

Marine Task Force Operates Across Africa During 'New Normal' Mission

ARLINGTON, Va. – A relatively small Marine Corps task force spent seven intense months operating across the vast expanse of Africa, focusing on the “New Normal” mission of ensuring there would be no repeat of the deadly 2012 attack on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, that killed the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans.

“New Normal dominated. ... That’s why we were there,” to support the State Department’s missions, Col. Adam L. Chalkey, commander of the recently returned Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) Crisis Response-Africa 18-2, said Dec. 14.

The task force’s “No. 1 operational priority,” and what he considered would be “the minimal mission success,” Chalkey said, was “we could not have another Benghazi,” with a loss of American lives.

Focusing on that mission, one of the SPMAGTF’s five infantry platoons rotated on 24-hour alert status prepared to fly wherever needed to reinforce or evacuate a U.S. diplomatic facility that was threatened. That response force would have been augmented as required by additional personnel and transported by some of the unit’s six MV-22 tiltrotor Ospreys, with aerial refueling and communications support by its three KC-130 tanker-transports.

Asked if he was confident that they could have met their primary mission, Chalkey noted that “there always is uncertainty” and some places in Africa are more unstable than others. But, he said, “I’m confident we’re not going to have another flashpoint incident” like Benghazi.

He attributed that confidence to the fact that organizations that might think of attacking a U.S. installation “know we are there, able to respond,” which serves as a deterrent.

And it was not just the SPMAGTF that could respond. The Marine unit was tied closely in with the U.S. European/Africa commands and the conventional and special operations forces under their authority, he said.

But while part of his force was standing that fly-away alert, the rest were conducting a staggering array of cooperative security exercises across most of Western and Central Europe and the vast expanse of Africa, as far from its European operating bases as Madagascar, which is nearly twice the east-west distance across the United States. Those operations required a total of 3,077 flight hours, with no mishaps.

And he had to maintain a balance between standing alert and doing unit training, Chalkey said.

“If all we did was standing alert, we would not be able to train and stay mission-ready,” he said.

They were able to maintain that balance through the security cooperative arrangements and access to allied training areas. As a result, the colonel said his units returned home better trained than when they deployed.

“Even though our mission was New Normal, we were operating out of Europe ... taking full advantage of Europe and our strategic partners,” to keep his own force well trained and to help improve the combat capabilities of U.S. allies in Europe and Africa, Chalkey said at a Potomac Institute briefing.

The unit, which averaged about 850 Marines and Sailors, rotated between out of Moron, Spain, and Sigonella, Italy, with most of its time at the latter facility on the island of Sicily.

“The efforts of and the relationships built with our host nations, Spain and Italy, gave us the opportunity to train,” he said.

And they also were conducting security cooperation missions across Africa, “helping our partners mature their skills, to the point where they could export those skills to other African nations.” That was in keeping with the intentions of Marine Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser, commander of the U.S. Africa Command.