

# Belgian Baltic Air Policing 2020

*On 14 January 2020, a media visit was organised by NATO Allied Air Command and the Belgian Air Force to visit the Belgian detachment at Šiauliai Air Base, in Lithuania.*

The Belgian detachment commander, call sign 'Ron', briefed us on aspects of *Belgian Baltic Air Policing*. In 2004, the Belgian Air Force became the first NATO Air Force to participate in the Baltic Air Policing programme and 16 years later, its 349 Squadron from Kleine-Brogel AB, is one of the present two BAP contributors, the other being the Polish Air Force with its F-16s at Ämari Air Base in Estonia and at Malbork Air Base in Poland.

The Belgian detachment is on a 24 hours, 7 days a week readiness with two aircraft which can be airborne within fifteen minutes after the scramble command, the fighters being on Quick Reaction Alert (QRA). Two aircraft are kept as reserve and at high readiness as well.

The Belgian detachment consists of a 'lean' group of just 60 personnel, split into three branches: the *operational branch* with pilots and mission planners, but also firefighters and a meteorologist; the *maintenance branch*, including personnel for the F-16 avionics and weapons, and the *support branch* with medic, military police and a fighter-controller at the Control and Reporting Centre at Karmėlava in Lithuania.

As standard armament are two AIM-120 AMRAAM beyond visual range missiles, two AIM-9 Sidewinder close combat missiles plus the integrated M61A1 six-barrel Gatling gun with some 500 rounds. Placed close to the radar is the Sniper Advanced Targeting Pod (ATP) which zooms in on the target even before the pilots have visual sight. With the targeting pod, it becomes easy to recognise the target and select appropriate armaments.

The F-16s are also equipped with flares, normally to be used as defence against heat-seeking missiles, but these can also be used to attract attention of the pilots of an intercepted aircraft.

During night flying operations, the Belgian pilots also employ Night Vision Goggles (NVG) to amplify the limited light in the sky. Within fifteen minutes, the F-16s must be airborne and thereafter the CRC guides them towards the aircraft being intercepted. When a 'rogue' aircraft

has been intercepted, a report is sent to the CRC and a photo taken for conformation. If the intercepted aircraft is posing a danger to other aircraft, or is heading towards a forbidden zone, or in an emergency, the F-16s needs to escort this aircraft into another direction. In 99% of intercepts, there is just R/T interrogation, with the F-16s flying close to the integrated aircraft and the cockpit visually checked.

There are 3 manners of Scramble:

*Alpha-Scramble:* this is the 'real thing' where the aircraft is launched within fifteen minutes

*Tango-Scramble:* this is for training where the full 'Scramble' is exercised, without any aircraft to be intercepted

*Sierra-Scramble:* this is also training Scramble where the full scenario is exercised, without a take-off.

Since September 2019, some 20 Alpha-Scramble intercepts were carried out by the Belgian detachment, intercepting fighters, transport aircraft and once even a strategic bomber.



After our briefing, a *Tango-scramble* was planned for the media, but owing to uncertain weather conditions, only a *Sierra-Scramble* was carried out. Instead, some archive photos of previous NATO Allied Air Command QRA missions were shared. 🦋

*Photos and text by: Joris van Boven and Alex van Noye.*

