavy hearts and an indescribable union forged over 12 months navigating cultural barriers and Taliban bullets together.

“There’s definitely something that happens when you’re in that kind of fighting together,” said 1st Sgt. Shawn Menard. “We went through some really rough stuff together and we lost some really good guys. You get as close to the guys you’re fighting with as your own family.”

However, with two more OMLTs slated for future deployment, there was little time to linger in reflection.

“We brought back to our country a lot of lessons learned in standard operating procedures, tactics, and policy,” said Lt. Col. Ģirts Savins. “We put those into training afterwards.”

The only problem was that the second OMLT would already be well into their program by the time those lessons could be relayed by the first team.

“I didn’t see the guys from the first OMLT

because of the rotation schedule,” said Maj. David Huber, operations and training officer for OMLT 2. “They had to leave almost two months prior to us getting into the country.”

Still, OMLT 2 benefited from the fact that their mission would be the same as the first OMLT’s: to coach, teach, and mentor the Afghan army. As it was with the first OMLT, personal and professional obstacles had to be overcome as the



A Latvian National Guard soldier prepares a MK19 grenade launcher at a site in Ādaži, Latvia on April 14, 2009 as Michigan Army National Guardsman Sgt. Robert Gustafson looks on. The Soldiers are preparing to deploy to Afghanistan as an operational and mentoring liaison team with the Afghanistan National Army. This is the second deployment for the joint Michigan-Latvian OMLT.



team melded during its pre-deployment phase.

“It wasn’t always smooth sailing. I worked very hard to ensure we were integrated in all parts of the team,” said Huber. “Going to mountain warfare school in Slovenia, spending two weeks with those guys and building that bond was huge.”

Although the criticality of their work was paramount in every team member’s mind, the training was not without a few lighthearted moments: “We’d be getting ready to go on a road march and we’d ask the Slovenian warfare instructor, ‘What will the weather be like today,’” said Huber. “He’d always say, ‘The weather will

be. It doesn’t matter what the weather will be – it will be!’ We all laughed about that.”

OMLT 2 arrived in Afghanistan in June 2009. Once in-theater, the team splintered from FOB Bostick to many small outposts and forward operating locations throughout Eastern

“Barg-e-Matal’s layout was a nightmare, You’re in a gigantic fishbowl with the biggest mountains in Afghanistan all around you. ...”

-Staff Sgt. T.J. Pierce



Mountain Warfare School, Slovenia.





OMLT 2 prior to deployment, with Latvian President Valdis Zatlers (center)

Afghanistan, just as OMLT 1 had been.

“The operational and tactical situation was very complicated,” said Maj. Juris Višņakovs, who served on OMLT 2. “We had several units displaced in a lot of locations and we were forced to split our teams in order to execute our tasks. For example, I was acting without my Michigan NCO, because he was tasked to support another unit in another camp. So pretty much, we built a relationship during training only.”

Barg-e-Matal

On July 7, 2009 the Taliban seized Barg-e-Matal, a village of approximately 1,500 in Nuristan province. As a significant thoroughfare in northern Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai could not stomach the village’s loss. He requested support from U.S. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who launched Operation Mountain Fire, an all-hands effort to retake Barg-e-Matal.

Staff Sgt. T.J. Pierce of the Michigan National Guard had been a part of the OMLT 2 component relieving 1st Sgt. Shawn Menard’s group in the area of Bari Alai after the May 1, 2009 offensive. Though coalition forces retook Barg-e-Matal on July 12, 2009, Pierce would be involved in tense fighting in the Barg-e-Matal area for the next two months.

“Barg-e-Matal’s layout was a nightmare,” said Pierce. “You’re in a gigantic fishbowl with the biggest mountains in Afghanistan all around you. “And we didn’t have engineer assets to fly in so we couldn’t build our own observation post or anything.”

Pierce was the lone American on a team that consisted of himself, 60-70 ANA soldiers, and four Latvian advisers. Among the Latvians, there were two officers – Capt. Dans Jansons and 1st Lt. Pēteris Plečkens – an NCO, Sgt. Mārtiņš “Squirrel” Dāboliņš, and Pfc. Janis Ozoliņš.



With robust enemy presence in the area, Pierce and his colleagues were certain they were outgunned and outnumbered. With three to five enemy sniper teams peering into the village at any given time, no one was safe.

“We continued to try to train the Afghans as best we could, but it was difficult because we were taking so many casualties,” Pierce said. “It was hard to get replacements, which was demoralizing, especially for the Afghans.”

On August 27, 2009, Pierce led a patrol into the mountains to locate and destroy some of the enemy sniper positions.

“We destroyed a bunch of positions and documented some other ones. Ultimately, I ended up walking into an ambush myself. That led to a 22-hour day and I lost half my patrol.”

In the village of Barg-e-Matal, Plečkens was leading another element from Pierce’s company that day. Pinned down in an ambush of their own, the OMLT troops blended in with counterparts from the U.S. Army’s 10th Mountain platoon. Ozoliņš, a machine gunner, rained down a hail of suppressive fire to cover his American colleagues.

“He was standing right out in the middle of the village with his SAW and just laid down cover to enable the platoon to move,” said Pierce.



Capt. Dans Jansons (center), Latvian JTAC



Sgt. Mārtiņš “Squirrel” Dāboliņš, and Staff Sgt. T.J. Pierce

“The Latvians made quite an impression on the Americans that day.”

Despite the valor of coalition forces, the situation in Barg-e-Matal continued in a stalemate. “We knew we had to hang onto the village, but we didn’t know why, and we didn’t know what it was going to take for us to leave,” said Pierce.

By September 10, 2009, the attrition that demanded such an exacting price from Pierce’s team was poised to become even more costly. Pierce and Jansons were standing on the porch of a girl’s school in Barg-e-Matal where the 10th Mountain platoon had established their tactical operations center (TOC). A village meeting had just concluded and the coalition troops were waiting for nightfall to make their safe transfer back to their usual position.

“Even though there were some tarps around, there was a tiny hole between a sandbag fighting position,” said Pierce. “From a very long distance, a sniper put a round through there that hit Capt. Jansons in the left shoulder. Myself, the



A3 from the 10th Mountain, and our medics got him medevac'd out, but just as soon as we got back, Lt. Plečkens got shot and we had to turn the bird around to pick him up.”

Down both their officers, Pierce was hard-pressed to enforce order among the Afghan forces who were growing increasingly restless. “The ranking Afghan soldier was a squad leader and it was myself, Dāboliņš, and Ozoliņš trying to handle 60-70 ANA guys stretched out across the village,” said Pierce. “The Taliban knew that, and they were trying to leverage that against us.”

On the morning of September 12, 2009, two of Pierce’s Afghan troops were standing in an open area in the village when shots rang out. One of the Afghans dropped to the ground, seriously wounded.

“Me and Squirrel went out and picked him up. Then the other one got shot and we went to pick him up,” said Pierce. “When the medevac bird was en route, I got shot in my right hip – and that was the end of my fun in Barg-e-Matal.”

For his service at Barg-e-Matal, Pierce would receive the Bronze Star medal with Valor Device, as well as the Purple Heart.

Within 48 hours, the decision was made to stand-down coalition operations at Barg-e-Matal. Pierce’s team, decimated by the fighting, was taken off operational status while several members were re-assigned to support other elements. Sgt. Dāboliņš was sent to COP Keating, a small outpost in Nuristan Province, not far from Barg-e-Matal.



COP Keating



“They needed to send my American counterpart on the Keating team, Staff Sgt. Dennis Smith, home on leave,” said Pierce. “So Squirrel [Dāboliņš] asked if he could go up there and cover down for him for about a month. He arrived at Keating about at about 0300 hours on October 3rd.”

“One feels the sense of camaraderie among the soldiers, I am convinced of it by being there – nobody judges you by the flag you belong to.”

-Sgt. Mārtiņš Dāboliņš

COP Keating

At around 0700 hours on October 3, 2009, COP Keating was attacked by some 350 insurgents, resulting in a 13-hour battle that included some of the most intense fighting of the war in Afghanistan. Along with Sgt. Dāboliņš, the defenders included Bravo Company of the U.S. 361st Cavalry and another Latvian soldier from OMLT 2, Staff Sgt. Jānis Lakis. They were outnumbered by the Taliban nearly 5-to-1. Journalist Jake Tapper writes in his book, *The Outpost*, of their heroism as ANA troops also assigned to COP Keating began retreating from their positions:

“‘This is your country!’ yelled one of their Latvian trainers, Jānis Lakis. ‘Hold your position! Hold your position!’ They didn’t listen. Once outside the wire, some even handed their weapons to insurgents as they passed them...

“...The Latvian trainers, Jānis Lakis and Mārtiņš Dāboliņš, were furious when they found some of the ANA troops outside the operations center, huddled together and squatting, holding their knees and shaking uncontrollably. Among them was their commander – who had fled his post. Lakis – a big guy with a beard whom the Americans called Bluto

– picked the man up. ‘Where are your men? Are any of them manning their battle position?’ Lakis asked. ‘The Taliban have taken that side,’ he said. ‘Get your men up and retake your side of the camp!’ Lakis told him. ‘You are not my commander!’ the Afghan exclaimed, and he ran off.”

When U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Clinton Romesha mobilized a team of five Americans to destroy Taliban targets operating inside the camp, Lakis and Dāboliņš fell in, firing from the same positions as Romesha and his men. At one point, Lakis and Dāboliņš joined Romesha in a firefight with three Taliban who had crouched behind a Humvee for cover. Romesha writes in his own book, *Red Platoon: A True Story of American Valor*, that he shot one of them through the neck while Lakis fired two grenades that landed directly on top of the others.

Meanwhile, Dāboliņš teamed up with Staff Sgt. Ty Carter. Both snipers, they began picking off Taliban one-by-one.

It was through the efforts of Lakis, Dāboliņš, Romesha, Carter, and others, that coalition forces were able to hold their position for more than four-and-a-half hours until close air support could arrive. They continued to fight for nearly ten hours after that, killing over 100 of the Taliban attackers. 8 Americans died in the melee.



Sgt. Mārtiņš Dāboliņš and Staff Sgt. Jānis Lakis after receiving medals in 2011.



Carter and Romesha each received the U.S. Medal of Honor for their actions that day. In 2011, Lakis and Dāboliņš were also honored by Gen. Carter Ham, U.S. Army Land Component Commander in Europe, with the Army Commendation Medal with Valor device as well as the Combat Infantryman Badge. Maj. Gen. Thomas Cutler also presented Lakis and Dāboliņš with awards from the State of Michigan recognizing service in the War on Terror.

“One feels the sense of camaraderie among the soldiers,” said Dāboliņš, after receiving his medals. “I am convinced of it by being there – nobody judges you by the flag you belong to.”

OMLT 3

When the American members of OMLT 2 returned home in February 2010, followed by their Latvian brothers in March, they did so having soldiered through one of the most dangerous phases of the War in Afghanistan,

and they bore the scars to prove it. The third and final OMLT would serve in Afghanistan with equal distinction.

Then-Staff Sgt. Steve Kiger was a company mentor who embedded alongside ANA forces to continue the training and sustainment operations of OMLTs 1 and 2.

“We started our train-up in mid October of 2009 and we did a lot of our pre-deployment tasks in Michigan,” said Kiger. “There were 13 of us from Michigan that went on OMLT 3.”

After a training stint at Fort Polk, Louisiana, the team left for Latvia in January of 2010. Half the team stayed at Camp Ādaži and the other half went to Germany before reconvening in Slovenia for the two-week mountain warfare portion of their build-up.

OMLT 3 arrived in Afghanistan on March 10, 2010 and also utilized FOB Bostick as its base



OMLT 3 soldiers of the Michigan National Guard prior to deployment



camp. Similar to the first two OMLTs, the unit was split into teams who were moved forward from there.

“There were four company mentors – Sgt. Wade Trigger, Staff Sgt. Jesus Media, Staff Sgt. Ryan Lange, and myself,” said Kiger. “There was one American with 4-5 Latvians on each team and there were various areas of operations that we worked with.”

Also serving with the team was Sgt. John Post, a veteran of OMLT 1 who would be the only soldier to deploy on multiple OMLT missions.

A key moment during OMLT 3’s rotation involved the provision of security for polling stations during Afghanistan’s parliamentary election on September 18, 2010. Kiger recalls that action was intense and frequent during OMLT 3’s deployment with firefights occurring almost weekly.

“We didn’t lose anybody and the Latvians didn’t lose anybody. There were a few injuries, but there were some really good soldiers and good leadership,” said Kiger. “Would I do it again? Yeah.”

When OMLT 3 returned at the end of 2010, it marked the conclusion of a trying but ultimately gratifying union that in many ways stands as the quintessential initiative of the State Partnership Program.

For Maj. Gen. Thomas Cutler, the OMLT’s realization of the original vision for a Michigan-Latvia deployment was more powerful than he had expected.

“I had the opportunity to go to Afghanistan in 2009 and visit the second OMLT. They were doing great work over there and it made me very proud to see our soldiers serving side-by-side with Latvian soldiers. It was a terrific thing that had been done...here was Latvia, who not-so-



Maj. Gen. Thomas Cutler in Afghanistan with members of OMLT 2.



long-ago had joined NATO, doing operational mentoring.”

Legacy of the OMLTs

As high-level brass from around the U.S. Department of Defense heard of the OMLT’s exploits in Afghanistan, Cutler received a flurry of correspondence that underscored the groundbreaking nature of what the OMLT had accomplished.

“JTAC and JFO capabilities give a country like Latvia the ability to fight way above its weight class... They’ve got real deterrent, real fighting capability.” -Maj. Gen. Gregory Vadnais

From Admiral Michael G. Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

“...the Michigan National Guard State Partnership Program is a valuable tool for strengthening relationships with enduring allies...”

“Your long-term commitment to building relationships based on understanding, trust, and cooperation has contributed significantly to Latvia’s transition from a Soviet-controlled state to a willing member of NATO. Furthermore, the solid bond between peoples you have created through the State Partnership Program will continue to influence the development of Latvia’s military capacity and national will to actively participate in NATO missions.”

From Admiral James G. Stavridis, Commander, U.S. European Command

“I recently had the pleasure of visiting Latvia and observing first-hand the results of Michigan’s efforts to build partnership capacity in that country.”

“Clearly...the efforts of Michigan’s National

Guard troops have helped Latvia emerge from the rubble of the Cold War and integrate successfully into the Euro-Atlantic community as a free, stable, and prosperous nation.”

The legacy of the OMLTs would soon live on in the training programs and educational institutions of both the Latvian army and the Michigan National Guard. Maj. Juris Višņakovs remembered that the point was never lost on new cadets that the OMLTs had to deploy and operate in austere environments with only the minimum of training.

“Later, I was assigned as instructor at the National Defense Academy, and I was sharing my experience and lessons learned to upcoming second lieutenants,” said Višņakovs. “The stories and cases which are analyzed from my experience were very interesting for cadets, and I believe they took this preparation seriously due to the fact that, as in my case, you could find yourself in the middle of the fight in just a few years.”

Another of the OMLTs major lessons was that the integration of Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) was a make-or-break capability for a small, independently-operating ground force. Veterans of the OMLTs spoke with high praise of the Latvian aptitude for this skillset.

“The two Latvian JTACs we had were completely trained by the Michigan National Guard,” said Maj. David Huber. “They did it excellently, and without them some of our bad days would have been a lot worse than what they were.”

Joint Fire Observer Training

Because of their success with the OMLTs, heavy emphasis remained on growing Latvia’s JTAC program, while the cultivation of a new capability for Joint Fires Observers (JFOs) began. A Joint Fires Observer is a trained service member who can request, adjust, and control surface-





First Latvian JFO Course

to-surface fires, provide targeting information in support of close air support terminal attack controls, and perform autonomous terminal guidance operations.

“JFOs are the indirect fire Army, so you can think of them as a mini-JTAC, or a great place to grow JTAC capability,” said Col. Andrew Roberts. “We wanted to develop that capability in Latvia, just as we had developed the JTAC piece.”

The first JFO course in Latvia graduated in 2013. Two other Latvian JFO courses have graduated since. While the failure rate at the U.S. JFO course at Fort Sill, Oklahoma stands at roughly 25%, remarkably, all three Latvian courses have graduated with a 100% pass rate. This stunning success sets Latvia in a world-class category for JTAC and JFO capability.

“Of the eight JFO courses that have ever graduated 100% of their students, three of them

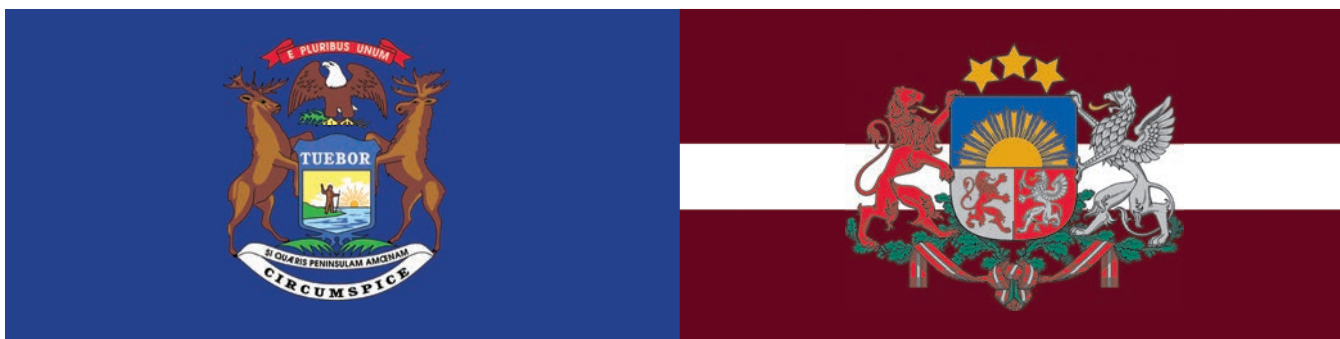
were 100% Latvian,” said Roberts. “In Latvia, you may be a Russian speaker at home, a Latvian speaker at work, and now, in a highly-technical environment, having to speak English to graduate that course. When you see that level of effort, it can’t help but instill in you some motivation to do better yourself and to do everything in your power to assist these individuals to be as good as they can possibly be.”

Today, both the JTAC and JFO programs in Latvia continue to expand. Latvia is one of only eight countries outside the U.S. with a JTAC training program that is certified to NATO standards.

“JTAC and JFO capabilities give a country like Latvia the ability to fight way above its weight class,” said Maj. Gen. Gregory Vadnais. And you know, I brag about Latvia’s JTACs all the time. They’ve got real deterrent, real fighting capability.”



CHAPTER EIGHT



Sustaining the Partnership: Recent Engagements of the SPP

*A*t the close of the 2010's, it was impossible not to take stock of the State Partnership Program with a sense of wonder. Just over fifteen years of collaboration between Michigan and Latvia had produced fruits unimaginable in 1993. Now a contributing NATO member state, Latvia was making tangible contributions to the development of military structures and democratic institutions in other parts of the world.

One way Latvia could continue to invest in NATO, while simultaneously ensuring its defense through the accommodation of NATO forces, was to develop airfield infrastructure at an abandoned Russian airfield near the town of Lielvārde. Patrols in the airspace of Latvia and other Baltic States were one of the first practical and visible factors that increased Latvian security after its admission to NATO. Air patrol operations also served as direct evidence for willingness of other NATO member states to provide their support to Latvia because countries apply for the operation on voluntary basis.



Maj. Gen. (ret.) Thomas Cutler and a Latvian partner at Lielvārde airfield

“On my last visit in 2009, we were at Lielvārde airfield and we began to talk about a great place for European JTAC training, a great place for Air Force-type operations out there,” said Cutler. “The Russians had left behind the facility and it was pretty rough, but I was up in the control tower looking at that and envisioning opportunities for the future.”



Lielvārde Air Base

As the profile of Lielvārde Air Base began to increase, so with it increased the State Partnership Program’s emphasis on air operations. When Maj. Gen. Gregory Vadnais succeeded Maj. Gen. Thomas Cutler as Michigan Adjutant General in 2011, he knew that having the right people in Latvia to direct this expanded air initiative would be paramount.

“I have learned in the last seven years the complexity of actually getting an airfield that is operational, that is functional, that is to U.S. and NATO standards so that we could utilize it,” said Vadnais. “The last three bilateral affairs officers that I’ve had in the country have been Air National Guard officers – their focus has been getting Lielvārde airfield operational.”

Fresh from his work with the Latvian JTAC

program, Col. Andrew Roberts was Vadnais’s first choice for the job.

“I came to the change of command ceremony [between Maj. Gen. Cutler and Maj. Gen. Vadnais]; I’d never met Maj. Gen. Vadnais before in my life,” said Roberts. “The change of command was done, things had loosened up a little bit, and General Vadnais walks up to me and thumps me right in the chest. He said, ‘Is there any reason you can’t move to Latvia?’ I said, ‘No, sir.’ He said, ‘You’re the BAO,’ and walked away. That was the job interview.”

Since then, the progress seen at Lielvārde makes the facility almost unrecognizable from its former self. Besides infrastructure improvement, heavy emphasis has been placed on the development of training programs in the airfield management, fire department, security forces, and medical specialties.



Joint Emergency responders worked together in a series of Emergency Response exercises at Lielvarde Air Base, Latvia, Nov. 16, 2017. Included in the exercise were Airman from the Michigan Air National Guard, Army Reserve personnel from the 407th Civil Affairs Battalion, counterparts from the Latvian Air Force, and Latvian State Fire Department (City of Ogre)





Joint Emergency responders worked together in a series of Emergency Response exercises at Lielvarde Air Base, Latvia, Nov. 16, 2017. Included in the exercise were airman from the Michigan Air National Guard, Army Reserve personnel from the 407th Civil Affairs Battalion, counterparts from the Latvian Air Force, and Latvian State Fire Department (City of Ogre)

“They had the one old hanger on the side, they had a cement-plate runway, and a brand-new operations center when I first showed up there,” said Roberts. “So everything – the ramp, the new hanger, the munitions, the dormitories, all that – 10 years ago it was literally a wooded swamp where all that is.”

Similar to the initial SPP engagements with the Zemessardze in the early 1990s, the steady National Guard model proved to be the perfect fit when developing the new skillsets of Latvian airmen.

“Our airmen can pull their counterparts under our wings – literally and figuratively – and give them that 2-4 year engagement,” said Roberts. “We’re working on getting some of them their supervisor skillsets – how to run a schedule, how to set up a training plan. All those things take time. That’s where Lielvārde and the SPP have really come together: the relationships and long-term engagement.”

The fire department at Lielvārde Air Base is a prime example of this type of long-term mentoring at work. When Michigan Air National Guard firefighters began collaborating with their Latvian counterparts at Lielvārde in 2013, it was clear that it would require a steep climb to establish an effective training plan and continuity of operations. Just four years later, in 2017, nine Latvian fire fighters were undergoing a program of certifications at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center in Michigan when an A-10 Thunderbolt II from Selfridge Air National Guard Base had to make a forced landing after its gun exploded during operations at Grayling Air-to-Ground Range. The pilot, Capt. Brett DeVries, briefly considered ejecting from the aircraft but was ultimately able to land the A-10, maintaining partial control of the aircraft. When a fire broke out on the airframe, Latvian Cpl. Jānis Borosvskis was in the first on-scene vehicle.

“You think about going from zero firefighters,”





An MQ-1B Predator from the 147th Reconnaissance Wing, Texas Air National Guard, based at Ellington Field Joint Reserve Base in Houston, is parked at Lielvārde Air Base, Latvia, Aug. 31, 2015. Wing members mobilized with other members of the wing to the Baltic nation where they deployed an entire MQ-1B Predator package, launching and recovering the first large-scale remotely piloted aircraft in Latvia

said Roberts, commander of Alpena CRTC at the time. “Then, you fast-forward four years and in Crash 1, on the hose, is a trained Latvian firefighter putting out a fire on one of our A-10s. That’s the cool stuff. That’s real.”



Senior Master Sgt. Jeremy Wohlford, Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center fire chief, greets Cpl. Jānis Borovskis, Latvian Air Force fire chief July 31, 2017.

First-ever Non-combat MQ-1 Deployment

On September 1, 2015, history was made at Lielvārde Air Base with the first ever launching, operating, and recovering of an MQ-1 Predator in European airspace. The successful deployment of this Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) was a feat facilitated by partnership upon partnership: while Michigan Air Guardsman laid the bedrock for the operation, it was an aircraft and support crew from the 147th Reconnaissance Wing, Texas Air National Guard that made the flight. From conception to execution, the process required nearly four years of coordination between the Michigan National Guard, the Latvian Civil Aviation Authority, the Latvian National Armed Forces, Air Navigation Service Provider, and the Riga Area Control Center. Latvian President Raimonds Vējonis witnessed the launch and spoke of its significance to Latvia’s strategic capability.



“It’s important to train for interoperability between NATO partners,” said Vējonis. “It’s a good example of smart defense that we can use the equipment that we don’t currently have.”

The noncombat deployment allowed for country-wide corridors to tie-in to special use airspace to de-conflict civilian and military flights, as well as nationwide utilization of surveillance capabilities to support a broad range of government needs for Latvia. In addition, the operation tested an Air National Guard Wing’s ability to deploy an RPA to a forward location and establish operations.

We’re really seeing the fruit of our labor [at Lielvārde] today,” said Vadnais. “As we build forces in the region to assure and deter in Latvia, the aviation slice in the Baltics is based out of Lielvārde. So I think that speaks volumes to the efforts of the Michigan Air National Guard. The first predator deployment was a powerful statement – something that gets Putin’s attention.”



Members from the 147th Maintenance Group, 147th Reconnaissance Wing, Texas Air National Guard, based at Ellington Field Joint Reserve Base in Houston, assemble a satellite at Lielvārde Air Base, Latvia. The airmen mobilized with other members of the wing to the Baltic nation where they deployed an entire MQ-1B Predator package, launching and recovering the first large-scale remotely piloted aircraft in Latvia.

In recent years, Lielvārde Air Base has also played an increasingly key role in the execution of U.S. European Command’s largest annual readiness event: “Saber Strike.”



Multiple nations stand together for Saber Strike 2015’s opening ceremony, Ādaži Military Base, Latvia. The eight nations participating in the event are Slovakia, Poland, Norway, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Italy, United States and the host country, Latvia.

Exercise Saber Strike

First held in 2011, Saber Strike is a long-standing U.S. Army Europe-led cooperative training exercise that helps facilitate collaboration amongst the U.S., Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and allied and partner nations.

The exercise trains participants on command and control as well as interoperability with regional partners and is comprised of a brigade-level command post exercise and computer assisted exercise, as well as company-level field and situational training exercises. It also features the integration of U.S. close air support with partner nation ground forces and the demonstration of U.S. Expeditionary Medical Support (EMEDS) capability.

This theater security cooperation exercise provides commanders and their staffs practical experience in organizing, controlling and supporting coalition operations and allows the United States, NATO, and participating nations to demonstrate their own unique roles in contributing to regional and global stability by strengthening international military partnerships, enhancing multinational interoperability and preparing participants for worldwide contingency operations.





A Michigan Air National Guard KC-135 Stratotanker taxis on a runway after landing on Riga International Airport, Latvia, for exercise Saber Strike. Two KC-135s flying out of Selfridge Air National Guard Base, Mich., landed at the airport carrying approximately 50 Airmen to participate in Saber Strike 2017.

In 2012, the air component of exercise Saber Strike increased significantly, with A-10 Thunderbolt II aircraft utilizing the gunnery range at Camp Ādaži, Latvia, to simulate supporting a movement of friendly ground troops in the region. American KC-135 Stratotankers were also in the region, providing air-to-air refueling support to the A-10s. Both types of aircraft were flown by the Michigan Air National Guard and were based at Amari Air Base in Estonia. The exercise represented the first time that fighter aircraft from the U.S. had operated from that country.

In the years since its inception, the host nation responsibilities for Saber Strike have rotated among Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, giving each iteration of the exercise a unique flavor. Recently, the presence of high-profile distinguished visitors at Sabre Strike has helped to secure its place as the U.S. European Command's premier annual exercise.

"Saber Strike is a very important exercise in that we get to work together, we get to make sure

our forces are interoperable," said Gen. Joseph Lengyel, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, who attended the exercise in 2017. "We get to become familiar with the environment in Europe, so that together we can work for the common defense of our partner nations here. I think Saber Strike is an exercise that's gotten better every single year and particularly in the National Guard, the total force is lucky to have it."

Gary Peters, one of Michigan's U.S. Senators, was also on the ground at Saber Strike in 2017. His visit, which reinforced the civic relationship between Michigan and Latvia, provided an opportunity to witness the fruits of the State Partnership Program first-hand.

"During my visit to Latvia and Lithuania, I heard firsthand from officials in these border countries about the threats they face from Russia on a daily basis," said Peters. "I am extremely proud that Michigan's National Guardsmen are such a critical part of the United States and NATO defenses, and I was honored to personally thank them for their service."



Michigan Shadow Platoon Flight at Opening of Saber Strike (reprinted from Army.mil)

The Michigan National Guard Shadow UAV platoon participated with Soldiers from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization member nations of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, United States, Great Britain, Finland, Canada, Norway and Denmark in the opening ceremonies for Exercise Saber Strike 14 at Ādaži, Latvia on June 9, 2014.

The ceremony consisted of member nation forces in formation at the Adazi base parade field, flanked by armored personnel carriers. Latvian Ministry of Defense and NATO general officers gave speeches stressing the benefits of joint training and inter-operability of member nations taking part in Exercise Saber Strike 14.

After viewing a pass in review, Latvian Ministry of Defense and North Atlantic Treaty Organization member nation public affairs personnel toured the airfield occupied by by Michigan Army National Guard B Company, Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 37th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Military Intelligence Company (MICO) Shadow Unmanned Aircraft Systems platoon.

The Latvian MOD and NATO PAO representatives were briefed on the capabilities of the RQ-7B Shadow aircraft and UAS platoon by Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jimmy Huck and Capt. Mark Wurth. After the briefings, an RQ-7B Shadow aircraft was launched by the UAS platoon, allowing Latvian MOD and NATO PAO representatives to view, photograph and video record the launch.

“It is exciting to launch our first flight at Ādaži on the opening day of Sabre Strike. Now we have flown the Shadow UAV from three locations in Latvia, the new airfield at Lielvārde, the abandoned airfield at Vainode and the improved gravel surface at Ādaži. The range of conditions we have operated from demonstrates the capabilities of the Shadow UAV system,” said Capt. Mark Wurth.

Estonian Army PAO Maj. Vlo Isberg said, “It was fascinating to see the Shadow aircraft get launched for the first time from this airstrip in Ādaži. The UAS briefers informed us how the aircraft is used for reconnaissance and its operational capabilities. This aircraft will enhance inter-NATO cooperation and coordination during Exercise Saber Strike 14 because it will relay imagery to all commanders of NATO ground units.”



An RQ-7B Shadow unmanned aircraft launched by Michigan Army National Guard B Company, Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 37th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Military Intelligence Company (MICO) Shadow Unmanned Aircraft Systems platoon lands after performing a mission during Exercise Saber Strike 14 at Ādaži, Latvia





Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC) from Latvia, Michigan, Illinois, and North Carolina work together to direct air strikes simulations with pinpoint accuracy during Operation Northern Strike at Grayling Air Gunnery Range.

After the launch, the Latvian MOD and NATO PAO representatives departed to visit other units participating in Saber Strike 14 training events.

Saber Strike is a U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)-directed, U.S. European Command (USEUCOM)-scheduled, U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR)-led theater security cooperation exercise that will be conducted at locations throughout the Baltic, including the Riga and the Ādaži training areas in Latvia. The exercise will consist of a host nation-supported command post exercise (CPX), a brigade-level CPX/computer assisted exercise (CAX), and a field training exercise (FTX) with a situational training exercise (STX) component. The exercise will feature the integration of U.S. close support with partner nation ground forces and a demonstration of air deployment of forces and equipment. Saber Strike 14 will be conducted June 9-20, 2014. ■

Exercise Northern Strike

The U.S. reserve component's answer to Saber Strike is exercise Northern Strike, held annually at Camp Grayling and Alpena CRTC in northern Michigan. What originated as an Air National Guard-focused exercise has morphed from its inception in 2012 into the reserve component's premier combined arms, live fire readiness event. As commander of Alpena CRTC in 2012, Col. Bryan Teff delivered the original brief to the Adjutant General in June of that year, proposing the exercise. The inaugural Northern Strike was executed just two months later.

"I had this idea since about 2001 because of the premier airspace and facilities in Northern Michigan, which is actually the largest airspace east of the Mississippi river," said Teff. "We built the exercise around our JTAC training on the ground with fighters, tankers, and airlift."

With JTAC capability at the forefront of



exercise Northern Strike, it was a natural fit for Latvia to showcase their capabilities.

“Latvia got in on the ground floor with Northern Strike,” said Teff. “They’ve continued to be a habitual partner, extending their reach as the exercise has grown.”



Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is briefed on close air support techniques by a combined Michigan National Guard and Latvian Armed Forces Joint Terminal Attack Controller team at the Camp Grayling Air Gunnery Range, Mich., on Aug 11, 2013 during Operation Northern Strike

In 2017, well over 5,000 service members from 11 U.S. states and five coalition countries convened for Northern Strike during the first two weeks of August. The exercise demonstrates the Michigan National Guard’s ability to provide accessible, readiness-building opportunities for military units from all service branches and many partner nations to achieve and sustain proficiency in conducting mission command, air, sea, and ground maneuver integration, together with the synchronization of fires in a joint, multinational, decisive action environment.

The opportunity for combined training with countries other than the U.S. also resonated with Latvian leadership.

“For collective training, it’s very important for us to participate at Northern Strike,” said Lt. Gen. Raimonds Graube. “It’s not just friendship, it’s good for morale and good for cultural understanding, also.”

Cyber

Latvia has also proven its edge in the development of cyber capability. Embedded specifically within the Zemessardze, Latvia has recruited the finest cyber talent from its civilian sector to perform functions as part of the reserve component. The collaboration between Latvian cyber specialists and their Michigan counterparts is showcased each year at exercise Baltic Ghost, hosted by U.S. European Command with the assistance of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence. Held at Stuttgart, Germany, Baltic Ghost also features participation from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and their National Guard State Partners Maryland, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

Baltic Ghost is made up of a series of cyber defense workshops designed to build, sustain, and/or enhance cyber partnerships between EUCOM, the Baltic States, and their respective State Partners. The primary objective of Baltic Ghost is to test cooperation between the three Baltic States and the United States in the event of an escalating cyber incident, the solution of which requires internationally coordinated joint action.

With cyber a growing capability for the Michigan National Guard as well, the countries have forged this new frontier together.

“For collective training, it’s very important for us to participate at Northern Strike. It’s not just friendship, it’s good for morale and for cultural understanding as well.

– Lt. Gen. Raimonds Graube





Coalition partnership nation members assigned to the 'red team' conduct vulnerability assessments on the exercise Combined Endeavor network. The United States, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Bulgaria made up the 10-member team tasked with searching out critical network vulnerabilities and providing assessments on 22 country networks. Combined Endeavor, a U.S. European Command-sponsored exercise, enhances joint and multinational C4 interoperability solutions for use in coalition operations and promoting Coalition Information Dominance.

Michigan National Guard participates in North American International Cyber Summit

Lansing, Mich. – Members of the Michigan Army and Air National Guard took part in the third annual North American International Cyber Conference held yesterday at Cobo Hall in Detroit, Mich.

Maj. Gen. Gregory Vadnais, director of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and Adjutant General for the Michigan Guard contributed to opening the event by addressing the audience from Riga, Latvia, via Skype alongside the Latvian Chief of Defense, Lt. Gen. Raimonds Graube.

“Cyber security is an international issue,” said Vadnais. “Working together with our partners in Latvia allows us to learn from each other and be prepared for an attack from state actors.”

“We will stand shoulder to shoulder with our allies to defend against cyber attacks,” Graube concurred with Vadnais.



Following the introductions, a panel discussion was convened for the audience. Among the panel members were Lt. Gen. Edward Cardon, commander of U.S. Army Cyber Command and David Devries, the acting principal deputy chief information officer for the Department of Defense. Cardon highlighted the importance of Michigan's cyber warriors.

"The National Guard and Reserves have a tremendous role in cyber defense," said Cardon. "Michigan is a fore runner in those efforts." Devries, a native of west Michigan, was also impressed with the skills of the National Guard. "We are coming to grips with the idea that the National Guard members are dealing with state issues one day and national issues the next," said Devries.

Governor Rick Snyder also addressed the audience during the conference, using the opportunity to restate his support for Michigan's Cyber Civilian Corps, a cyber-incident rapid-response team comprised of state government, National Guard and other public and private partners.

"The Civilian Cyber Corps is modeled like the National Guard," said Snyder. "Citizens who could be called up to defend their country," Snyder continued. "This has worked for the National Guard for 378 years and it can work for us."

The conference provided an opportunity to showcase a cyber competition with two Michigan Cyber Civilian Corps (MiC3) teams from Cobo Center as well as teams from the Michigan National Guard in Battle Creek, the California National Guard, and the Latvian National Guard Cyber Division. Teams competed for control of an online city called "Alphaville." Dr. Joe Adams, vice president of research and cyber security at Merit and the director of the Michigan Cyber Range explained the benefits of the contained network.

"The fictitious online city of Alphaville allows players to try all kinds of hacking and defending techniques without impacting the actual internet or putting actual systems at risk," said Adams.

The cyber conference is sponsored by Governor Rick Snyder and provides an opportunity for ideas to be exchanged across public and private cyber defense sectors. ■

10th Anniversary of NATO – From the Latvian Military Periodical *Tēvijas Sargs*

In 2014, celebrating 10th anniversary of Latvia joining NATO, then-Minister of Defense Raimonds Vējonis announced during the ceremonial event at the Freedom Monument that membership in NATO is the most significant foreign policy achievement in the history of restored Latvian state.

"Achievement of this goal was not simple. The Russian army was still in Latvia at the time when a decision to join NATO was taken. Apart from this, there were countries that doubted Latvia's accession to the alliance. Today, many people have forgotten the major foreign policy challenge at that time," Vējonis said.

In his speech, Vējonis also expressed gratitude to the Latvian allies who 10 years ago were ready to accept its membership in NATO and to share



their security in favor of security in Latvia.

The Minister emphasized that Latvia is part of the most powerful collective security system that has ever existed in the world. “Actual power of NATO lies in the fact that no one in the world has dared to test whether Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is actually working and how efficient it is. We have a reason to feel safe,” emphasized Vējonis.

At the same time, the Minister reminded that safety is not free, it requires a price. Vējonis urged to honor the memory of soldiers who gave their lives in the operations of NATO and the allies.

The Minister also admitted that no alliance, no friend or ally, would be ready to replace our own will and desire to fight for an independent Latvia. “When the Latvian Army defeated the Bermont army in Riga on 11 November 1919, an allied army with English and French warships provided an invaluable contribution. However, this support would not have given anything if the Latvian nation had no will to fight for the country. Latvia is as strong as the will of its inhabitants to protect Latvia,” Vējonis concluded.

“I wish that these 10 years being part of NATO serve as a good beginning for a safe, prosperous and flourishing Latvia.”

—President Andris Bērziņš

The decision on membership in the world’s most powerful military alliance was correct, because at the moment, Latvia is safer than it has ever been, President Andris Bērziņš accented in his speech.

“The recent events in the Ukraine and the reaction of the NATO Allies followed by these events prove that we can be sure about the enforcement of Article 5 of the North Atlantic



Former President of Latvia Andris Bērziņš (2011-2015)

Treaty in full extent,” the President pointed out.

Bērziņš admitted that during this international crisis, when the borders of Europe are changed, it is crucially important not only to involve greater resources in the protection of Latvia, but also to take actual measures to primarily strengthen protection and cooperation of the Baltic States, as well as security of the entire region within the scope of NATO. Poland and the Nordic countries are definitely important partners in this matter.

Purposefully, step by step, the Saeima and the Government must achieve investment of the promised two per cent from the gross domestic product in the field of defense of Latvia. “The latter has been enshrined in the law, safety and defense experts agree with this, it is required by logic and common sense. It is time to put this into practice,” the President stressed.



“I wish that these 10 years being part of NATO serve as a good beginning for a safe, prosperous and flourishing Latvia,” the President accented.

Taking the Partnership to Africa

One very clear sign of the maturation of Latvia’s National Armed Forces came in 2013 and 2014, when Latvian officers participated in a State Partnership Program engagement in the African nation of Liberia. Michigan had formed a second relationship under the State Partnership Program with Liberia in 2009, and with Latvia’s increasing emphasis on going outside its own borders to develop and assist other militaries, it

made for a perfect collaboration. Courses were offered by the Michigan-Latvia delegation for Liberia’s NCO corps. Maj. Juris Višņakovs, who saw action in Afghanistan with OMLT 2, was one of the Latvian participants.

“Two officers from the Latvian army and two officers from Michigan were deployed to Monrovia, capital of Liberia, and we organized some developments and short-term courses,” said Višņakovs. “It was done twice, and both times I was a part of this team.”

The biggest challenge of the collaboration, according to Višņakovs, was the fact that the



Michigan National Guardsman Master Sgt. Santos Feliciano and Latvian National Armed Force 1st Sgt. Mārtiņš Kupčs pose with workers from a rubber plantation in Liberia, Jan. 16, 2013. Michigan and Latvia are partners in the Department of State and DoD State Partnership Program and Liberia is Michigan’s newest partner. The soldiers were there to assist with noncommissioned military officer development and other core military discipline and civil defense initiatives. While driving from one site to another, the soldiers spotted the workers and pulled their vehicle over to talk to them. Establishing relationships with the local community is a key factor in assisting partner countries, especially a country such as Liberia, that is recovering from years of civil war.



participants from Latvia and Michigan had to work remotely to develop their training plans in advance, meeting just once before they headed into the classroom to begin their training.

This partnership engagement in Liberia, along with other operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Mali, is a perfect example of how Latvia is now giving back – a gratifying progression for those who were present in the early 1990s as Latvia’s fledgling military began its rise.

“Back then, Latvia was asking for help. Now, it is the NATO force that has to help other countries,” said Guntis Ulmanis. “I feel that the Latvian military forces in the Middle East and Africa are at a level where they’re not just taking, but giving.”

Current Army Initiatives

Recent engagements under the SPP are not limited to airfield development at Lielvārde Air Base. Collaboration continues on the Army side of the relationship, with new lines of effort emerging in several areas.

One of these areas of emphasis is the Zemessardze, with whom the Michigan National Guard continues to collaborate on developing core combat skills. Recent events under the Core Combat Skills Development (CCSD) line of activity include engagements on combat medical care and movement, combat engineering topics such as counter-mobility, mobility, and survivability skills, combat signals skillsets, and infantry tactical knowledge. Other lines of activity include focused development of the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) and Battle Staff Management, combat engineering skills to include an annual Sapper Camp, continued development of Joint Fires Observer (JFO), and an emerging Indirect Fires capability effort.

“On the medical side, we’re talking about clearing airways, how to stop bleeding, how do to combat carries, how to apply different dressings,



Zemessardzes 3rd Brigade soldiers participate in combat care drills under simulated conditions.

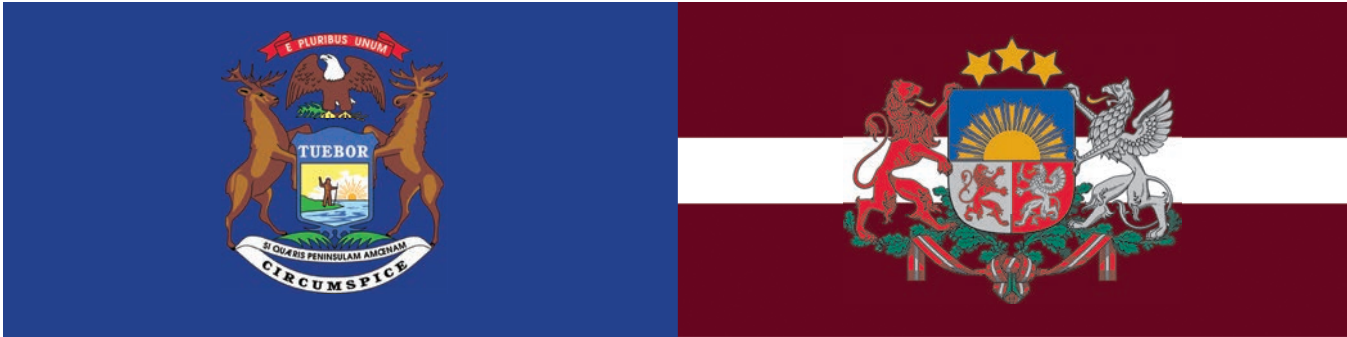
how to get them up to a casualty collection point,” said Lt. Col. Dustin Budd, the current Bilateral Affairs Officer in Riga. “You will continue to see combat engineer engagements focused on counter-mobility and survivability, combat signals development that seeks to build the capability to effectively communicate on the battlefield and improve resilience of communications networks at the tactical level, we’re also pursuing engagements partnering Latvian and Michigan Army combat maneuver elements across the organizational training spectrum.”

While sustainment of the long-term Zemessardze development objectives will remain a focal point for SPP engagements, recent and future weapons systems procurements will evolve the lines of activity developed and executed with the Latvian National Armed Forces. Recently, the acquisition of the M109 artillery system by the Latvian National Armed Forces has initiated a new partnership activity intended to assist with the development of an indirect fires capability and the integration of fires.

“This is more a procurement and artillery branch development project,” said Budd. “As well as linking the M109 artillery into the existing joint fires piece.”



CHAPTER NINE



The Key to Success – Relationships

American President Theodore Roosevelt said that the single most important ingredient in the formula of success is “knowing how to get along with people.” While it’s no secret that relationships have been crucial to the development of the State Partnership Program, these ties have transcended professional military relationships, becoming a conduit for long-term cultural, civic, and personal understanding. They form a bedrock of continuity for the partnership, weathering challenges of all kinds – from international security crises to routine administration transitions.

This dynamic is something that even the early founders of the SPP did not predict.

“Life consists of positive and negative surprises; the relationships were a positive surprise,” said former Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis, whose close friendship with Maj. Gen. (ret.) E. Gordon Stump served as a model for the SPP’s blending of cultural and professional exchange.

“Maybe Stump was a big Latvian patriot,” said Ulmanis. “And maybe we were just two old soldiers. But the differences were very few. We never had a problem getting along.”

From F-16s to Wild Boars

The adventures shared by Ulmanis and Stump during their mutual visits to Latvia and Michigan have become the stuff of legend among National Guard circles in both countries. One of Ulmanis’s fondest memories of Michigan is a special flight he took in an F-16 fighter at Selfridge Air National Guard Base in the mid-1990s. The former President recalls the story with a nostalgic smile, even twenty-plus years after his flight:



Two F-16s from the 107th FS, Selfridge, Air National Guard Base, fly over the community just south of Detroit.



“The biggest event for me was going up in the F-16. That was very, very difficult. To get in the air took 12 seconds. I was sitting there, eyes closed, and suddenly we were in the sky.

“We were 12 kilometers in the sky, over the Great Lakes, and at one moment the pilot says, ‘watch what will happen now.’ He threw the plane down quickly to just a few kilometers above the waves. We completed all the figures up in the air, including a ‘death-spiral.’ Very difficult!

“Five minutes before it was over, I realized I was disengaged. I told the pilot, ‘I think it’s time to be done.’ He said, ‘no, you need to hold on five more minutes.’ I don’t know how I was able to manage. As soon as I was on the ground I was absolutely out, unable to speak. But up the steps comes Stump and he had a flask of cognac in his pocket. He said, ‘Guntis, drink this immediately. You are a president and you need to shine like a candle!’ Down below, there were generals, U.S. military officials, and members of the press. So I took the glass and drank it. I felt so good.

“Stump said, ‘You can’t tell anyone about this,’

but after 20 years, I think the story can probably be told!”

Stump adds that Ulmanis’s F-16 ride wasn’t the only memorable event of the day.

“That night we went out to dinner and then went in a boat on the Detroit River, followed by the Coast Guard. Except they couldn’t keep up because our boat was much faster.”

Ulmanis’s ride on a Michigan Air National Guard F-16 was certainly an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime experience, but he pointed out that it also helped him while building a rapport with other world leaders, who may have been a bit jealous of the experience.

“I also tried out a lot of tanks, vehicles, and helicopters. The point is that I got to contact a lot of people and it helped me as president,” he said. “President Clinton later asked me how it felt to fly in the F-16. He said, ‘the President of America is an important person and can’t take that risk – I guess the Latvian president is a little braver.’”



President Clinton with (left) Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis, and (right) Estonian President Lennart Meri, and Lithuanian President Algirdas-Brazauskas



When hosting Stump in Latvia, Ulmanis made sure to return the favor by setting up a grandiose midnight boar hunt, complete with a furnished lodge and guides.

“Now, I’m not a hunter, but I couldn’t turn him down,” said Stump. “We had a little vodka before we went to zero our guns so the boar would have a better chance of surviving.”

Because of Latvia’s latitude position, in mid-summer, sunlight often lingers until the early morning hours. When the hunt began at midnight, darkness was still hours away.

“I had another Latvian with me who was a real hunter and Ulmanis went a different way,” said Stump. “Out at the blind, we saw a huge boar and three little ones. So I shot, but I only got the

little one.”

Later, Ulmanis gave a speech at the United Nations and coordinated for Stump to meet him in New York after the event. There, he produced a special gift for his friend from Michigan.

“He had this huge boar’s head for me, and he said, ‘Look what you shot,’” said Stump. “I said, ‘Guntis, I didn’t shoot that.’ And he said, ‘I know, but you can tell everyone you did!’ Well, my wife took one look at the boar’s head and said, ‘don’t you bring that home.’ So today it hangs over the fireplace at the Camp Grayling officer’s club.”

Of the hunt, Ulmanis had only one thing to say: “Boar hunting is much more complicated than flying an F-16!”



(From left) Gov. John Engler, Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis, and Maj. Gen. (ret.) E. Gordon Stump at Mackinac Island





Maj. Gen. Gregory J. Vadnais, Adjutant General and Director of Military and Veterans Affairs for the Michigan National Guard, and Lt. Gen. Raimonds Graube, Latvian Chief of Defense, discuss the capabilities of the M777A1 howitzer with Capt. Richard Sands, battery commander assigned Alpha Battery, 1st Battalion, 119th Field Artillery Regiment

Strategic Value Added

Of course, when dealing with bilateral security agreements, relationships take on a far greater significance than serving as a conduit for good storytelling.

That significance especially comes to bear during crisis situations. Nowhere is this clearer than in the relationship between Maj. Gen. Gregory Vadnais, Michigan's Adjutant General, and Lt. Gen. (ret.) Raimonds Graube, Latvia's Chief of Defense from 2010 to 2017.

"I met General Graube when the Latvians were making their first visits in the early 90s; I think he was a Major and I was a Lieutenant Colonel at the time," said Vadnais. "So we certainly go back a long way. He's a great friend and soldier who loves his country and has done a lot to enhance the readiness of the Latvian armed forces."

"... Lt. Gen. Graube paid us one of the best compliments, he said, 'if we ever really need something, we don't call Washington. We call Michigan.' You cannot surge relationships – you forge those over time, based on trust and working together." –Maj. Gen. Gregory J. Vadnais

Graube recalls that in March 2014, the Russian invasion of Crimea drove security tensions in Eastern Europe to a fever pitch. Vadnais was a welcome voice of reassurance during that time of grave concern.



“I got a phone call from General Vadnais and he said, ‘I can come next week. What assistance do you need?’ A couple of weeks later, a Michigan National Guard unit that operated light drones [B company, Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 37th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Military Intelligence Company Shadow Unmanned Aircraft Systems platoon] came to Latvia. It was one of the fastest decisions and logistical movements I’ve ever seen. We had immediately on our soil, real Michigan assistance. And they were stationed at Lielvārde Air Base all summer.”

For Vadnais, this episode underscored the fact that the time and effort invested in relationships cannot be taken for granted in the event of a security crisis.

“After that, Lt. Gen. Graube paid us one of the best compliments,” said Vadnais. “He said, ‘if we ever really need something, we don’t call Washington. We call Michigan.’ You cannot surge relationships – you forge those over time, based on trust and working together.”

In fact, the way long-term associations like these have proven their worth during diplomatic flash points has been one of the best arguments for continuing the State Partnership Program. In the mid-2000s, as stability seemed to be prevailing throughout the Baltic region, the idea of consolidating the program to assign a single Bilateral Affairs Officer for the region was seriously discussed at higher command echelons. When Russia invaded Georgia in 2007, that changed, and the SPP’s stabilizing presence in the region was duly noted.

“The small amount of money the SPP costs, the great relationships, the future benefit of all that – it led people at the higher command levels to say, ‘Yeah, I think they’re right [we need to keep investing in this program],’ said Maj. Gen. (ret.) Thomas Cutler. “Periodically, the discussion of whether to continue the SPP may come up again, but history will tell us that these

partnerships don’t cost very much and they have a great deal of benefit for both Latvia and for the United States.”

Blood Brothers – And Sisters

For any two people that have experienced the trauma of combat together, the bonds are almost universally said to be tighter than blood relation. This is certainly true among veterans of the SPP’s Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTs), some of whom meet every August in Latvia for a reunion. Years removed from those deployments, old relationships also continue to be rekindled as veterans remain involved with ongoing SPP projects.

“When I look at the Michigan National Guardsmen that have gone to Latvia, I see what they are able to draw out of the relationship, what training pieces they’re able to pick up from it, and I see their capabilities increasing as well. But the part that really motivates is when you also see the excellence and level of effort of our Latvian counterparts.” –Col. Andrew Roberts

“In 2013, I was the first guy to carry U.S. colors in the Latvian Independence Day parade, which was pretty awesome,” said 1st Sgt. Shawn Menard. “When we got back to the hotel, we walked through the doors, and probably three quarters of the enlisted guys from OMLT 1 were in that lobby waiting for me. Every time I go over there those boys track me down.”

Staff Sgt. T.J. Pierce, who retired from the Michigan National Guard in 2014, raised money



through a GoFundMe campaign to bring his Latvian teammates to Michigan for a week-long vacation in the summer of 2016.

“We were able to bring 1st Lt. Pēteris Plečkens, Sgt. Mārtiņš ‘Squirrel’ Dāboliņš and Staff Sgt. Jānis Laķis over here and take them throughout Michigan,” said Pierce. “We went to the Pictured Rocks in the Upper Peninsula, did a Tigers baseball game in Detroit, and also visited Grand Rapids.”



Staff Sgt. (ret) T.J. Pierce, 1st Lt. Pēteris Plečkens, Sgt. Mārtiņš ‘Squirrel’ Dāboliņš and Staff Sgt. Jānis Laķis at a Detroit Tigers baseball game in Detroit, Mich.

This bond is certainly reciprocated by Pierce’s Latvian colleagues: “Our long cooperation with Michigan already brought us to the place where we are brothers in arms,” said Lt. Col. Girts Savins. “The relationships are not just at the country level. It’s also between people at the private level.”

Mutual Benefit

Just as the relationship aspect of the partnership came as a welcome surprise to officials in Latvia and Michigan at the beginning of the cooperation, leaders – especially those from Michigan – are quick to point out that the mutual benefit of the SPP far exceeds any prediction that could have been made in 1993.

“When I look at the Michigan National Guardsmen that have gone to Latvia, I see what they are able to draw out of the relationship, what training pieces they’re able to pick up from it, and I see their capabilities increasing as well,” said Col. Andrew Roberts. “But the part that really motivates is when you also see the excellence and level of effort of our Latvian counterparts.”

Roberts includes the ability to operate in a foreign environment, to problem-solve new challenges – at times having to overcome the obstacles of language and cultural barriers – as key areas where there is always new ground to be broken.

The tools to seize those opportunities are offered through relationships.

“When you’re working cross-culturally, there are different verbal cues, different emotional cues, and a different history,” said Roberts. “The only way to overcome that is to sit across a table and break bread, have a drink, work on some common goals and to see those successes together – and then understand what you did for it and what I did for it.”

“That is what the State Partnership Program was about at the beginning – and still is today.”



CHAPTER TEN



The Future of the Partnership

Today, the security environment in the Baltic Region is more similar to tensions experienced during and immediately following the Cold War than the tranquil years of the late 1990s. Recently, recruiting efforts for Latvia's National Guard have surged and Latvia's defense budget has risen to 2% of its GDP, highlighting the country's current posture against any threat.

"Today we're big optimists about our military potential," said former President Guntis Ulmanis. "I think in these days, a soldier has become a central figure in today's society."

A Reflection: Create, Develop, Sustain

Since the State Partnership Program's inception, Latvia's military has developed from the tenuous moments of the 1990s, to NATO acceptance, to actually mentoring and building other militaries as advisors – all in the span of a single generation. When reflecting on these developments, Lt. Gen. (ret.) Raimonds Graube uses a three-phased approach to take stock of their significance.

"The first phase was formalization: we visited each other and saw the decision making



(From left) Maj. Gen. Gregory Vadnais, Adjutant General of the Michigan National Guard, Maj. Gen. Leonard Isabelle, Michigan Air National Guard Commander, and Brig. Gen. Ronald Wilson, Director of the Joint Staff participate in Latvia's 99th Annual Independence Day Celebration, Nov. 18, 2017





A special challenge coin has been designed to represent the unity of purpose between the Michigan National Guard and the Latvian National Armed Forces. Lt. Gen. Raimonds Graube and Maj. Gen. Gregory Vadnais explain the coin's significance to Gen. Joseph Lengyel, Chief of the National Guard Bureau at exercise Northern Strike 16

procedures,” said Graube. “The second phase was more on the joint level; Michigan crossed the border from helping only the National Guard and began to help the regular forces, the land forces brigade, and air force. And then the third level was military capability.”

By capability, Graube refers to niche programs developed through SPP collaboration, like JTACs, JFOs, engineers, cyber, and specialties at Lielvārde Air Base.

“You could call it create, develop and sustain. These are the most important words to describe our relationship with Michigan compared with other allies,” said Graube. “But Michigan has been there for the full set, from the very beginning. This is very unique.”

While the history of the partnership is full of rich achievements, collaborations, and relationships, the question remains – where does the partnership go from here?

Maj. Gen. (ret.) Thomas Cutler believes that the best roadmap for the partnership’s future is history itself: “We’ve deployed together, we’ve trained together, and Latvia is now involved in extending that kind of partnership spirit in Africa,” said Cutler. “We don’t really know where the partnership will be in the next twenty-five years. But we know the past, and we understand the history and the wisdom that was involved in growing the partnership.”

Of course, it is easy to take stock of the successes of the past, lingering fondly on long-ago accomplishments. Ulmanis suggests that a balance is necessary to avoid the temptation offered by this type of self-congratulation.

“The Michigan-Latvia relationship is not the past; it is the present and the future,” said Ulmanis. “Defense is one area that you can’t sleep for even a moment. The basic structure is sound, but every day you need to ask the question, ‘what else?’”



Northern Strike a Showcase for Michigan's Military Partnership with Latvia (Michigan Air National Guard Press Release, August 2017)

With approximately 5,000 participants, Exercise Northern Strike will mark the U.S. military's largest reserve component exercise of the year. The exercise, which sprawls across northern Michigan from July 29 – Aug. 11, will feature events at Michigan National Guard facilities including Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Camp Grayling, Grayling Air-to-Ground Range, the Calcite Quarry in Rogers City, and the former K.I. Sawyer Air Force Base in the Upper Peninsula. However, Northern Strike's true hallmark is the opportunity it presents for combined maneuvers with a variety of coalition partners. This year, the United Kingdom, Canada, Poland, Denmark, Lithuania, and Latvia are all represented.

Notably, the Michigan National Guard's partnership with Latvia – a small country in the Baltic region bordering Russia – dates back nearly 25 years to the security vacuum that swept the Baltic states after the Soviet Union's collapse. That's when the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Department of Defense, and the National Guard Bureau responded to a request from formerly occupied nations of the Soviet bloc for security assistance with the establishment of national defense forces and other governmental institutions. A decision to pair the National Guard forces of individual states with these newly independent nations was made and the State Partnership Program was born. When Michigan joined the program, it requested Latvia as its Baltic counterpart, a nation that shares much with the Great Lakes region topographically, including its forest-green landscape and harsh winters.

Chief Master Sgt. Jerome Torres, airfield

manager at Alpena CRTC, has been involved in the State Partnership Program since 2012 and has participated in approximately a dozen bilateral military events in Latvia. He says that the progress made by Latvian armed forces over the past five years in organization and mission capability is remarkable.



More than 70 soldiers from National Armed Forces of Latvia, including JTACs and National Guard soldiers, trained in the international military exercise Northern Strike 17 in Michigan.

“Northern Strike is a big part of that because the exercise gives us a hands-on opportunity to manage large-scale airflow as bilateral partners,” said Torres. “It’s good for both countries.”

“It is very exciting to literally help write doctrine and guidance for a foreign military ally. We’re helping to spread peace, cooperation, and goodwill in two very different parts of the world. That’s the thing I love most about working with the State Partnership Program.”

—Chief Master Sgt. Rob Mills

This week, Torres is working with Maj. Normunds Merces, airfield manager for the





Michigan Honor Guard members participate in Latvia's 99th annual Independence Day parade, November 18, 2017, Riga, Latvia. The honor guard team was comprised of two Air National Guard members, Master Sgt. Luke Wimby, and Tech. Sgt. Matthew Kuhn and two Army National Guard members, Staff Sgt. Kyle Swank, and Sgt. 1st Class Christopher McNally. This was the first year that the Air National Guard Honor Guard has participated.

Latvian Air Force, on air traffic control plans and airfield management policy. They've known each other for about four years, and their rapport makes for an easy collaboration.

"Even though we have two different cultures, we have a very good synch," said Mercs. "I've hardly noticed any challenges in working with our Michigan colleagues."

Lt. Col. Dustin Budd, Michigan's Bilateral Affairs Officer in Latvia, says that these kind of long-term relationships between Latvian and Michigan military personnel are key to the success of the State Partnership Program.

"The State Partnership Program pays dividends beyond what anyone could have originally expected," said Budd. "Exercise Northern Strike is a key event to showcase this partnership because it puts American and Latvian service members side-by-side in realistic incident management scenarios that test the skills, trust, and mutual experience they've built over time."

In many cases, these bonds have evolved from professional contacts to deep personal friendships. Senior Master Sgt. Rob Mills, Security Forces superintendent at Alpena CRTC, says his favorite experience from seven state partnership-affiliated trips came when Mills' Latvian counterpart invited him to a cultural dance recital his daughter was performing in.





Chief of Defence of Latvia, Lt.Gen. Leonīds Kalniņš, visits exercise Northern Strike to observe training and meet with JTACs. JTAC is one of the combat capabilities developed in the Latvian National Armed Forces by closely cooperating with Michigan National Guard.

“Most people don’t even know where Latvia is,” said Mills. “For me to be invited to such a special tradition in the Latvian culture was incredible. Of course, when my Latvian friends asked me about what kind of cultural dances we have in America, I said, ‘In America, we have dance fads. There’s nothing that comes close to this kind of tradition and significance.’”

Torres agrees that “tradition” and “honor” are words synonymous with Latvia’s culture. “What really impresses me about the Latvian people is their deep appreciation of heritage,” he said. “It all goes back to Latvian pride.”

Along with a high regard for tradition, national values of resilience and fortitude are tightly-woven into Latvia’s identity and have carried its people through a tumultuous history marked by occupation and war. After winning independence from the Russian Empire in 1918, Latvia was again occupied by Soviet Russia in 1940. In 1941, it was invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany, then reconquered by the Soviets in 1944. Harsh fighting scarred the countryside of Latvia during World War II, which preceded a period of economic hardship as Latvia remained part of the Soviet Union until 1991. In the years since, Latvia has emerged as a sovereign democracy that is building international

credibility through military proficiency and its strong ties to the West.

“I am most excited because we have the very good, nice friendship with the Michigan National Guard – and this friendship is tested because we went together in three OMLT operations in Afghanistan and together lost our soldiers. And we are very proud of what this friendship means for our capabilities.”

–Lt. Gen. Leonīds Kalniņš

“Latvia’s military capabilities and infrastructure are always improving,” said Mills. “Some of their security programs are even more advanced than what we have in the U.S.”

Though Latvia’s military proficiency is surging, the country still faces grave challenges because of its geographical proximity to Russia. Despite the fact that Latvia’s capital, Riga, is a mere eleven hours removed from Moscow by auto, Latvia’s decades of Soviet occupation have left many of its citizens bitterly entrenched against the Kremlin, even to this day. The State Partnership Program itself finds strategic value as an unshakable deterrent against Russian aggression in the Baltic region, especially after the Kremlin’s 2014 invasion of Crimea.

“Without our cooperation with the Michigan Air National Guard, the Latvian Air Force wouldn’t make such progress as we have,” said Mercs. “We wouldn’t have the practical knowledge that it takes to be proficient. Having



that, our military is stronger, more ready, and more capable to rise to the task at hand.”

This year, Latvia’s participation in Exercise Northern Strike is more robust than ever. Approximately 300 troops from the Latvian National Guard (Zemessardzes) will be operating out of Camp Grayling. Alpena CRTC is due to host nine Latvian military firefighters and a number of Joint Tactical Air Controllers. Meanwhile, the Latvian Combat Camera team will be on a sojourn across northern Michigan documenting the adventures of their countrymen and women.

As Michigan’s State Partnership Program with Latvia nears the quarter-century mark, subject-matter experts predict more growth and mutual benefit between the two countries. According to Torres and Mills, current projects planned with participation from the Michigan Air National Guard include more infrastructure improvements at Latvia’s military airfield and further cooperation in the standardization of policy for Latvian force protection and security professionals.

“It is very exciting to literally help write doctrine and guidance for a foreign military ally,” said Mills. “We’re helping to spread peace, cooperation, and goodwill in two very different parts of the world. That’s the thing I love most about working with the State Partnership Program.” ■

The Art of the Possible

According to Maj. Gen. Gregory Vadnais, there is much to look forward to, pointing to increased multinational cooperation as a major area of future growth for the SPP.

“I think that what you’ll see in the coming years is that we’re also doing a lot with Denmark, and there is also a NATO relationship between Denmark and Latvia, said Vadnais. “So we continue to stitch those relationships together, just like we’re doing with Liberia, also.”

For evidence of these new, budding relationships, look no farther than the attendees of Michigan’s exercise Northern Strike in 2017.

“Lt. Gen. Leonīds Kalniņš was here at Northern Strike last year, and what was really awesome is that we had our other State partner of Liberia represented by Maj. Gen. Ziankahn here on the ground,” said Vadnais. “The Latvians have gone into Liberia with us. They’ve participated in multiple engagements in Liberia, so we continue to build that partnership and we continue to look at the art of the possible – what can we do jointly?”

Kalniņš also indicates many reasons for a positive outlook on what lies ahead: “I am very happy because I was born in Latvia. I am very happy because I am in this time when we are developing after regaining our independence and developing our military capability,” said Kalniņš. “But I am most excited because we have the very good, nice friendship with the Michigan National Guard – and this friendship is tested because we went together in three OMLT operations in Afghanistan and together lost our soldiers. And we are very proud of what this friendship means for our capabilities.”

Regardless of command, security climate, project requirements, or operations tempo, one thing about the State Partnership Program will stay the same.

“I think the important piece going forward is that foundationally, it’s the relationships,” said Vadnais. “It’s the alliances, and how critically important it is when you have like-minded, freedom-loving people standing shoulder-to-shoulder.

“That’s what it’s all about.”





For Further Reading

- Altau and Tērauds, eds. *The Campaign to Admit Latvia into NATO*. Rockville, Md.: World Federation of Free Latvians, 2004.
- Bleiere, Butulis, Feldmanis, Stanga, Zunda, eds. *History of Latvia – 100 Years*. Riga: Domas Spēks, 2014.
- Boehm, William B. *The National Guard State Partnership Program*. Arlington, Va. Public Affairs Office, National Guard Bureau, 2014.
- Dinevičs, Gorbunovs, Tilgass, Umpmalis, eds. *Latvia – USSR Military Base; 1939-1998: Materials and Documents on the Soviet army's presence in and withdrawal from Latvia*. Riga, 2012.
- Indāns, Ivars, ed. *Latvia and the United States: A New Chapter in the Partnership*. Riga: Center for East European Policy Studies, 2012.
- Meija, Silvija. *Latvians in Michigan*. Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 2005.
- Tapper, Jake. *The Outpost: An Untold Story of American Valor*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2013.
- Upite, Ruta. *Dear God, I Wanted to Live*. Brooklyn: Gramatu Draugs, 1978.
- Verzemnieks, Inara. *Among the Living and the Dead: A Tale of Exile and Homecoming on the War Roads of Europe*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.