

“Doing Job“

The Latvian Army

By: CSM Andris Grikavics

2nd Infantry Battalion (Latvia)

11 Sept 2006

Class 57

Personal Experience Paper

I am from the Republic of Latvia. I am Command Sergeant Major of the Second Infantry Battalion and I am 32 years old. While some would question why so young a man is in this position, I would remind them my country is young as well as my National Armed Force. The Latvian army consists of one Light infantry regiment. Every soldier in the Latvian Army is a professional now.

Before I begin my personal experience paper, I want to remind you that throughout history my country was occupied by Soviets twice and once by Germans during the Second World War. From that time my country was a part of the Soviet Union for long time and we finally received our independence again in 1991. My country is small and so is our military force. However, we have a great history before we received our independence the second time (broke away from the Soviet Union). In these 15 years we have grown very much, because everyone has worked hard.

I thought for long time about what to write in this experience paper and decided to write about what I did, what I saw and what I heard during my military career. I am a part of Latvian military history and my experience comes from doing my job for many years. Latvian NCOs corps is still in development process, we are still gaining experience every day and I am here to get more. This is the first time I wrote a paper like this and I think this is a great opportunity to write history of the Latvian NCOs while these experiences are clear and fresh in my memory.

I joined National Armed Forces in 1993 when I was 19. This was a time when the Latvian army began. I started in the Navy as a conscript soldier. At this time the Latvian army existed approximately for two years and we used many of the Soviet army

Personal Experience Paper

techniques. Officers and NCOs with Soviet army experience, used the Soviet methods to lead, to teach and make relationship between officers, NCOs, and privates. The worst habit was hazing and humiliation of Soldiers, even between privates it happened. One more day of service gave the soldiers the right to harass.

As all new armies we had problems in supply. We had issues with uniforms, weapons, ammunition, vehicles and equipment. I heard that high rank Latvian officers bought weapons from Soviet army, from Soviet officers and warrant officers paying by Vodka. I cannot confirm this to be true but it is possible. All installations were in bad condition, Soviets left our installation in good condition as viewed from the outside. However, everything inside the barracks was stolen. For example, electrical cables were cut of and sold, because of the money for the nonferrous metals.

Now I need to explain more about the NCOs and the soldiers. The Soviet army had conscript service and Latvian army adapted it. Officers were professionals but NCOs, most of them were conscripts. After 1.5 years of serving in conscription service, a private could stay in the army as a professional. If you were manageable and you could adapt to systems during conscript service, you could grow fast in ranks.

In our NCO ranks, we had only corporal, sergeant, and first sergeant. Private ranks were private and lance corporal. After first sergeant rank followed warrant officer rank. We called this rank second in command because this wasn't officer rank but also this wasn't NCOs rank. This rank didn't belong to the Officers or NCOs. In the Soviet army there were four NCO ranks and two warrant officer rank. At this time the NCOs role in the Latvian army was minimized due to the officers' lack of trust of the NCOs because we

Personal Experience Paper

were conscripts. Individuals who stayed in the army as professionals very quickly forgot who they were. They didn't act like NCOs, and the Squad leaders which were corporals couldn't say anything to privates. They couldn't lead soldiers because they were conscripts. Platoon sergeants didn't know what to do, because they become platoon sergeants after one year service sometimes less. For example in stationary shooting exercises they stayed at the ammunition point and this was their only responsibility. They had to ensure that private signed for and received only 5 rounds. This was true in my time of conscript service. I shot just 5 rounds to qualify. First sergeant role in a company was to count company equipment, and make sure that company barrack is clean. He deals most of his time with documentation, and generally he was supply man.

Through my conscript service I savored "the pleasures" of that life. Once, at the end of my service time I got new platoon sergeant. He was different as those that I had before. He also went through Latvian conscript service but he thought different as my previous platoon sergeants. For the first time I saw fire and maneuver. I saw combat training. He treated us with respect. Because of his influence I stayed in the army. We both joined first professional infantry battalion – BALTIC BATTALION.

The Baltic Battalion was an international battalion and consisted of three infantry companies – Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian. It is 3 Baltic nations, three Baltic countries. All commanding personnel – NCOs and officers got basic military training up to company level and leadership training from British Royal Marines, also Swedish officers took part in this. Training took time and for NCOs it was 9 months. We used new personal equipment from United States. We had plenty of ammunition, and we had the best instructors I could

Personal Experience Paper

imagine at that time. Thanks to those foreign countries which helped with the first step in developing of Latvian NCOs.

This was my first, real military experience in my career and it was the hardest time in my life, training was very tough. I believe that Latvian NCOs and officers got a lot of knowledge and experience from them. At that time I saw how important an NCOs job is. I saw that NCOs lead soldiers, but officers lead units. I saw relationship between Officers, NCOs and privates. I learned how to conduct lessons, how to conduct training, how to conduct shooting and tactics exercises. This happened in 1995.

After short vacation new recruits came and we trained our own soldiers in the way we were trained. Most of the recruits were conscripts and we didn't make mistakes training them. We showed them the right way, we treat them well. From those soldiers we got a lot of our NCOs today. To include our squad leaders, platoon sergeants, even first sergeants.

We were trained as light infantry with future task of peacekeeping missions. My company was attached to a Swedish battalion for short time. We received more military training, but now we were prepared a mechanized infantry. It was 1996 and we went to IFOR mission in Bosnia Herzegovina, near air base Tuzla where American units were. There I met some Russian conscript soldiers and I could compare them with Latvian soldiers. In this air base I took part in one parade together with my squad and first time in my life. I met a command sergeant major from USA Army. It was impressive what he did before and during this parade. Peacekeeping missions were also time for learning. Latvian soldiers saw and spoke with soldiers from different countries; we could compare different systems and choose which is better.

Personal Experience Paper

After our first mission was a time I call the “Hard routine” because it is time when soldiers were leaving the army and new soldiers were arriving. Unfortunately in Latvia payment is not high in all working scopes and people are searching for better payment and life. We still did training, squad, platoon, company and battalion level exercises. We reached high standards in patrolling operations.

This was a time when I took part in some basic military training as instructor. In one course we had military adviser from Netherlands, he is warrant officer from Dutch marines and he is still my friend, now he is retired. He told about his army system, about highest NCOs rank Sergeant major/warrant officer, about their responsibilities. It was first time when I started to think about NCOs military career. I remember that I wanted to get military education as officer, but my company commander said that I am good, young, perspective NCO and we have enough officers in our army. Many good NCOs in that time left NCOs corps and became officers, reason for that was money, better life, more possibilities to achieve their private goals.

In Latvia in that time we hadn't NCO school or common military education system for NCOs. Each unit prepared own instructors in own way. National guards had Infantry training centre and there was squad leader and platoon sergeant courses and my unit send me to this school. Many National guards after graduation got warrant officer ranks, but I had still sergeant rank – thank you god for that! Finally so many warrant officer ranks made big mess in our army because many of national guards came joined our army.

Then my second mission (SFOR) came, it was also in Bosnia Herzegovina in 1999 but this time it was together with Danish army. We returned to Latvia in 2000 and I felt bad

Personal Experience Paper

because I didn't see future for NCOs, or for myself. I didn't want to take first sergeant position in company because as I said before that position was for supply man, not for commanding NCO. I didn't want to go to third mission abroad, I was tired of it and I knew every thing what happen there. I had also ambitions and goals. My previous platoon commander, didn't listen to suggestions, we had some misunderstandings in way of doing things. We had a lot of problems during mission to execute tasks, he was young Lieutenant and he didn't learn from experience.

My country's political aim was to join the NATO and to reach this aim we should reorganize our National Armed Forces structure close to NATO standards. One of my previous platoon commanders got a task from NAF commander to create same educational system for all NCOs and establish NCO academy/school. He offered me to join his crew and I agreed. Also BALTIC BATTALION project was closed. That officer also was young, but now I call him as: "Father of Latvian NCOs". That officer got his military education in Swedish and British military academies and I think he is on of most advanced officers in NAF. So, together with him and some NCOs from former Baltic Battalion we created nowadays Latvian educational system for NCOs.

At the beginning of the NCO school, it was big brain storm to find out what we should do. For two years we worked days and nights, we conducted different kind of courses for junior, advanced and senior NCOs, battle courses for infantry, for squad, section (British) and platoon level. In my memory all those days converged in one, we worked as robots and we didn't think about personal life, health or money. It was the greatest time in my life.

Personal Experience Paper

I was appointed to Officer Academy for half of year as instructor for young officers. It was first experience in Latvia that NCOs educate/teach officers in basic military, leadership and tactics. Some of those officers are serving in my battalion now. After some time our batteries started to break up and one by one we went away from NCOs school to different units. We were replaced by our followers.

It was end of 2003. Latvia joined NATO and first Latvian infantry company went to Iraq, also Second Infantry Battalion was established. In 2004 command sergeant major positions was created in Latvian infantry battalions and some different units. I was appointed to Second Infantry battalion as command sergeant major, my friend who now is NAF command sergeant major, who graduated class 56 in USASMA was appointed to First Infantry Battalion. Also command sergeant major of NCO school was appointed, all we were from BALTBAT Latvian Company, all we were together instructors in NCO School. I was appointed to battalion what consisted of conscripts, all NCO'S were professionals Most of them were with different military experience, with different military education, from different units, also many warrant officers from National guards came after reorganization in their units. My rank was First Sergeant and it was lower rank than Warrant Officer. It was not easy to prove to them that I am real leader, that I am more experienced than they are. But also this was the easiest part of my duty, the hardest part was to break thinking of officers, they didn't trust in NCOs. As I said before – officers lead units, but NCOs lead soldiers. They didn't believe in this. I spoke a lot with officers and my battalion commander about NCOs in battalion. I spoke about officers and NCOs

Personal Experience Paper

responsibilities. I told to the commander that our NCOs chain of command needs improvement. Both, he and I, were not supply men but in charge of troops.

As I mention before the First sergeant in Latvian army was man who deals with paperwork and supply. I persuaded the battalion commander to change this. With my advice, he put the right NCOs in right positions. I asked an NCOs whom I knew from previous service to join our battalion. We started to send NCOs to military courses and to NCO school to get military education. Every day I spoke with officers, NCOs and soldiers. Every day I was involved their activities, in lessons, in exercises, in briefings, debriefings; I briefed NCOs. I gave advice to junior officers; I spoke with company commanders and with staff officers. It was very hard to convince staff commander that I am not taking off his responsibilities that I am not in charge of him. Generally it is very hard to convince officers that NCOs are soldiers who need to lead and help them work more effectively. Step by step my battalion changed from a conscription battalion to professional and now we have not conscript soldiers anymore. Each infantry company has been to Iraq at least once.

I had four battalion commanders during my service as command sergeant major. The first one understood and had great confidence in me and quickly promoted to Brigade staff Commander position. The second one listened and understood me, we did great job and now he is in NAF staff. The third one didn't listen and didn't understand me, now he is serving at a position one level down. Now I have my fourth one, he is "Father of Latvian NCOs" and we understand each other without words.

Personal Experience Paper

We do not have the warrant officer ranks any longer. We have six NCO ranks now instead of three. We have sergeant majors meetings when we speak about problems of privates and NCOs. We are advising J1 and now when we have NAF command sergeant major. He is the enlisted adviser to the NAF commander.

This is a short story about my military life. I would never trade my life for another. I am Battalion Command Sergeant Major and my next appointment after graduation of USASMA is Brigade/Regiment command sergeant major position. I am young but ready for this position. My goal is to develop NCOs and lead soldiers and NCOs of the Latvian Army.