

From Nike to Patriot

- Reorganisation of air defence in the 80ies and 90ies -

In the 1970ies replacement of Nike by a modern air defence system became inevitable. Many modifications had improved performance and reliability, but didn't overcome inherent deficiencies like low firing rate and little mobility. Nike's nuclear role made it a target for protest and politicians hoped to get rid of the old system as a cheap contribution to nuclear disarmament. On the other hand short funds in a time of little economic growth and a number of expensive conventional weapons programmes for the German Bundeswehr (Leo 2 tank, Tornado fighter) delayed a decision for replacement by Patriot, which was the only available predecessor. So for a last time European Nikes received a technical "make up" by the Nike Support Plan beginning in 1980 to prolong service and secure maintainance and supply for another decade. New digital electronics renewed fire control systems. The modifications for the German, Dutch, Belgian and Norwegian Nikes were carried out by the workshops of 8 Logistic Regiment (GE) at Mechernich. Nuclear sites were also hardened by the Longe Range Security Programme.

Finally in 1984 an agreement between the German and US government found a solution to modernize air defence in Central Europe. Germany agreed to man and run 36 Patriot units and form another 15 units for short air defense which should be equipped with a wheeled version of the Roland anti aircraft missile system to defend NATO airbases. Two of the six future German Patriot wings should be deployed in South German air defense zones, where US units had been responsible before. Three German Roland batteries had to secure local air defence for three US airbases. The Germans would buy equipment for 12 Patriot units, the USA in return would provide and lend 24 further Patriot units. 12 of them would be turned to Germany after 12 years, the other 12 should remain US-property. All 36 Patriot batteries were delivered in German configuration with German vehicles, communications systems and generators.

The German air force had to reorganize six Patriot wings with 36 batteries and three Roland battalions with 15 batteries from the six Nike battalions (=24 batteries). The nine Hawk battalions should remain untouched. This increase in units was possible because Patriot required less personnel than the huge Nike battalions of over 1400 soldiers.

What had not changed was the military situation. In the mid-eighties military planners still had to consider terms of deterrence. For immediate reaction, continual operational readiness and protection, the Patriot batteries still had to be installed on permanent sites, although plans for war intended a mobile concept of mixed air defence zones ("clusters") parallel to the Inner German Border. To save costs the existing camps and sites should be used as far as possible. German airforce also had to consider the local social links of its airdefence personnel as well as the plea of local communities for maintaining the military camps.

Nevertheless three complete battalions, which in future structure were called wings, had to re-deploy over far distances. The Nike battalions no 22 and 23 left their air defence sectors between the River Ruhr and the River Main for Bavaria, where they had to deploy in former zones of US-Hawks. Since the departure of French Nikes in 1966 the area south of River Donau had lacked missile air defence for high altitude. The Patriots from 22 and 23 wing filled these gaps. In the north 38 Battalion (Hawk) left the area between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea to deploy on camps and sites in the triangle between Frankfurt, Kassel and Cologne which were abandoned by 22 and 23 battalion. The gap of 38 Battalion in the north was filled by parts of 26 Battalion (Nike) which moved from the north-west coast around Wilhelmshaven to become a Patriot wing in Schleswig-Holstein to secure air defence there in co-operation with remaining Hawk Bn 39. Like Bavaria this zone also hadn't been covered by long range SAM missiles before. Parts of 23 and 26 Battalion had to stay at their old camps Schöneck/Kemel and Wangerland near Frankfurt and Wilhelmshaven to form two of the three new Roland Battalions.

The whole reorganisation meant an increase from 60 batteries (Nike,Hawk) to 86 batteries (Patriot, Hawk, Roland). All but one Nike site (Dornum) and a few Hawk sites had to be rebuilt into Patriot missile stations. No. 22 and 23 wings in Bavaria, where there hadn't been any Nikes before, should receive five completely new sites on the edge of airbases (Lechfeld,Kaufbeuren,Manching,Roth) or on a military training area (Peißenberg-Guselried), which had to be shared by two batteries each. As the number of 36 Hawk batteries wasn't reduced, no. 38 and 34 Battalion had to take over a few sites from the US and Belgian forces.

The headquarter organisation of missile air defence should rise one level in command. Battalions became wings and the six regiments, which had only had an administration function in the old structure, became brigades ("Kommandos") for administration and operational control in one mixed air defence cluster each. Every "Kommando" had to control one Patriot wing and one or two Hawk wings, plus a Roland battalion in three brigades.

The reorganisatio began with the disbanding of the first Nikes of no. 21 and 23 Bn in 1987 and should finish about 1994 when no. 26 wing was to be fully operational with 6 Patriot batteries. The programme was proceeding when a few weeks after the definite end of the German Nike at no. 24 and 26 Bn in October 1989 the unexpected political change in Europe made alle plans obsolete again. Looking forward to huge force reductions the German government stopped the rebuilding and construction programme for Patriot sites and reduced the number of military camps in the early 90ies. A number of Patriot and Hawk units in the north were concentrated on abandoned airbases (Leck,Husum-Schwesing, Oldenburg, Ahlhorn). The total number of firing units was not reduced because military planners expected new risks of air and missile attacks by proliferation of technology to unstable countries in the future. As the allied airdefence forces in Europe were widely reduced, the German missiles had to remain as the backbone of ground airdefence in Europe. Three from nine Hawk battalion headquarters were reduced and their batteries transferred to the remaining battalions, which now had six batteries. Later two of six Hawk batteries in each battalion were deactivated and put on reserve. The future of the Hawk units is quite uncertain. A future air defence system with anti ballistic missile capacity is planned to replace Hawk, but the military budget is short. Of course the rise in command level was reverted again, but the short living "wings" and "brigades" didn't regain their old more army-like terms "battailon" and "regiment" when they were reduced to their old size. To underline the long airforce tradition of German missile units the battalions were called "Gruppen" and the HQ-units were called "Geschwader" (wing) now.

(Download: „airdef_ge_list.pdf „ for more information.)

The operational status of all missile air defence units is low because permanent reaction alert has become obsolete. Although most units with the exception of 12 Hawk batteries survived as active units, their personnel strength has been radically reduced. Today training for a wide variety of conflicts and maintaining a basic know how and capacity for mobilization has become their main task. Many sites of the old missile air defence belt in Central Europe are still used for training or storage of equipment but have no operational function. The wings no. 21 and 23 which first converted from Nike to Patriot still received all their six rebuilt single sites and three completey new 2-battery-sites for Patriot. Two double-sites from no. 22 bn and three single-sites from no. 25 bn were also finished before the construction programme could be stopped. These units can use an infrastructure which was specially adapted for Patriot. The other units use former airbases, where they can store the equipment in aircraft shelters and deploy the firing units for exercises on the runways. Parts of no. 1 wing (Husum) and no. 3 wing (Oldenburg) with their Patriot Bns no 26 and 25 and Hawk bns no 36 and 39 plus Roland Bn 41 (later 43 bn) have been classified for Rapid Reaction and are kept in a higher operational status. In the late 90ies a special battalion for ground and air defence of airforce objects outside Germany has been formed in Jever, Wangerland and Diepholz. They are equipped with "Stinger" man portable anti-air-missiles. All German SAM-units regularly practice air defence in different scenarios . The "Roving Sand" exercises in the USA have become a highlight for every wing. There the Patriots,

Hawks, Rolands and Stingers can train under realistic conditions. In 1997 a new agreement between the German and US-government modified the regulations from 1984. The German side assured to maintain 36 Patriot-batteries for European airdefence and in return in the long run the 24 US-provided or US-owned battery equipment will become German property. A detailed list of the German SAM-airdefence units and their locations in past and present can be seen in the document „airdef-ge-ist.pdf“. All information has been collected from public sources and satellite pictures.

Compiled by Jürgen Dreifke for Rolf's Nike page, August 1999