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V CORPS ARTILLERY SOLDIERS JOIN VISIT GERMAN COUNTERPARTS FOR CAMARADERIE, INTEROPERABILITY

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HEIDELBERG, Germany – Officers and senior NCOs from units in V Corps Artillery got a closer look at how their German field artillery counterparts do things during a special visit to the German Artillery School in Idar-Oberstein, Germany November 16.

Buses carried more than 60 V Corps Artillery Soldiers bused from the VCA headquarters in Schwetzingen and VCA's 41st Field Artillery Brigade in Babenhausen to the academy near Baumholder for a special tour of the world's oldest artillery school.

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Soldiers from V Corps Artillery listen to a briefing by Capt. Marco Engelhardt, a teacher at the German Artillery School, on the systems and capabilities of the German Army's newest self-propelled howitzer, the Panzerhaubitze 2000, during a visit by VCA Soldiers to the school last week.

The trip focused on introducing V Corps Soldiers to the German army, its artillery corps and the weapons systems they use and building relations between American

and German soldiers who could very well work side by side on the battlefield in future missions, said Maj. Elliott Nowacky, VCA assistant fire support coordinator.

“This is the first time some of our junior officers have ever seen a foreign artillery unit up close, and this is a chance for them to learn how our German partners do things,” said Nowacky. “It’s a chance for all of us to learn about and work on the partnership between our countries. Understanding how the German army works could be vital to a mission that requires us to work as a team with our NATO allies.”

The visit started with a welcome from the school’s commandant, Brig. Gen. H. Fischer, and a classroom presentation on the school’s mission, facilities and history. The officers also learned about the structure of the German artillery branch and the different weapons systems its Soldiers use.

After learning the basics about their German counterparts, the group headed to the school’s on-site artillery museum to get a closer look at the history of German artillery. The museum features a wide range of pieces, from some of the earliest cannons used to the early self-propelled guns of World War II. Soldiers were also able to see one of the few surviving rounds left from one of the largest artillery pieces ever constructed -- the train-hauled 80cm 'Schwere Gustav' of WWII.

After a break for lunch with the commandant and his staff, the VCA Soldiers were given a demonstration of the German Artillery’s ADLER system, a computerized command, control and weapon deployment system that tracks targets, units available to react to them, and the coordination of weapon employment. The ADLER is similar to and able to interact with the U.S. Army’s integrated fire support system,

the Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System (AFATDS), as well as similar systems belonging to other allied countries.

Even Nowacky admitted that he found it interesting how similar the systems were. “How we do things is very similar,” he said. “The procedures, like reconnaissance and fire control, are the same.”

After the ADLER demonstration, the group moved on to the final, and most anticipated, part of the day’s activities -- a look at the German Army’s newest self-propelled howitzer, the Panzerhaubitze 2000.

The PzH 2000, a 155mm gun first appearing in the German Army in 1998, offers a totally automated system unlike that used by American self-propelled guns. The most similar system used by the U.S. Army is the Paladin M109, which entered service in 1963. Though the Paladin has been upgraded many times since its introduction, most of the officers taking part in the visit agreed that the new PzH 2000 was amazing by comparison.

“It’s like stepping out of a Fiat and into a Cadillac,” said Capt. Robert Mitchell from the VCA fire control office, one of a small group of Soldiers who got to watch the tank operating from inside the turret.

“It is really impressive,” agreed Capt. Eric Lehmann, VCA assistant training officer. “It’s fully automated and much faster to fire than the M109 -- eight rounds a minute, as opposed to three rounds a minute for our gun. But at the same time, I wouldn’t want to have to work that thing in a manual setting – it’d be really hard.”

In a special demonstration, the visiting officers were also able to see the machine “in action,” thanks to a new training system that allows the German soldiers to almost fully replicate battlefield procedures – right up to loading and firing rounds.

“I got to sit up inside while they worked,” said Capt. Joe Martuscelli with VCA’s fire support element, one of only four to sit inside the gun as it went through a firing order. “I didn’t fire a round or touch any buttons, but I got to watch everything and that was really interesting.”

The training system uses compressed air, dummy rounds and a special shell-catching device to replicate firing procedures – safely, even inside a building or motor pool. The German Soldiers load rounds and go through all the motions of firing, just as they would with live rounds, but the system passes inert shells through the machine and into a special barrel that collects them instead of firing. In addition, the system can be installed on any PzH 2000 in approximately three hours, turning the actual weapon into a training simulator. The simulation system drew even more praise from the visiting Americans than the PzH 2000 itself.

“We have simulators, but they’re dedicated machines, this can attach to any of their machines in just three hours. It’s a great idea and very impressive,” said Lehmann.

“It’s pretty amazing,” agreed Mitchell. “You put it on, roll it out, let the troops use it, take it off, put the barrel back on, park it in the motor pool, and you’re done.”

“I wouldn’t say that it was as good as a true fire mission, but it seems like a really nice training tool and it’s good that you could do it right there in the motor pool,” added Martuscelli.

After viewing the PzH 2000 and spending some time talking with the crew and instructors about the system, the group of excited Americans was ready to head home, declaring the day's event a great success.

"I thought this was a great visit," said Col. Gary Langford, commander of the 41st Field Artillery Brigade. "The Germans, as usual, were fantastic hosts. We had a great trip, learned a lot, and most importantly, we built started to build up camaraderie and friendship that will help to bring our countries together."

Such activities, while being fun for those involved, also offer very useful knowledge to Soldiers for the future, especially considering the fact that American forces have worked closely with Germans in past engagements, including Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan, said Langford.

"A lot of the things we have learned can translate from these friendship-type activities into the actual tactical military operations that we do," he said. "We're in Afghanistan with the Germans, and in Kosovo, Bosnia and other places (where) we've done combined operations with them. I think that's probably the way of the future -- that we'll see more operations with our European allies -- and it raises the importance of interoperability."