

The 1,300-member coalition force, spearheaded by Joint Special Operations Task Force 2, operates 10 miles outside of Brindisi at San Vito Air Station. Its role: supporting NATO troops deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina and aircrews monitoring a no-fly zone above that volatile country, where swarming Serbian mobs attacked Army patrols in September.

Bolstered by commandos from France's Armee de l'Air (air force) and a sprinkling of U.S. soldiers and sailors, the 352nd Special Operations Group, RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 16th Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, Fla., comprise most of the joint task force.

In 1993, the two Air Force units initially deployed people and hardware to San Vito while supporting Operation Provide Promise, a humanitarian airlift that sustained thousands of sick and starving civilians trapped by Bosnia's civil war. Eventually, as Balkan peacekeeping efforts began in earnest, that tasking switched to Operation Deny Flight, with 352nd SOG and 16th SOW resources staying put. And they will maintain a sizable presence there as long as U.S. F-16 Falcons, French Mirages or English Tornados continue flying air-policing missions, said Col. Rich Stimer, the coalition group's commander this summer.



"Supporting the fighter community is a big part of our mission," said Stimer, who is chief of air operations for U.S. Special Operations Command, MacDill Air Force Base, Fla. "We possess an all-weather, around-the-clock capability to go in and get them if anything goes wrong."

Things did "go wrong" for one French aircrew on Aug. 30, 1995, during the first day of Operation Deliberate Force, NATO's bombing campaign that eventually forced Bosnian factions into a truce. Within an hour after the campaign began, Serbian ground forces shot down a Mirage, capturing its injured pilot and weapon systems officer.

Unaware the Frenchmen were prisoners, special operations members flew nightly reconnaissance missions into Bosnia from Italy, hoping to locate and then rescue the men.

On one flight, two MH-53 Pave Low helicopters from Mildenhall's 21st Special Operations Squadron - exposed by bright moonlight - came under heavy anti-aircraft and small-arms fire. Seventy-five miles deep into hostile territory, the choppers, call signs Knife 44 and 47, slugged their way out while receiving help from a Hurlburt AC-130 Spectre, two A-10s, two Marine F-18s and a Navy EA-6.

Staff Sgts. Dennis Turner and Randy Rutledge, Knife 44 side-gunners from Hurlburt's 20th SOS, were wounded by searing shrapnel during the fight but managed to return a furious fusillade of their own. Both men received Purple Hearts.

"There was a lot of heroism in that aircraft," recalled pilot Maj. Mark Harmon, whose actions that hair-raising night won him a Cheney Award for valor. "We took a lot of fire."

And not just then; during a search the night before, bullets and tracers hit other low-flying Pave

Lows.

"The effort and courage displayed in those two days defies comprehension," said Col. Michael Planert, 352nd SOG commander.

He added that all involved, not just the helicopters crews, "poured their hearts" into the missions. "Support people, maintenance, everyone."

Besides providing combat search and rescue, Mildenhall's 21st and 7th SOS, using MH-53s and MC-130H Combat Talon IIs, also ferried troops into Sarajevo and Tuzla, and played a key role in Bosnia's 1996 elections by flying 54 U.S. delegates - including special envoy Richard Holbrooke - to eight polling sites scattered throughout the war-scarred country. During the delegate shuttles, Hurlburt 16th SOS Spectres patrolled travel routes, and MC-130P Combat Shadows from Mildenhall's 67th SOS refueled helicopters and provided airborne command and control.

All these special ops resources are now based at San Vito, but for 34 years during the Cold War, the place hosted various intelligence people that intercepted and analyzed transmissions from former Warsaw Pact countries. You can still see the big Flare-9 antenna - nicknamed the elephant cage - they used.

And though the base supposedly closed in October 1994, as part of the U.S. military drawdown, the Bosnian mission keeps San Vito's gates open. Most of the buildings are sealed, except for needed housing and a few workshops and recreational areas that are still maintained, said Chief Master Sgt. Ron Aitken of the 31st Expeditionary Air Base Squadron, which supports the special ops task force.

"The pervasive attitude was, 'We are moving out shortly, so don't spend much on the base,' " Aitken said. "But a 10-day deployment turned into six-months, which turned into three years. As a result, the infrastructure has begun to collapse on itself."

A crew of 25 Air Force civil engineers and 21 civilians keep the place up and running. They even upgraded several dormitories.



"Our primary concern is improving the quality of life for folks here," said Aitken, who normally is assigned to Kelly Air Force Base, Texas. "We are trying to provide them more than what is offered at other forward-deployed locations."

Surrounded by artichoke fields and vineyards, San Vito's 318-acre site is too small for a runway and flightline, so Pave Lows and fixed-wing aircraft operate from a nearby Italian air force base.

However, Mildenhall helicopter crews do land on the old base golf course for practice. And not just for Bosnian operations. As the only Air Force special operations unit permanently aligned under U.S. European Command, the 352nd SOG works a variety of theater contingencies, such as evacuating civilians during African coup attempts or supporting Operations Southern and

Northern Watch in Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

It also rushed troops to Dubrovnik, Croatia, when an Air Force CT-43 carrying Commerce Secretary Ron Brown crashed into a mountain. Arriving in a nasty rainstorm, 21st SOS Pave Lows inserted the first search-and-rescue teams, followed by a 67th SOS MC-130P. Mildenhall crews remained on scene until the last body was removed.

It's at the end of Via Appia, though, where they travel most often.

Staff Sgt. Chuck Shock, 21st SOS aerial gunner, has deployed to San Vito 15 times. Out of his four years stationed at Mildenhall, he's spent nearly two in Italy.

"We might as well move on down south," he halfheartedly joked.

But that would be a break with tradition. One that Roman foot soldiers started 20 centuries ago, of marching along Via Appia just to head elsewhere.

(Additional information provided by Tech. Sgt. Jim Greeley, 352nd SOG public affairs)

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