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BALTICA 2026

ROMANIA RETURNS TO BALTIC AIR POLICING DUTY

PER ASPERA AD ASTRA

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Cover IV: ***ROU AF F-16 at Șiauliai Air Base | Photo by Bogdan Pantilimon***

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IMPORTANT NOTE:
The articles presented in the magazine are drawn from various sources.
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Romanian Air Force Staff
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Air Chiefs and Senior Representatives from 27 NATO nations and five NATO partner nations attended the two-day event to define this new defensive posture and confirm national commitments - photo courtesy Allied Air Command

ALLIED AIR COMMAND HOSTED FIRST NATO AIR CHIEFS' SYMPOSIUM OF 2026

Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) hosted the first of its biannual NATO Air Chiefs' Symposium (NACS) for 2026. The NACS serves as a critical strategic platform for Allied and NATO Partner Air Chiefs to discuss the evolution of air and space power, synchronize multinational capabilities, and align national contributions to NATO's collective defence. The primary objective of the symposium is to refine strategies that ensure the Alliance remains prepared to defend every inch of NATO territory.

The theme for this iteration, "Operationalizing the Shift to Air Defence", reflects NATO's new strategic approach to defending NATO territory. This transition evolves traditional air policing into a robust air defence posture, tailored to the high-threat environment of the modern battlefield. Air Chiefs and Senior Representatives from 27 NATO nations and 5 NATO partner nations attended the two-day event to define this new defensive posture and confirm national commitments.

"We gather at a time where air and space power is more critical than ever," stated Lieutenant General Jason Hinds, Commander Allied Air Command. His remarks underscored the necessity of adapting to the dynamic and contested security environment. Key topics included NATO Command and Control (C2) framework, Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD), the reinforcement of the Eastern Flank through enhanced Vigilance Activity (eVA) Eastern Sentry and Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concepts for ensuring resilience and sustainment. The NACS 26-I also symbolizes an event of unity and collaboration.

"Your presence here demonstrates our shared commitment to Airpower's contribution to the defence of the Alliance", Lieutenant General Hinds pointed out, highlighting the overall goal of the conference. "It is our chance to exchange insight, tackle emerging threats and advance Airpower's contribution to the multi-domain operations that make our nations safe".

The symposium facilitated the exchange of lessons learned and provided a venue for AIRCOM to discuss Exercise Ramstein Flag 26, NATO's largest multi-JOA LIVEX. This gathering offered a unique opportunity for nations to share relevant intelligence in a secure, multinational forum. Further emphasizing the requirement for technological adaptation, the symposium also included static displays of Counter-Unmanned Air System (C-UAS) complementing the symposium's theme and showing the Alliance's rapid adaptation to modern air defence requirements.

NACS 26-I sends a clear signal to any potential adversary: NATO is constantly adapting to an increasingly complex and contested environment. Through initiatives like eVA Eastern Sentry, the Alliance demonstrates its resolve to maintain a persistent and credible defensive presence. By fostering interoperability across 32 NATO nations and our partners, AIRCOM continues to ensure that Allied Air and Space Power remain the bedrock of a resilient and unified air defence posture, fully prepared to deter aggression by our adversaries.

TYPHOON FIGHTERS DEPLOYED IN ROMANIA UNDER NATO'S EASTERN SENTRY ACTIVITY, REINFORCING ALLIED AIR SECURITY ON THE EASTERN FLANK

Aeronautica Militare

Italian Air Force Eurofighter Typhoon fighter aircraft arrived in Romania in early June 2026 to execute NATO's enhanced air policing mission. The deployment forms part of the enhanced vigilance activity (eVA), Eastern Sentry, which strengthens a flexible and scalable Allied force posture. Operating from Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, the Italian Task Group Air 51st Wing maintains a constant state of readiness to defend NATO airspace.

The Italian detachment, until August 2026, secures the skies over the eastern flank alongside the Romanian Air Force and the Royal Air Force already deployed at Borcea Air Base in Romania. Together, these nations safeguard Allied airspace and maintain the integrity of the integrated air and missile defence systems of NATO. This collective commitment ensures that any uncoordinated air activity near Allied borders is rapidly identified, monitored and intercepted.

On Saturday, June 13, 2026, just hours after achieving full operational capability, two Italian Eurofighter aircraft scrambled for the first time. Controlled by the Combined Air Operations Centre Torrejón, the fighter aircraft launched to monitor NATO airspace along the eastern flank before converting the mission into a training flight.

Activities conducted under Eastern Sentry are designed to reinforce deterrence and assurance measures along the eastern flank of the Alliance. By maintaining a flexible and scalable presence, NATO ensures it can adjust its posture rapidly to respond to changes in the security environment. Air policing serves as a cornerstone of the collective defence of NATO, providing continuous, round-the-clock protection of Allied airspace. These missions operate on a rotational basis, with member nations contributing personnel and assets to maintain a persistent and reliable defensive shield.



Royal Air Force

Royal Air Force (RAF) Eurofighter Typhoon fighters arrive at Borcea Air Base, Romania, to take over NATO's Air Policing mission and reinforce the Alliance's commitment to the security of its eastern flank.

The deployment, supported by around 200 personnel, forms part of NATO's enhanced vigilance activity, Eastern Sentry, and contributes to a flexible and scalable Allied force posture in the region. The RAF assumes Air Policing responsibilities from the outgoing German Eurofighter detachment and leads the mission for the next four months. Operating from Borcea, the British fighters maintain Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) alongside the Romanian Air Force, safeguarding Allied airspace and supporting NATO's integrated air and missile defence systems. The mission ensures that any unusual or uncoordinated air activity near NATO airspace is identified, monitored and, if necessary, intercepted.

"*The deployment of our Typhoons to Romania demonstrates the United Kingdom's unwavering commitment to NATO and to the defence of NATO airspace,*" said Officer Commanding 3 (Fighter) Squadron, Wing Commander Sonny. "*Working alongside our Romanian Allies, this deployment also reflects our ability to rapidly project credible air power in support of collective defence, whenever needed,*" he added.

Royal Air Force personnel from 121 Expeditionary Air Wing formally assume responsibility for NATO's Enhanced Air Policing mission in Romania during a handover ceremony at 86th Air Base, Borcea, on 31 March 2026.

This marks the beginning of the UK's four-month contribution to Operation Biloxi 2026, in support of NATO's Eastern Sentry vigilance activity on the Alliance's eastern flank. The RAF detachment succeeds the outgoing German Eurofighter contingent, underscoring the interoperability and unity that underpin NATO air operations. RAF Typhoon aircraft from 3 (Fighter) Squadron now conduct Quick Reaction Alert duties and joint training with Romanian counterparts, strengthening cooperation and reinforcing NATO's collective defence posture on its eastern border.

The ceremony, hosted by the Romanian Air Force, highlights the continued cooperation between Allied nations. The UK has regularly supported NATO Air Policing missions in Romania since 2014, reflecting the RAF's readiness, professionalism and integration with partner air forces. This deployment continues that support and helps ensure the Alliance maintains a credible and capable presence during a period of heightened vigilance along NATO's borders.

Story compiled from press releases published by the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Allied Air Command Public Affairs Office. Sources: www.raf.mod.uk and www.ac.nato.int.





ROMANIA RETURNS TO BALTIC AIR POLICING DUTY

The Romanian Air Force joins French Rafale fighters at Šiauliai Air Base to support Baltic Air Policing and reinforce NATO's eastern flank

The Romanian Air Force has deployed F-16 fighter aircraft and approximately 100 personnel to Šiauliai Air Base, Lithuania, in support of NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission under the Eastern Sentry framework, following the departure of the outgoing Spanish Air Force detachment. This marks the fourth time Romania has contributed to the mission from Lithuania, demonstrating its sustained commitment to Allied collective defense on the Alliance's eastern flank.

Operating under NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence system, the Romanian detachment maintains Quick Reaction Alert to safeguard Allied airspace, ensuring continuous monitoring of air activity over the Baltic region and the capability to intercept aircraft approaching NATO territory when required.

Alongside the Romanian contingent, the French Air and Space Force has deployed four Rafale fighter aircraft to Šiauliai, assuming the lead role in the current Baltic Air Policing rotation. This deployment marks the ninth rotation for the French Air and Space Force in Lithuania, with additional French deployments to Ämari Air Base, Estonia, further underlining France's commitment to Allied collective defense and regional stability.

The simultaneous presence of two Allied fighter detachments at the same forward operating location significantly enhances NATO's operational flexibility while maintaining a robust and responsive air defense capability across the Baltic region. Despite operating different aircraft platforms, Romanian F-16s and French Rafales integrate seamlessly within NATO's command and control structures — a concrete demonstration of the interoperability that underpins NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence system and the Alliance's ability to rapidly combine multinational air power.

"For our pilots and personnel, deploying to Lithuania is both a responsibility and a privilege," said Lt. Col. Alexandre, chief of the French detachment. "We are proud to stand alongside our Romanian Allies and our Lithuanian hosts to help protect NATO airspace. Every day our teams work together — different aircraft, different nations, but one mission: to ensure the security of the Alliance."

Since the Baltic states do not operate their own fighter aircraft for air policing purposes, Allied nations regularly rotate forces through forward operating locations such as Šiauliai to ensure the continuous protection of Allied airspace. Conducted under the Eastern Sentry framework, the mission contributes to NATO's scalable and responsive force posture along the eastern flank, reinforcing deterrence and defense across a region of enduring strategic importance.

By rotating Allied air power through Šiauliai and sustaining the presence of multinational detachments capable of operating as a single integrated force, the Alliance demonstrates unity, readiness, and resolve — ensuring a persistent and credible defensive presence in the Baltic region.

Story compiled from press releases published by Allied Air Command Public Affairs Office. Source: www.ac.nato.int
Archive photos by Adrian Sultănoiu and Laurențiu Turoi



#WEARENATO

BALTICA 2026

Carpathian Vipers – Safeguarding Nato Airspace Over The Baltic

At Šiauliai Air Base, Lithuania, the service members of the "Carpathian Vipers" detachment represent Romania in one of NATO's most visible and enduring missions. Since April, approximately 100 personnel and six F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft have been conducting Enhanced Air Policing missions over the Baltic region, contributing to the security of Allied airspace and reinforcing NATO's deterrence and defense posture on the Alliance's eastern flank.
For the Romanian Air Force, this deployment marks its fourth rotation to Lithuania and reflects Romania's continued commitment to NATO Air Policing missions. Behind every sortie stands a team of pilots, maintainers, and support personnel who ensure a constant readiness posture in a demanding operational environment.



MAINTAINING VIGILANCE

The first weeks of the deployment quickly brought operational taskings. In mid-April, Romanian F-16s were scrambled to identify a Russian IL-20 Coot-A aircraft operating in international airspace over the Baltic region without radio contact with air traffic control authorities. In accordance with NATO procedures, the aircraft was identified and monitored until it departed the area.
Later that month, Romanian crews launched in response to a formation of Tu-22M3 bombers escorted by Su-35S fighter aircraft. The mission was conducted in close coordination with Allied command-and-control structures and concluded once the formation left the area of responsibility.
These missions demonstrated the detachment's ability to respond rapidly and operate seamlessly within NATO's integrated air defense architecture.



Recognition came not only for the outcome of the mission, but also for the professionalism behind it. During a ceremony at Šiauliai Air Base, Lieutenant Colonel (AF) Alexandru Pavelescu was awarded the "Merit Emblem in the Service of Peace, First Class" by the Minister of National Defense, Radu Miruță, for his role in the engagement that resulted in the destruction of a drone that had entered Estonian airspace



On May 25, the same distinction was presented to Lieutenant Colonel (AF) Vlad Cristian Crețu by the Chief of Staff of the Romanian Air Force, Lieutenant General (AF) Leonard Baraboi. Beyond the individual recognition, the award reflected a broader reality familiar to every pilot: behind every mission stand a crew, a maintenance team, controllers, planners, and countless hours of preparation. The events of May 19 were the result of that collective effort

A HISTORIC AIR POLICING ENGAGEMENT

The deployment's most significant operational event occurred on May 19.
During an Air Policing mission, Lieutenant Colonel (AF) Alexandru Costel Pavelescu, patrol lead and pilot assigned to the 86th Air Base, engaged and destroyed a drone that had entered Estonian airspace. Flying alongside him was Lieutenant Colonel (AF) Vlad Cristian Crețu, who participated throughout the mission.
The identification and engagement process lasted approximately 33 minutes and required two successive engagement phases. Following positive identification and authorization in accordance with established procedures and rules of engagement, the target was successfully neutralized.
The event marked the first live air-to-air engagement conducted by a Romanian crew during a NATO Enhanced Air Policing mission.

RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM AND READINESS

Several days later, the achievement was recognized during a visit to Šiauliai by the Minister of National Defense, Radu Miruță, the Chief of the Defense Staff, General Gheorghiță Vlad, and the Chief of Staff of the Romanian Air Force, Lieutenant General (AF) Leonard Baraboi.
During a ceremony held at the air base, Lieutenant Colonel (AF) Alexandru Costel Pavelescu received the "Merit Emblem in the Service of Peace, First Class."
Addressing detachment personnel, the Minister emphasized that such achievements are built upon years of training, discipline, coordination, and teamwork. He also highlighted Romania's longstanding contribution to NATO Air Policing efforts in the Baltic region.
On May 25, Lieutenant Colonel (AF) Vlad Cristian Crețu received the same distinction. The award recognized the collective nature of the mission and the teamwork required throughout the engagement process, from target identification to mission execution.

MORE THAN A DEPLOYMENT

Beyond operational missions, Romanian personnel also participated in the "Runway Run 2026" event organized at Šiauliai Air Base on the occasion of NATO Day. Alongside Allied personnel and members of the local community, they celebrated the shared values, solidarity, and cooperation that underpin the Alliance.

THE MISSION CONTINUES.

Each day, Romanian aircraft and crews remain ready to respond to any activity that may affect the security of Allied airspace. Operating alongside NATO Allies, the "Carpathian Vipers" continue to demonstrate professionalism, readiness, and commitment while contributing directly to the defense of the Alliance's northeastern flank.

Sources: Ministry of National Defense, Romanian Air Force Staff
Public Affairs, Joint Forces Command
Photos: Bogdan Pantilimon, Laurențiu Turoi



OPERATIONS, TRAINING, AND CONTINUOUS ADAPTATION

Interview with Brigadier General (AF) Ciprian Marin, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Training, Romanian Air Force

There are officers who accumulate experience. And there are officers who turn experience into a way of leading. Brigadier General (AF) Ciprian Marin belongs to the second category. Trained in the cockpit of the IAR-330 helicopter and tested in operational deployments across three continents, he assumed the position of Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Training of the Romanian Air Force at a time when Romanian military aviation is undergoing accelerated transformation: two active F-16 squadrons, operational PATRIOT systems, an unprecedented tempo of multinational exercises, and the prospect of introducing fifth-generation aircraft into service.

In this context, training and operations are no longer administrative functions. They are pillars of readiness and Allied credibility. General Marin graciously agreed to answer questions from the *CER SENIN* editorial staff about lessons learned during operational deployments, the pressures of day-to-day readiness, and the essential direction of the Romanian Air Force – from the perspective of a professional shaped in the cockpit and now responsible for operations and training at the strategic level.

General, your professional career includes more than 1,450 flight hours on the IAR-330, service as an instructor, chief pilot, and commander of detachments in operational deployments. How has this path shaped the way you understand leadership, training, and responsibility in your current position as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Training?

Flying shapes your perspective in a unique way. In the cockpit, there is no opportunity to postpone a decision or pass responsibility to someone else. In critical moments, preparation, experience, and sound judgment matter most.

My time on the IAR-330 gave me far more than technical experience. It taught discipline, accountability, and decision-making under pressure. You learn to recognize mistakes, correct them, and remain composed when the situation becomes complicated.

Serving as an instructor gave me another important perspective. When you train other pilots, your role is not simply to pass on procedures and knowledge, but to build confidence, character, and professional responsibility. Over time, you understand that the success of an organization does not depend on one individual, but on the quality of the team.

Today, in my position as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Training, I try to apply those same principles. My main concern is ensuring that our people have the training, resources, and conditions they need to accomplish their missions to the highest standards. In the end, the most important investment is always the investment in people.

Your career has included missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Afghanistan, as well as command of the "Carpathian Pumas" detachment under the UN MINUSMA mission in Mali. What stays with you most from those experiences, and how do you carry those lessons into the way the Romanian Air Force prepares today to operate in complex and demanding environments?

Each overseas mission brought different experiences and different lessons. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, I saw how complex an operational environment can become when the military dimension is constantly influenced by political and security factors. It was a lesson in the importance of balance between firmness and sound judgment.

Afghanistan represented a different level of demand. Asymmetric threats, persistent risks, and missions conducted under difficult conditions tested the professionalism and mental resilience of our service members. There, I saw how critical thorough preparation, discipline, and the ability to act calmly under pressure really are.

In Mali, while commanding the "Carpathian Pumas" detachment, the challenges were different in nature. Vast distances, harsh environmental conditions, and logistical constraints required rigorous planning and a high degree of adaptability. Our crews executed complex medical evacuation, transport, and observation missions in an environment that continuously demanded the attention and professionalism of every individual.

Despite the differences between those deployments, the lesson remains the same: people make the difference. Equipment and technology are essential, but mission success depends above all on the preparation, character, and cohesion of the team. That is why we place particular emphasis on professional development and on training that reflects real-world conditions as closely as possible.

If we look at the Romanian Air Force as an integrated system – in which fighter aviation, transport aviation, helicopters, ground-based air defense, radar, communications, and logistics all work together – how do you see the role of air defense today, in the current geopolitical context, in maintaining the security of national and Allied airspace?

The security environment of recent years has shown once again that airspace defense does not rest on a single capability, but on the integrated functioning of a complex system. Aircraft, radar systems, command-and-control structures, air defense assets, and communications networks must work together to ensure a rapid and effective response.

In an increasingly dynamic security environment, the ability to detect, assess, and respond quickly is essential. For this reason, developing an integrated air defense architecture remains one of the Romanian Air Force's enduring priorities.

Bringing PATRIOT systems into operational service has been a significant step forward. These systems complement existing capabilities and help strengthen the defense of both national and Allied airspace. Together with radar systems, command-and-control structures, and the other components integrated into the NATO architecture, they reinforce Romania's defensive capacity and that of the Alliance's eastern flank.

Regardless of the technological level of the systems we operate, their effectiveness depends on the people who operate them. Recent experience has shown that vigilance, professionalism, and cooperation remain the essential elements of credible air defense.

The Romanian Air Force participates consistently in Air Policing missions – both in the Baltic states under NATO Baltic Air Policing and in national airspace, where Allies conduct Enhanced Air Policing missions. From your experience, what do these commitments mean for Romanian pilots, and how do they contribute to building a culture of professionalism and continuous adaptation?

Air policing missions provide some of the most valuable operational experience available to fighter pilots. These are real missions conducted on alert status, in which reaction time, precision, and adherence to procedures are essential.

For Romanian pilots, participation in Enhanced Air Policing or NATO Baltic Air Policing provides experience that cannot be fully replicated in exercises. These missions bring them into direct contact with Alliance operational standards and give them the opportunity to operate in a multinational environment under real conditions. At the same time, the presence of Allied forces in Romania contributes to strengthening interoperability and to the exchange of experience between participating air forces. The benefits are felt at every level – from flight crews and air traffic controllers to planning staffs and technical personnel.

Beyond the operational aspect, these missions help build a common professional culture. Over time, that culture of cooperation and mutual trust becomes second nature. That is, in essence, the foundation of interoperability within NATO.



"We continue to build on the legacy of those who came before us, and we have a duty to prepare those who will follow. That is what the Romanian Air Force has always stood for, and what drives every mission, every exercise, every hour of training."
– Brigadier General (AF) Ciprian Marin

Participation in multinational exercises has become a constant feature of Romanian Air Force life. How is the alignment with NATO standards and procedures felt in day-to-day training, and how does that experience translate when Romanian aircraft and crews operate in an integrated manner alongside partners?

Multinational exercises have become a natural part of Romanian Air Force activity. They are no longer isolated events, but part of the continuous process of training and operational development.

Each exercise brings different challenges and provides the opportunity to work alongside partners who contribute diverse experience and perspectives. Whether we are talking about Ramstein Flag, Saber Guardian, Dacian Spring, Dacian Fall, Anatolian Phoenix, or Steadfast Dart, all of them contribute to developing our ability to operate in an integrated manner within NATO.

Ramstein Flag is a relevant example. Its complex scenarios and emphasis on integrated air and missile defense provided a framework very close to the realities of a modern operational environment. In such situations, it is not enough to be highly proficient in your own specialty. You must understand how the entire Allied mechanism works and be able to integrate into it quickly.

Equally significant was the participation of the C-27J Spartan in Exercise Emerald Warrior 25. The transatlantic deployment represented not only a logistical challenge, but also a demonstration of the maturity reached by our crews and support structures.

The real value of these exercises is seen first and foremost in the experience our people gain. Over time, procedures, common operational language, and integrated working methods become second nature. That is the real gain – and one of the most important conditions for effective interoperability within the Alliance.

In an increasingly intense operational tempo, how is the balance maintained between preparation for domestic missions, multinational exercises, and overseas commitments – and what are the greatest pressures facing Romanian Air Force training today?

Maintaining the balance between current missions, multinational exercises, and overseas commitments is a permanent challenge, but also a necessity. The solution is not to reduce any one of these areas of activity, but to integrate them into a coherent planning and preparation process.

Participation in an air policing mission, a major exercise, or an overseas operation does not mean a break in the training process. On the contrary, these activities provide training opportunities under highly realistic conditions and contribute directly to the development of operational experience.

As for current challenges, the most significant remains human resources. Modern systems require highly trained personnel, and developing specialists takes time, continuity, and sustained investment. There are no shortcuts when it comes to building the competencies required to operate complex capabilities.

Another challenge is the accelerated pace of technological transformation. Digitization, systems integration, and the management of ever-larger volumes of information directly affect the decision-making process and the conduct of operations. For this reason, modernization must be viewed not merely as the acquisition of equipment, but as a continuous process of developing the competencies required to use that equipment effectively.

Ultimately, the success of modernization depends on our ability to develop people who can translate technology into operational effect.

Looking at the overall trajectory of the Romanian Air Force – from international missions and multinational exercises to capability modernization and the prospect of introducing fifth-generation aircraft – how do you see the essential directions taking shape for the years ahead?

The Romanian Air Force is going through one of the most significant transformation phases of recent decades. This is a process that goes beyond the simple modernization of equipment and aims to develop an air force capable of meeting the current and future demands of the security environment.

The introduction of the F-16 represented an essential step in this process. These platforms have enabled a higher level of interoperability and have accelerated integration into NATO's operational mechanisms. At the same time, they have contributed to the development of a new generation of specialists and to the consolidation of a modern operational culture.

The next major step is the introduction of the F-35. This transformation will affect not only the aviation component, but the entire associated ecosystem: infrastructure, logistics, training, maintenance, and command-and-control processes. It is a major step toward a new generation of capabilities.

In addition, the development of the European F-16 Training Center at Fetești and the expansion of training programs show that Romania is consolidating its role in training and Allied cooperation. These initiatives contribute both to the development of our own capabilities and to supporting partners and Allies.

In parallel, programs such as SAFE offer additional opportunities to accelerate modernization and to develop capabilities compatible with the defense objectives of NATO and the European Union.

At the close of this conversation, we are left with the image of an officer who learned to read the sky before he learned to lead people – and who understood, somewhere between the cockpit and the commander's desk, that the two are not as different as they may seem. In flight and at the strategic level alike, the stakes are the same: be present, decide in time, and never leave your team alone.
Thank you, General, for the candor and openness with which you spoke about your profession and about the people who, day after day, give substance to Romanian air power!

Interview by Adrian Sultănoiu

#WEARENATO



The Romanian Air Force in Exercise

„SEA SHIELD 2026”

Over the Black Sea, operational tempo is shaped not only by the movement of ships or the deployment of ground forces, but by the precise synchronization of all available capabilities. During multinational exercise SEA SHIELD 2026, conducted from March 23 to April 3, that synchronization was consistently enabled by the air component.
In a dispersed, fragmented, and dynamic operating environment, the Romanian Air Force served as the connective element across warfighting domains, providing mobility, rapid response, and real-time operational integration.

A Complex Operational Environment

SEA SHIELD 2026 brought together more than 2,500 service members from Romania and 12 Allied nations in a joint effort conducted simultaneously across the maritime, air, and land domains. Forty-eight vessels, dozens of combat vehicles, aircraft, and unmanned systems formed an integrated framework in which every component had a clearly defined role.
For the Romanian Air Force, this environment meant more than participation. It meant operating within a joint system in which speed of response and precision of execution became decisive factors.

Insertion, Extraction, Rescue — the Vertical Dimension of Operations

Crews from the 57th Air Base “Captain Aviator Constantin Cantacuzino” operated at a sustained pace, executing missions that defined the air mobility component of the exercise.
INFIL insertions conducted by parachute and FAST ROPE procedures enabled the rapid insertion of forces into areas of interest, while EXFIL missions ensured their safe extraction. At the same time, MEDEVAC and SAR operations demonstrated the ability to respond immediately in critical situations, in an environment where every minute mattered.
These missions were not executed in isolation. They were integrated into broader tactical scenarios in which coordination with naval and land forces was essential.

From Sea to Shore — Joint Air Support

The participation of the 86th Air Base expanded the operational reach of the exercise, directly linking the air domain with the maritime and land environments.
In the Black Sea basin, Anti-Surface Warfare (ASuW) missions contributed to developing the ability to identify and engage surface threats. Simultaneously, at the Babadag Range, Close Air Support (CAS) missions provided direct support to ground forces within a framework that demanded precise coordination and rapid response.
The integration of Bayraktar TB2 unmanned systems extended reconnaissance and target designation capabilities, while cooperation with the frigates Regele Ferdinand (221) and Regina Maria (222) strengthened the exercise’s naval-air dimension.

Mobility and Adaptability in a Fragmented Environment

Conducting activities across the Babadag Range, Mangalia, the Port of Constanța, and the open waters of the Black Sea created a dispersed training environment in which mobility became a critical factor.
For the Romanian Air Force, this meant simultaneous operations across multiple points of interest, sustained operational continuity, and rapid adaptation to evolving requirements. The air component ensured coherence of effort, facilitating the rapid transfer of capabilities and information among the various participating organizations.

Real Integration, Not Just Concept

SEA SHIELD 2026 demonstrated the level of maturity achieved in joint interoperability. Missions conducted alongside organizations such as the 164th Squadron and the 39th Diving Center highlighted the ability to plan and execute joint operations within a multinational framework.
For the Romanian Air Force, the exercise represented the practical validation of interoperability: common procedures, effective command-and-control flows, and the ability to operate in an integrated manner in real time.

A Presence That Defines Operational Tempo

During SEA SHIELD 2026, the Romanian Air Force demonstrated that operational superiority is not the product of a single capability, but of the way capabilities are integrated.
Through mobility, flexibility, and responsiveness, the air component helped define the tempo of joint operations, connecting warfighting domains and sustaining the collective effort of the participating forces. In a strategic environment such as the Black Sea, this capability is essential for maintaining a high state of readiness and reinforcing regional security.

Adrian Sultănoiu
Photo: Adrian Sultănoiu (archive)

SHEPPARD – WHERE NATO INTEROPERABILITY BECOMES REALITY

Romania at ENJJPT: A Strategic Investment in the Future of Military Aviation



Romanian Air Force Lietenant General (AF Leonard-Gabriel Baraboi, chief of the Romanian Air Force, and U.S. Air Force Col. Ryan Serril, 80th Flying Training Wing deputy commander at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas.General Baraboi visited the 80th Flying Training Wing, meeting with Airmen and leadership across the wing. He also met with Romanian instructors, student pilots and support personnel assigned to the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training program. U.S. Air Force photo by 2nd Lt. Dennis Melka

There are places in military aviation where differences in language, uniforms, and organizational culture are set aside in pursuit of a common objective: developing pilots capable of operating effectively in an integrated Allied environment. The Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training program (ENJJPT) is one of the most compelling examples of this reality, bringing together the standards, experience, and expertise of multiple NATO member nations within a single training system.

In April 2026, the Chief of Staff of the Romanian Air Force, Lieutenant General Leonard-Gabriel Baraboi, visited the ENJJPT program at the 80th Flying Training Wing, Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas. Beyond its official purpose, the visit underscored the strategic importance of Romania's participation in one of the world's most respected military pilot training programs.

For Romanian personnel currently undergoing training within the program, the meeting with the Chief of Staff reaffirmed that the experience gained at ENJJPT directly contributes to the development of a generation of aviators trained according to NATO operational standards and the principles of Allied interoperability.

A TRAINING SYSTEM BUILT ON ALLIED COOPERATION

Across the Alliance, ENJJPT is recognized as one of the most comprehensive and effective fighter pilot training programs. Fourteen nations contribute to its operation, and Romania has been a participant since 2017.

During the visit, the Romanian delegation met with representatives of the 80th Flying Training Wing to discuss current challenges facing modern military aviation, with particular emphasis on personnel retention, long-term workforce sustainability, training aircraft maintenance, and infrastructure modernization in support of future air capabilities.

The discussions also addressed the measures employed to sustain the T-38 Talon fleet, an aircraft that continues to play a critical role in the training of NATO fighter pilots. In a program that operates continuously throughout the year, every logistical and technical component directly influences both the pace and effectiveness of training.

Participants also emphasized that the success of any military training program ultimately depends on the quality, dedication, and professionalism of the people who sustain and develop it.

ROMANIAN AIRMEN WITHIN ENJJPT

Within the international community at Sheppard Air Force Base, Romanian instructors, student pilots, and support personnel contribute daily to the training of NATO's future fighter pilots.

During meetings with Romanian personnel assigned to the program, Lieutenant General Leonard-Gabriel Baraboi discussed the experience gained within ENJJPT, the demanding standards associated with training in a highly competitive environment, and the responsibility of representing the Romanian Air Force in a multinational setting.

ENJJPT representatives praised the professionalism and integration demonstrated by Romanian personnel, highlighting their consistent contribution to the program and their ability to operate effectively within Allied standards and procedures.

"LEADERSHIP MEANS RESPONSIBILITY"

The visit to ENJJPT also carried a strong human and professional dimension, reflected in the discussions held with Romanian instructors and student pilots training in the United States.

In remarks provided to CER SENIN magazine, the Chief of Staff of the Romanian Air Force spoke about the meaning of military leadership in an operational environment defined by constant change and adaptation:

"*Leadership is not about rank or recognition. It means responsibility. It means putting the mission first, taking care of the people under your charge, and making decisions that reflect honor even in the most difficult moments*."

General Leonard-Gabriel Baraboi also emphasized the importance of professional continuity and the transfer of experience between generations of aviators:

"*We continue to build on the legacy of those who came before us, and we have a duty to prepare those who will follow. True character reveals itself in difficult moments*."

Within a program such as ENJJPT, where young pilots from different nations train together from the earliest stages of their careers, these principles form the foundation of the professional culture that makes modern interoperability possible.

MORE THAN A TRAINING PROGRAM

For the Romanian Air Force, participation in ENJJPT represents far more than access to a world-class pilot training system. It means integration into an Allied environment where interoperability, standardization, and mutual trust are built through shared experience and sustained cooperation.

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At Sheppard Air Force Base, Romania actively contributes to preparing a new generation of aviators capable of operating in a complex and highly interconnected strategic environment. For young Romanian pilots at the beginning of their careers, the ENJJPT experience represents not only a major professional milestone, but also their first direct exposure to the international dimension of modern military aviation.

Story by Lorena Niță and Adrian Sultănoiu

NEPTUNE STRIKE 26

ROMANIAN AIR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN NATO'S LARGEST MARITIME AND AIR EXERCISE ON THE ALLIANCE'S SOUTHERN FLANK



The Romanian Air Force participated with F-16 fighter aircraft in the multinational exercise NEPTUNE STRIKE 26 (NEST26), which concluded on April 30, 2026. Conducted under the command of the Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO), headquartered in Oeiras, Portugal, the exercise spanned the Alliance's southern and southeastern flanks, as well as its northern flank, testing NATO's ability to project credible deterrence in a complex, multidomain operational environment.

NEST26 marked the second iteration of NATO's enhanced Vigilance Activities (eVA), a framework through which Allied forces exercise their ability to deploy rapidly and operate flexibly across the full breadth of Alliance territory, transcending national boundaries and individual operational domains—air, maritime, and land.

Romanian and British Aircraft, One Force

Within the exercise's air component, NATO Air Command (AIRCOM) integrated Royal Air Force Typhoon aircraft—already forward-deployed to Romania under NATO's enhanced Air Policing mission, Eastern Sentry—with Romanian Air Force F-16s. The integrated air operations focused on harmonizing tactics, procedures, and command-and-control arrangements, enabling Romanian and British aircrews to operate as a single, cohesive force.

"As a representative of the Romanian Air Force, I served as an air operations specialist within the Joint Operations Centre (JOC) at STRIKFORNATO headquarters during the multinational exercise NEPTUNE STRIKE 26. Participation in this exercise represented a significant professional challenge, as it was the first activity of this scale in which I have taken part. The complexity of the operational environment—characterized by the integration of forces across multiple operational domains and the execution of real-world deterrence missions involving air, maritime, and land assets—required a high degree of coordination and synchronization among participating organizations. Within the JOC, I contributed to the monitoring and coordination of air activities and participated in the planning and execution of joint operations. This exercise provided an opportunity to work alongside professionals from numerous Allied nations and to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of NATO operations. It was an extremely valuable experience, both professionally and personally," said Lieutenant Alexandru Apetrei of the Romanian Air Force.

Operating alongside Romanian and British aircraft were assets from Albania, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Montenegro, Portugal, and Türkiye.

"The fact that we were already deployed to Romania as part of our own eVA mission, Eastern Sentry, gave us a unique level of efficiency. NEPTUNE STRIKE allowed us to step beyond routine operations and train together against complex challenges, demonstrating that we can integrate seamlessly with our counterparts in the shortest possible time," said a Royal Air Force pilot participating in the exercise.

Operating in international airspace over the Black Sea, Allied air forces maintained a visible and continuous NATO presence in the region. These activities directly support NATO's 360-degree approach to deterrence and defense, ensuring the Alliance remains vigilant and capable of responding to threats from any direction.

NEPTUNE STRIKE 26 brought together carrier strike groups, amphibious ready groups, and land, air, and maritime forces from across the Alliance, underscoring NATO's ability to operate seamlessly across all domains and beyond national boundaries.

Together with Eastern Sentry, Arctic Sentry, and Baltic Sentry, NEPTUNE STRIKE forms part of the enhanced Vigilance Activities network, which spans the full extent of Allied territory—at sea, on land, and in the air—reaffirming the commitment of all 32 member nations to collective defense and regional stability.

Sources: STRIKFORNATO, NATO Air Command (AIRCOM), Royal Air Force



Rafale fighter jets participate in Neptune Strike 26 activities over the Mediterranean Sea



UK and Romanian fighter jets operating during NEST 26 - photo courtesy Royal Air Force



A NATO RQ-4D Phoenix approaches NAS Sigonella during Neptune Strike 26

FROM EXPERIMENTATION TO CAPABILITY: LCI-X CRUCIBLE 1-26 IN ROMANIA

NATO's ability to counter emerging uncrewed aerial system (UAS) threats depends not only on technology, but on how effectively the Alliance can integrate, test, and adapt that technology in realistic conditions. That is the purpose behind the Layered Counter-UAS Initiative (LCI-X), one of Allied Command Transformation's Beacon Projects. The new Crucible Series was created to help turn that effort into interoperable counter-UAS capability. Hosted by Romania at Capu Midia Training Range this month as a part of Exercise Eastern Phoenix 26, Crucible 1-26 marked the first event in the LCI-X series. Organized by the Romanian Ministry of National Defence with NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT), it brought together around 500 personnel and roughly 215 technical systems in a structured experimentation environment designed to move promising capability more quickly from demonstration toward operational relevance.

The event was significant not only for its scale, but also for the breadth of participation behind it. As one of ACT's Beacon Projects, LCI-X reflects the command's focus on initiatives with the potential to accelerate capability development for the Alliance. NATO ACT led the initiative with support from the NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC). Romania contributed around 250 personnel from across its armed forces, joint commands, and defence agencies, while industry partners added another 250 personnel. In total, the event brought together participants from 21 Allied nations through national representation, participating companies and defence-industry delegations.

What was tested on the range

The event was also notable for the scale and variety of systems brought together for testing across a 2.5 km area. These included more than 215 systems such as radars, acoustic and radio-frequency detectors, electronic warfare tools, and both kinetic and non-kinetic effectors (systems that can physically defeat a threat or disrupt it through other means such as jamming). Rather than evaluating each system on its own, the event brought them together into a counter-UAS cell combining detection, command and control, and defeat mechanisms to test how effectively they could work as a single integrated defence.

What made the event especially tangible was the activity on the range itself. At times, drones flew over the Black Sea in patterns intended to simulate swarm tactics. At others, small drones could be heard overhead until a successful interception brought sudden silence. Because the drones being engaged were target drones, participants were given realistic ways to test how well their systems could detect, track, disrupt, and defeat aerial threats in practice. Support from the NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC), including Ukrainian experts who helped incorporate current UAS tactics, ensured the event unfolded in a threat-informed environment.

That mattered because the challenge facing NATO is not simply identifying promising technologies but determining how different systems could work together under realistic conditions. Crucible 1-26 was therefore less about showcasing individual products than about testing whether capabilities could connect, communicate and perform as part of a broader interoperable network.

Our advantage lies in our ability to adapt faster than our adversaries. NATO gives nations a unique way to de-risk that adaptation together by testing what is available in the market, at scale, with industry from across the Alliance. Initiatives like LCI-X are a good example of this approach: they bring nations and industry together to test solutions, learn quickly, integrate what works, and turn innovation into capability. Very few actors can convene that breadth of nations, users, and companies to do this at speed. That is the real value of NATO, and of ACT.
– Admiral Pierre Vandier, Supreme Allied Commander Transformation

From capability demonstration to operational integration

The central shift within LCI-X is a move away from presenting technology in isolation toward validating operational effects. Systems were not assessed separately, but placed into realistic, threat-informed scenarios where success depended on coordination, integration, and the ability to contribute to a wider tactical cell.

This approach reflects a broader recognition across the Alliance that air defence cannot depend on a single solution. It requires multiple capabilities to function together coherently across sensing, command and control, and engagement. Crucible 1-26 provides the conditions to experiment with industry. Through its threat-informed scenarios, LCI-X exposes systems to operational friction, uncertainty, and the need for rapid coordination, generating evidence-based insights into what works and how systems perform together.

Industry as a partner in problem-solving

A defining feature of the Crucible Series is the role of industry as an active participant in experimentation. Companies are demonstrating capabilities, while working alongside NATO and national representatives to solve integration challenges in real time.

Many of the technologies relevant to counter-UAS defence are evolving rapidly in the commercial sector. By bringing industry into a realistic experimentation framework, NATO is gaining a better understanding of what is already available, how it performs in operational conditions, and what adaptations might be needed for integration into Allied structures. At the same time, participating companies are gaining clearer insights into NATO requirements, interoperability demands, and the practical realities of multinational operations.

Why this matters for NATO

Interoperability remains central to NATO's operational effectiveness. The Crucible Series provides a practical mechanism to connect national capability development with Alliance requirements, and commercial innovation in a single experimentation environment. This allows NATO and participating nations to assess how layered counter-UAS capability could be built in practice and at scale.

As the first event in the LCI-X Crucible Series, Crucible 1-26 established a baseline for further experimentation, with several testing events planned throughout 2026. Each is intended to build on previous insights and contribute to a growing body of knowledge about how NATO can field more effective, scalable, interoperable and rapidly adaptable counter-UAS capability across the Alliance.

Story by ALLIED COMMAND TRANSFORMATION (www.act.nato.int)









ROMANIA AT APROC 26: TRADITION, PROFESSIONALISM, AND INTEROPERABILITY IN PERSONNEL RECOVERY

A Romanian Benchmark in the Skies of Spain

Every year, APROC brings together some of Europe's most capable personnel recovery forces in an environment designed to test procedures, leadership, and teamwork under pressure. In May 2026, Romanian Air Force crews and Combat Search and Rescue specialists once again joined their Allied counterparts at Albacete Air Base, Spain, for the eighth edition of the Air Centric Personnel Recovery Operatives Course (APROC 26).

Representing Romania were two IAR-330 SOCAT helicopters assigned to the 71st Air Base and the 95th Air Base, alongside personnel from the Combat Search and Rescue Detachment. Together, they brought experience, professionalism, and a commitment to continuous improvement in one of the most demanding multinational training environments dedicated to personnel recovery.

WHERE RECOVERY BECOMES A TEAM EFFORT

Organized by the European Personnel Recovery Centre and hosted this year by Spain, APROC remains unique within Europe. It is the only live training event dedicated exclusively to personnel recovery forces, providing a realistic environment in which aircrews, recovery specialists, and mission planners refine their ability to operate together in complex and potentially hostile scenarios.

The course focuses not only on tactical proficiency, but also on developing future Recovery Mission Commanders capable of planning and leading operations in multinational environments. Common procedures, shared terminology, and integrated working methods help transform personnel from different nations into cohesive teams capable of acting quickly and effectively when lives depend on their decisions.

In personnel recovery operations, success depends on far more than equipment. It requires trust, preparation, and the ability of individuals and crews to operate seamlessly under pressure.

TRAINING UNDER REALISTIC CONDITIONS

APROC is built around a rigorous methodology in which mission objectives, threats, terrain, and available capabilities shape every scenario. Following the academic phase, participants enter an intensive period of simulated flights and practical missions designed to progressively increase complexity and operational pressure.

The scenarios closely replicate the realities of a hostile operational environment. Participants must contend with multiple risk factors, compressed timelines, and rapidly evolving situations that demand accurate decisions and flawless coordination.

Under these conditions, every mission becomes a test of judgment, teamwork, and adaptability. Success depends not only on individual performance, but on the ability of the entire force to function as a single, integrated system.

BUILDING EXPERIENCE YEAR AFTER YEAR

Romania's participation in APROC reflects a commitment that has steadily grown over time.

The Romanian Air Force first joined the course in 2022, when a detachment from the 95th Air Base completed an aerial deployment of approximately 3,000 kilometers to Spain–the longest mission of its kind for the IAR-330 SOCAT fleet at that time.

Since then, Romanian participation has expanded consistently. In 2023, Romania was among the five nations that deployed dedicated personnel recovery assets. In 2024, the 71st Air Base continued this effort, deploying two IAR-330 SOCAT helicopters alongside personnel from the 95th Air Base and extraction forces from the 90th Airlift Base.

The 2025 edition marked Romania's largest participation to date. Alongside two IAR-330 SOCAT helicopters, the Romanian task force integrated a legal advisor for the first time, reflecting the increasingly multidisciplinary nature of modern personnel recovery operations.

Each year has brought new lessons, new partnerships, and new opportunities to refine capabilities alongside Allied counterparts.

APROC 26 – ANOTHER STEP FORWARD

In 2026, the Romanian detachment built upon this accumulated experience in an operational framework that continues to grow in complexity and realism.

The crews from the 71st and 95th Air Bases, together with Combat Search and Rescue personnel, operated as part of a multinational force where interoperability was not simply discussed–it was practiced every day. The varied terrain surrounding Albacete, ranging from open countryside to mountainous areas, provided an ideal setting for scenarios that tested planning, coordination, and execution.

For the Romanian Air Force, APROC 26 represented more than training. It was an opportunity to validate procedures, strengthen partnerships, and continue developing capabilities essential to personnel recovery missions.

TOGETHER, ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

From May 4 to 15, the skies above Spain once again echoed with the sound of Romanian IAR-330 SOCAT helicopters operating alongside Allied aircraft and recovery forces. When the deployment concluded, Romanian crews returned home with more than additional flight hours and completed training objectives. They returned with strengthened partnerships, valuable lessons learned, and the confidence that comes from operating alongside trusted Allies in a demanding multinational environment.

For the Romanian Air Force, APROC 26 was not simply another exercise. It was another opportunity to invest in people, refine capabilities, and strengthen the readiness of those who stand prepared to recover others when circumstances are at their most challenging.

Together, anywhere, anytime!

Story and photo by Adrian Sultănoiu



DACCC HOSTED FIRST NATO AIR SUPPORT OPERATIONS CENTRE FOUNDATION TRAINING COURSE

The Deployable Air Command and Control Centre hosted NATO's first Air Support Operations Centre Foundation Training Course from May 12 to 22, 2026. Held at Poggio Renatico Air Base in Italy, the course provided initial training to personnel from Air Forces across NATO, preparing them to work in Air Support Operations Centres (ASOC) across the Alliance. Hosted by the Deployable Air Command and Control Centre (DACCC), the training marked an important step in building a common foundation of knowledge, procedures and professional understanding for personnel operating at the intersection of air and land operations.

Air Support Operations Centres are an essential element of Command and Control (C2) for air operations conducted in direct support of land forces. They help ensure air power is effectively integrated into land operations and contributes to mission success, while enabling the safe and efficient coordination of aircraft with artillery fires, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), friendly air defence, attack helicopters and support helicopters.

The new course was delivered alongside the established Initial Functional Joint Force Air Component Training Course (JFAC), which reached its 100th iteration in April 2026. Both courses were conducted in the DACCC's recently opened Lotto 4 training facilities at Poggio Renatico Air Base, further increasing the training value delivered by the centre and introducing students to the specific challenges of integrating air operations with land forces. The launch of the course reflects the growing importance of multidomain air-land integration in a complex operating environment. As NATO continues to adapt its tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP), training activities such as this strengthen readiness, interoperability and the Alliance's ability to conduct coordinated multi-domain operations in support of deterrence and defence.

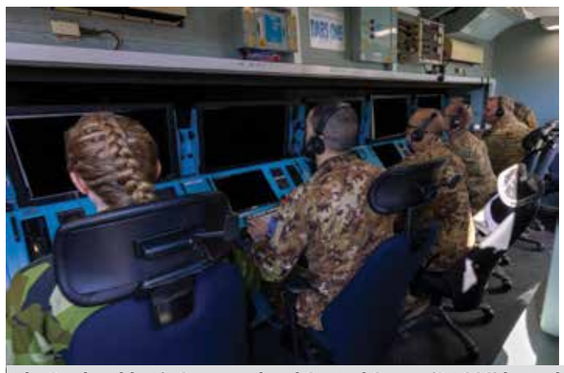
Students from 10 nations and different services took part in the course.

"In today's operating environment, air-land integration has become increasingly complex, particularly due to the growing congestion of airspace above the battlefield and the emergence of new technologies," said Italian Major General Luca Maineri, commander of the DACCC. "This makes the effective employment of Airpower essential to maintaining operational tempo and achieving mission success."

Experienced ASOC operators from the

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United Kingdom and the United States also supported the course, contributing to the review and further development of the training content to ensure it meets foundational requirements across the Alliance. By developing shared understanding and common procedures, the course supports NATO's defensive posture and strengthens the Alliance's ability to integrate air power effectively with land forces whenever and wherever required.





The Deployable Air Command and Control Centre (DACCC) hosted NATO's first Air Support Operations Centre Foundation Training Course from May 12 to 22, 2026. The training marked an important step in building a common foundation of knowledge, procedures and professional understanding for personnel operating at the intersection of air and land operations. Photos courtesy of the DACCC and NATO Allied Air Command.



The training brought together Romanian and Portuguese F-16 fighters, Lithuanian surface-based air and missile defence units (SBAMD), Spanish National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NSAMS) and a Romanian Patriot system in a counter-unmanned aerial system (c-UAS) scenario focused on Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD). Photos by French OR-9 Arnaud Chamberlin





ALLIED AIR COMMAND LEADS COUNTER-DRONE TRAINING OVER THE BALTICS UNDER EASTERN SENTRY

NATO Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) led counter-drone training over Lithuania and Latvia on May 27, 2026, as part of enhanced Vigilance Activity (eVA) Eastern Sentry.

The training brought together Romanian and Portuguese F-16 fighters, Lithuanian surface-based air and missile defence units (SBAMD), Spanish National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NSAMS) and a Romanian Patriot system in a counter-unmanned aerial system (c-UAS) scenario focused on Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD).

The Romanian 'Carpathian Vipers' detachment of F-16 fighters operating from Šiauliai, Lithuania, currently contribute to NATO's Air Policing mission in the Baltic region, providing a ready air defence capability under NATO command. Their participation in the counter-drone training linked day-to-day vigilance with wider IAMD activity, demonstrating how deployed Allied fighter detachments can support both routine safeguarding of NATO airspace and rapid responses to emerging airborne threats.

NATO's Airborne Warning and Control System provided airborne Command and Control (C2), cross-domain coordination and notional target information to air and ground assets. NATO's Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) Uedem coordinated and oversaw the activity, directing air defence operations across the region.

The mission strengthened NATO's ability to integrate air, ground and enabling assets into a cohesive air defence posture, demonstrating how Allied forces combine national capabilities under NATO command to detect, track and respond to airborne threats. IAMD is the backbone of NATO's air defence framework and Eastern Sentry demonstrates AIRCOM's contribution to the defence of NATO territory, populations and NATO airspace through a defensive, proportionate and coordinated posture on the Alliance's eastern flank.

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The training showed NATO's ability to conduct high-level air activity over the Baltic region while refining shared procedures, interoperability and operational cohesion among Allies, reinforcing deterrence and defence through ready, integrated and responsive Airpower.

ATHENA WARRIOR 26 LINKS SYNTHETIC TRAINING TO RAMSTEIN FLAG 26 AND EASTERN SENTRY

NATO Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) led Athena Warrior 26 from May 26 to 28, preparing Allied forces for Ramstein Flag 26. The multinational synthetic training event served as a preface to the upcoming AIRCOM-led live exercise, Ramstein Flag 26, which runs from June 8 to 19. Athena Warrior 26 was also conducted under enhanced Vigilance Activity (eVA) Eastern Sentry, strengthening AIRCOM's air defence shield on NATO's Eastern Flank following the Russian drone incursions of September 2025.

The training took place primarily at RAF Waddington's Air Battlespace Training Centre in the United Kingdom, using simulated airborne and ground-based Command and Control (C2), fighter aircraft, helicopters, ground-based air defence and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV). Allied nations across Europe participated remotely, providing scenario injects and inputs that drove the training environment and tested shared procedures across the Alliance.

"*We have had the opportunity to train joint operations over the network with multiple NATO nations with a wide range of capabilities,*" said Finnish Lieutenant Colonel Juuso Ilkka, AIRCOM's operational lead at RAF Waddington overseeing the training. "*These activities help optimize and strengthen integrated air defence cooperation.*"

The synthetic scenario unfolded in NATO's middle Joint Operations Area (JOA), overseen by Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFCBS) and NATO's Combined Air Operations Centre Uedem (CAOC-U) in Germany. The virtual environment allowed participants to push beyond normal airspace limitations, repeat complex scenarios and refine tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) in a secure and cost-effective setting.

Athena Warrior 26 will carry directly into the opening phase of Ramstein Flag 26. The Tactical Leadership Programme in Albacete, Spain, will also use simulators for Joint Operations Area Southeast training, adding further realism to the Ramstein Flag scenario and linking synthetic preparation to live execution.

Together, Athena Warrior 26, Ramstein Flag 26 and Eastern Sentry underscore AIRCOM's continuous focus on readiness, interoperability and air defence. By combining network-enabled training with live-fly operations, NATO strengthens its defensive, non-provocative and proportionate posture, safeguarding NATO territory, populations and NATO airspace.

#STRONGERTOGETHER

RAMSTEIN FLAG 2026:
ALLIED AIRPOWER FROM NORWAY TO SPAIN
MODERN AIRPOWER IS BUILT ON A SIMPLE PREMISE: NO NATION FIGHTS ALONE

In modern air operations, distance matters less than connectivity. Aircraft may launch from different countries, operate from dispersed locations, and belong to different air forces, yet they must be capable of acting as a single force when the mission requires it. Exercises such as Ramstein Flag are designed to build precisely that capability, bringing together Allied airmen, aircraft, and command structures in an environment that mirrors the complexity of contemporary operations.

From June 8 to 19, Ramstein Flag 2026 transformed the skies above Europe into one of NATO's largest and most demanding training environments. Conducted under Allied Air Command and integrated within the enhanced Vigilance Activity Eastern Sentry, the exercise brought together 18 Allied nations, more than 200 aircraft, and a wide range of air capabilities operating from locations stretching from northern Norway to southern Spain.

For the Romanian Air Force, participation came through two F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft from the 48th Fighter Squadron, 71st Air Base, forward-deployed to Lithuania for the duration of the exercise. Operating from NATO's eastern flank rather than from home station, Romanian crews joined Allied partners in missions designed to strengthen multinational integration and formation-level interoperability. Every sortie required coordination across national boundaries, aircraft types, and command structures. In such an environment, interoperability ceases to be a doctrinal concept and becomes an operational necessity.

The exercise focused on some of the defining challenges of modern air warfare. Integrated Air and Missile Defense, rapid information sharing, Counter Anti-Access/Area Denial operations, and Agile Combat Employment formed the foundation of the training effort. Together, these capabilities reflect the reality of contemporary conflict, where survivability, flexibility, and speed of decision-making are as important as firepower itself.

Counter-A2AD operations occupied a central place in the exercise. Across multiple operating locations, Allied aircrews rehearsed the identification, suppression, and neutralization of the radar systems, missile batteries, and electronic warfare capabilities that could threaten freedom of action in contested airspace. At Pirkkala Air Base in Finland, U.S. Air Force F-35As conducted missions against simulated integrated air defense systems, while in Norway, Italian F-35As operated alongside Norwegian, Belgian, Danish, and Turkish aircraft in similarly demanding scenarios. At Kallax Air Base in Sweden, NATO's Deployable Air Control Centre provided a shared recognized air picture, enabling participating aircrews to coordinate offensive operations against simulated threats within a common operational framework.

Fifth-generation aircraft played a significant role throughout the exercise. F-35s from Denmark, Italy, Norway, and the United States operated from locations across Finland and Norway, contributing advanced sensing, information-sharing, and battlespace awareness capabilities. Their integration with NATO command-and-control networks demonstrated how modern airpower increasingly depends on the rapid exchange of information across multiple platforms and domains.

Ramstein Flag 2026 also showcased the practical application of Agile Combat Employment. On June 8, U.S. Marine Corps F-35Bs landed on a highway strip in Tervo, Finland, marking the first Marine F-35B operation conducted on Finnish soil. The event also represented the first time Polish and Spanish aircraft operated from a Finnish roadway configured as a runway. Such activities demonstrated the Alliance's growing ability to disperse forces, operate from alternative locations, and maintain combat effectiveness under dynamic conditions.

Another milestone followed one week later, when a NATO E-3A AWACS aircraft landed at Kallax Air Base in Sweden for the first time in Alliance history after completing a surveillance mission over Poland. The landing illustrated that Agile Combat Employment principles are no longer limited to fighter aircraft, but can be applied across the full spectrum of Allied air capabilities.







Fifth-generation F-35 aircraft from Denmark, Italy, Norway, United Kindom and the United States contributed advanced sensing and data-sharing capabilities, while NATO's ISR Force provided persistent surveillance through RQ-4D Phoenix remotely piloted aircraft operating from Finland

Across Europe, fighter aircraft operated alongside airlift platforms, aerial refueling assets, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems, airborne warning and control aircraft, and remotely piloted platforms









For Romania, the exercise unfolded from Lithuania, where two F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft from the 48th Fighter Squadron, 71st Air Base, were forward-deployed for the duration of the event. Photo by Mihai Gava

The maritime dimension of Allied airpower was equally visible. Operating in the North Atlantic under Arctic Sentry, the United Kingdom's carrier strike group joined the broader training effort. HMS Prince of Wales launched F-35B aircraft while integrating with Allied naval forces in combined air and maritime activities. The participation of the carrier group reinforced a fundamental principle of NATO operations: airpower does not operate independently, but as part of a broader joint force capable of delivering effects across multiple domains.

On the ground, Norway's 51 Air Defence Battery employed NASAMS systems to protect Ørland Air Base while training in an environment characterized by unusually high volumes of Allied air traffic. The scenario provided valuable opportunities for air defenders to operate under realistic conditions while exchanging procedures and experience with Allied counterparts.

Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities also played a key role. While RQ-4D Phoenix remotely piloted aircraft conducted operations from Finland, mission analysis and intelligence production continued from Sigonella, Italy. The arrangement demonstrated how distributed structures can support a single mission, linking sensors, analysts, and decision-makers across significant distances while maintaining a coherent operational picture.

What Ramstein Flag 2026 ultimately demonstrated was not simply the ability of Allied aircraft to fly together. It showed the Alliance's capacity to integrate people, platforms, information, and procedures into a single operational framework. Across thousands of kilometers, airmen from different nations trained side by side, shared experience, and refined the habits of cooperation that underpin collective defense.

* * *

For Romanian personnel, the exercise offered more than valuable flying hours. It provided the opportunity to operate within one of NATO's most complex multinational training environments, contributing directly to the readiness, interoperability, and credibility of Allied airpower. As aircraft returned to their home stations across Europe, they carried with them not only completed training objectives, but also stronger professional relationships, deeper operational understanding, and renewed confidence in the ability of Allies to act together whenever and wherever required.

Story by Adrian Sultănoiu based on press releases of AIRCOM, Romanian MoD and ROU AF PAO. Photos courtesy of Allied Air Command Public Affairs Office

NATO ALLIED AIR COMMAND HOSTED INTERNATIONAL LEADERS FOR RAMSTEIN FLAG 2026

Supported by Allied Air Command, the host nations of Norway, Sweden, and Finland welcomed senior NATO and non-NATO military and civilian leaders to the High North to observe Exercise Ramstein Flag 2026 on June 15 and 16, 2026.

The two-day event took place across operational hubs in Bodø (Norway), Kallax (Sweden), and Rovaniemi (Finland). The visiting delegation included up to 13 members of the NATO Military Committee, led by the Committee Chair, Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, alongside 17 national air chiefs or representatives and five international ambassadors. The visits allowed officials to observe the scale of Allied Air Command's premier tactical-level exercise. It also demonstrated how the exercise strengthens the Alliance's deterrence and collective defense by enhancing operational readiness and interoperability.

The tour began at Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) Bodø, the lead command facility for this third iteration of the exercise. Integrating this Norwegian facility enhances operational awareness in the High North and provides vital redundancy within the NATO command structure. Alongside CAOCs in Spain and Germany, this framework ensures continuous air operations across the Alliance.

"*In the air domain, deterrence and defence require the integration of science, operational art, engineering, computing and human performance. Together, these allow NATO to detect, understand, decide and act across 360 degrees, from every direction and against every threat. This is what our societies expect from us,*" underlined Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone.

The delegation then traveled to Kallax Air Base in Sweden to observe how one of the several main operating bases provide high-end training opportunities, involving realistic problem sets in a complex operational environment. In this framework, Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept focuses on dispersing aircraft to austere or temporary locations to increase survivability and maintain power projection. The high-level group witnessed Swedish Gripen fighter jets conduct rapid refueling and rearming operations - known as a "quick turnaround"- under simulated combat conditions. As a core element of the NATO ACE concept, this practice demonstrates how an aircraft can land, get re-armed and refueled and immediately return to the air within minutes.

"*As we've seen in the past week and a half, this iteration of Ramstein Flag stretches from the northernmost parts of Norway to the southern reaches of Spain, showcasing Allied Airpower's 360-degree approach to defend every inch of NATO territory,*" said Lt Gen Jason T. Hinds, commander of Allied Air Command. "*The scale of this exercise is a testament to NATO's determination to counter modern and emerging threats through distributed operations across NATO's Joint Operations Areas.*"

Ramstein Flag 2026 also marked a milestone in NATO Airborne Early Warning and Control (AWACS) history. On June 15, 2026, a NATO E-3A landed in Kallax, Sweden, for the first time, following a successful surveillance mission over Poland. Furthermore, the AWACS deployment in Lithuania for the exercise further supports the NATO ACE concept, enhancing flexibility, resilience, and survivability by operating from dispersed locations. The realistic and high-intensity scenario of Ramstein Flag exercise provided also the opportunity for AIRCOM's Evaluation Division (EVALS) to proof AWACS team. This team is responsible for evaluating and certifying that NATO forces maintain the Alliance's strict operational standards.

During the flight transportation to Rovaniemi Air Base, the group observed a simulated interception mission (Alpha Scramble) between Swedish and Finnish airspace. These interceptions highlighted NATO's 24/7 commitment to safeguarding Allied territory through Air Policing missions under the enhanced Vigilance Activities (eVA) Eastern Sentry framework. The mission demonstrated outstanding flexibility, interoperability, and cohesion among the participating nations and air crews, while underlining NATO's commitment to countering emerging and modern threats through distributed operations and various sets of different effectors.

At Rovaniemi Air Base, Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk highlighted the strategic importance of the Arctic region and NATO's commitment under the eVA Arctic Sentry framework. This initiative provides a key opportunity to align Allied exercises and operations across the Arctic and High North in a focused, cohesive manner.

"*The High North and North Atlantic present unique operational challenges that require NATO forces to integrate capabilities across domains, synchronize effects across vast distances and maintain freedom of manoeuvre in a rapidly evolving security environment,*" said Vice Admiral James Morley, Deputy Commander of JFC Norfolk. "Ramstein Flag demonstrates the Alliance's ability to connect sensors, decision-makers and forces across the battlespace, integrating air, maritime, land, cyber and space-enabled capabilities through resilient command and control networks.

"*By enhancing interoperability, shared situational awareness and the ability to generate and sustain combat power from dispersed locations, the exercise strengthens NATO's capacity to deter, defend and respond as a unified force across the northern flank,*" he added.







The two-day event took place across operational hubs in Bodø (Norway), Kallax (Sweden), and Rovaniemi (Finland). The visiting delegation included up to 13 members of the NATO Military Committee, led by the Committee Chair, alongside 17 national air chiefs or representatives and five international ambassadors. Photo courtesy Norwegian Air Force, Fanny Chesiere (AIRCOM) and Martin Mellquist (AIRCOM)



EASTERN SENTRY STRENGTHENS NATO'S AIR DEFENCE POSTURE ON EASTERN FLANK

NATO's Eastern Sentry initiative is strengthening the Alliance's air defence posture along its Eastern Flank, bringing together Allied air, land, maritime, cyber and space capabilities to respond to evolving security challenges.

Eastern Sentry reflects a shift from a traditional air policing approach towards a broader air defence posture focused on protecting NATO territory, populations and forces. The initiative enhances NATO's ability to detect, track and respond to threats through a coordinated, multi-domain approach that integrates capabilities across the Alliance.

"*Eastern Sentry is NATO's response and shift from an air policing mindset to an air defence mindset,*" said Lieutenant Colonel "Thor". "*It is a shift from the air policing connotation of controlling the skies to protecting where and when NATO can.*"

The operation brings together a wide range of Allied capabilities under a single command structure, including fighter aircraft, surface and sea-based air and missile defence systems, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms, maritime assets, mobile radar systems and command-and-control networks. These capabilities contribute to a layered defensive posture designed to detect, track and respond to threats across the Eastern Flank.

A key feature of Eastern Sentry is its emphasis on multi-domain integration. Air operations are coordinated with land, maritime, cyber and space capabilities to create a comprehensive defensive network capable of responding to increasingly complex threats.

"*There is no silver bullet to solve the threat of airspace violations,*" Thor said. "*It is important that the various domains work together to identify solutions for the evolving threat.*"

One example is NATO's work on counter-unmanned aerial systems (C-UAS), where Allied Air Command is coordinating closely with NATO's land component to improve integration, innovation and experimentation against emerging drone threats.

Eastern Sentry also strengthens NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) architecture by connecting sensors, command-and-control systems and effectors across the Alliance. This enables faster decision-making, improved situational awareness and the timely employment of defensive capabilities, ensuring the right capabilities are positioned and connected to respond when required.

The initiative's focus on flexibility and agility will continue during Exercise Ramstein Flag 2026, from 8th to 18th June across all Europe, where Allied forces will train Integrated Air and Missile Defence, Counter Anti-Access/Area Denial, Agile Combat Employment, command and control, and interoperability. The exercise will further refine NATO's ability to deliver a rapid, coordinated response in defence of the Alliance's Eastern Flank.

By integrating capabilities across domains and nations, Ramstein Flag 2026, as part of Eastern Sentry, demonstrates NATO's commitment to deterrence and defence. These initiatives enhance the Alliance's readiness to respond to evolving threats while helping safeguard NATO territory, populations and NATO airspace through a defensive, proportionate and coordinated approach.





Romanian Air Force at BSDA 2026:
Capability on Display, Partnership in Focus



The Romanian Air Force took part in the 10th edition of Black Sea Defense & Aerospace (BSDA) 2026, the international defense, aerospace, and security exhibition held at ROMAERO in Bucharest from May 13 to 15. Marking 20 years since its launch, this year's edition was presented as the largest to date, bringing together more than 550 exhibiting companies from 36 countries and reaffirming BSDA's role as a leading forum for the Black Sea region's defense and security community.

For three days, Bucharest became a meeting point for strategic dialogue, professional exchange, and defense cooperation. In a security environment defined by rapid technological change and persistent regional challenges, events such as BSDA go beyond the exhibition floor. They provide a setting where armed forces, industry, and institutions can discuss capability development, interoperability, and the future of defense. For the Romanian Air Force, participation in BSDA 2026 represented an opportunity to strengthen ties, share experience, and present the standards, discipline, and adaptability that define military aviation. Visitors had the opportunity to see equipment and platforms currently in service with the Romanian Air Force and to learn more about military career opportunities through dedicated recruitment stands staffed by Air Force personnel. The static display included IAR-330 SOCAT and IAR-330 PUMA L-RM helicopters, an F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft, a TPS 79 R mobile radar, an EOD vehicle, CBRN reconnaissance vehicles, and a PATRIOT surface-to-air missile system. These assets reflected not only operational capability, but also the breadth of missions carried out every day in support of national and allied defense.

For military personnel and military aviation enthusiasts alike, BSDA 2026 offered a clear reminder that modern air power is built on more than aircraft alone. It depends on integrated systems, trained crews, resilient support structures, and enduring partnerships. In that sense, the Romanian Air Force presence at ROMAERO was both a demonstration of capability and a reaffirmation of commitment to continuous development, professional excellence, and NATO interoperability.

Foto: Alex Nițu, Bogdan Pantilimon








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NATO ALLIES DEMONSTRATED DETERRENCE AND ASSURANCE DURING EXERCISE COBRA WARRIOR



The Royal Air Force (RAF) is hosted its biannual exercise, Cobra Warrior 2026-1 (COWA26-1), the United Kingdom's premier tactical air training event. This high-end exercise brings together Allied air forces to refine collective defence strategies and enhance multinational integration within an increasingly complex security environment.

COWA26-1 is deliberately designed to challenge participants across the high-end spectrum of warfighting. It serves as the culmination of rigorous preparation, ensuring that NATO nations' air forces remain integrated, adaptable, and capable of addressing mutual security challenges globally. The primary objective of COWA26-1 is to advance joint mission planning and tactical execution within a Composite Air Operation (COMAO) environment. By hosting German and Polish Allies, the exercise provides a critical platform to synchronize Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) against a peer-competitor adversary. Beyond technical proficiency, Cobra Warrior serves as a high-level leadership incubator. The program is specifically tailored to produce elite Mission Commanders (MC) and Functional Team Leaders (FTL), trained to execute Mission Command effectively within coalition operations, ensuring that NATO's command structure remains resilient, decentralized, and lethal.

"Training with our Allies in such a demanding environment is immensely valuable," said Group Captain Robertson, Exercise Director.

"It enables participants to develop and practise the leadership skills required to synchronise multi-platform air manoeuvres with cross-domain effects in a multinational setting. This level of training is essential to sustaining our operational advantage," Robertson concluded.

The exercise stands as a testament to the consistent, steadfast commitment and contribution to NATO's collective defence. COWA26 showcases the overall intent to maintain warfighting excellence alongside strategic Allies, further reinforcing the operational vigilance that underpins the 'Eastern Sentry' framework. Through constant refinement and shared lessons learned, Cobra Warrior ensures that Allied air forces remain a capable, credible, and prepared force. By demonstrating these robust deterrence and assurance capabilities, NATO Allies send a clear message of unity and readiness to respond to any threat against the Alliance's integrity, bridging tactical excellence with the persistent regional security objectives of the Eastern Flank.



NATO'S 100TH AIR COMMAND TRAINING COURSE MARKS HISTORIC MILESTONE AT DACCC IN ITALY

The 100th Initial Functional Joint Force Air Component Training (IFJT) course graduated at Poggio Renatico, marking a significant milestone in NATO's air command and control history.

The course is hosted by the Deployable Air Command and Control Centre (DACCC), which has become the gold standard for preparing multinational personnel to operate within a Joint Force Air Component. Established following lessons identified during Operation Unified Protector over Libya, the program has evolved from a basic orientation into a comprehensive curriculum focused on modern operational planning within a multi-domain construct.

"The success of the 100th iteration is a testament to the enduring strength of the Alliance," said Major General Maineri, Commander of the DACCC. "It proves that when we train together, we stand stronger together in the defence of our shared values."

Major General Maineri's remarks highlight how the evolution of this training directly supports NATO's transition toward modern multi-domain operations and reinforced collective protection.

The diversity of the 100th course reflects the current geopolitical landscape, drawing 33 participants and mentors from 15 nations across Europe and North America. Students represent the Combined Air Operations Centres in Spain, Germany, and Norway, as well as Air Command and various national force elements. This milestone coincides with a renewed focus on collective defence. Unlike training in previous decades that focused on "out-of-area" missions, current iterations prioritize the deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area.

Reaching this 100th iteration represents over 3,000 NATO officers and non-commissioned officers trained for air command and control duties at this single location. This specific session is the first to be delivered within the DACCC's newly inaugurated Lotto 4 structures, which provide dedicated operations rooms and a Battle Lab for experimenting with innovative tactics to meet future air domain challenges.

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Poggio Renatico in Italy serves as the home of the DACCC, the only NATO entity capable of deploying its own radar and communications equipment to manage air operations directly from the field. The training ensures that when the Alliance conducts complex multinational operations, staff members are synchronized in their language, procedures, and tactical mindset.

2026 NATO SPACE OPERATIONS COMMANDERS CONFERENCE STRENGTHENS COOPERATION

Space commanders from NATO Allies and partner nations met at Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) from May 27 to 28, 2026. The annual NATO Space Operations Commanders Conference brought together commanders and subject matter experts at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, to strengthen cooperation, share expertise and deepen strategic ties across the Alliance and with partner nations.



This year's conference focused on setting the NATO Space Command and Control (C2) Concept of Operations (CONOPS), with discussions on a campaign approach to NATO plans; multi-domain escalation dynamics; and space enablement of joint multi-domain operations. These themes underpin the Alliance's commitment to space capability development, information sharing and integration of space support into NATO missions and operations. The event at AIRCOM showed the importance of having common standards, interoperability and multinational coordination in a domain that is essential to modern deterrence and defence.

"Space is no longer just a support activity; it is a joint operating area, like any other domain for deterrence and defence," said U.S. Colonel Jonathan L. Whitaker, chief of staff of NATO's Space Theatre Component and director of the NATO Space Operations Centre.

"What happens in the orbital joint operating area has serious consequences across every other domain, and that is why NATO's investments in space are right and necessary."

Whitaker recently conducted an in-depth interview discussing space's primal role in NATO operations on The Allied Airpower Podcast.

NATO recognised space as an operational domain in 2019. The NATO Space Operations Centre, located at Allied Air Command and staffed by a multinational team of military personnel and civilian experts, supports the NATO Space Theatre Component by coordinating Allied space activities, supporting NATO missions and operations from space and helping protect Allied space systems through appropriate information sharing.

U.S. General Stephen N. Whiting, commander of U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM), also attended the conference. Following the conference at AIRCOM, he led a special gathering of Allied and partner nations under the auspices of USSPACECOM's Multinational Force Operation Olympic Defender (MNF-OOD). The multinational force is composed of Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany, and New Zealand. This seven-nation consortium represents a concerted effort by Allies and partners to optimise space operations; improve mission assurance; enhance resilience of space-based systems; synchronise efforts to strengthen deterrence against hostile actors and reduce the spread of debris orbiting the Earth.

"Space is a team sport, and every partner and Allied nation here this week plays a critical role," the general said at the conference. "The opportunity to share perspectives and best practices will strengthen our integrated approach and help ensure there is never a day without space."

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By strengthening coordination among national space operations centres, agencies, organisations and commercial partners where appropriate, the conference supports NATO's ability to respond to current and emerging threats. Continued cooperation in space reinforces the Alliance's readiness, resilience and collective defence, preserving peace and stability across the Euro-Atlantic area.

NATO AGENDA



A Greek F-16 takes off.
Photo by OR-6 Martin Mellquist



F/A-18 Hornets from the Spanish Air and Space Force taxi at Araxos Air Base.
Photo by OR-9 Fanny Chesiere



German Air Force Tornado painted in special color for NATO Tiger Meet.
Photo by OR-9 Fanny Chesiere

NATO ALLIES STRENGTHENED INTEROPERABILITY DURING NATO TIGER MEET 2026

From May 4 to 15, 2026, aircraft and personnel from across the Alliance gathered at Araxos Air Base in Greece for Exercise NATO Tiger Meet 2026, hosted by 335 Squadron of the Hellenic Air Force. Bringing together aircrew, maintainers and support personnel from nine Allied nations, the exercise focused on improving interoperability, refining tactics and strengthening cooperation in a demanding multinational environment.

Originally established in 1961 as a meeting between a small number of squadrons sharing the tiger emblem, the NATO Tiger Association has evolved into a major multinational training event involving fighter aircraft, helicopters and supporting assets from across the Alliance. This year's exercise included participation from Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain and Switzerland. Participating units operated a wide range of aircraft, including F-16 Fighting Falcons, Eurofighters, Gripens, Tornados, Hornets, Venom helicopters and HH.101 helicopters.

In modern warfare, where skies serve as both battlegrounds and corridors of deterrence, the mastery of air power stands paramount

Lieutenant General Dimosthenis Grigoriadis, Chef of the Hellenic Air Force General Staff, highlighted the strategic importance of multinational training in today's security environment. "In modern warfare, where skies serve as both battlegrounds and corridors of deterrence, the mastery of air power stands paramount," he said during the exercise Distinguished Visitors' Day. "Exercises like the NATO Tiger Meet provide the ideal framework to train as a team, to enhance interoperability, and to ensure that we can respond collectively, decisively, and effectively to any emerging threat."

He also underlined the importance of adapting to evolving threats, including the growing role of unmanned systems and multi-domain operations.

"The nature of warfare is rapidly evolving," Grigoriadis said. "We are witnessing the increasing use of low-cost, highly effective unmanned combat aerial vehicles, which are reshaping the battlespace and challenging traditional concepts of air superiority."

For Brigadier General Michel, French Air Force (Ret.), and now advisor to the NATO Tiger Association, interoperability remains at the centre of the exercise.

"The NATO Tiger Meet is a nest of interoperability, a nest of friendship, and a nest of tradition," he said. "There is something very strong in the links between the participating units."

Throughout the two-week exercise, participating units trained together in increasingly complex scenarios designed to replicate modern operational challenges. Aircrews integrated while working against simulated threats in contested environments.

"Each year we meet together to improve our tactics, work together, and adapt to emerging threats such as drones and missiles," Michel said. "The exercise evolves continuously to remain realistic and relevant to the security environment we face today."

The exercise also incorporated non-fighter capabilities to create a more comprehensive operational environment. "We also integrate supporting assets that are not part of the Tiger community, such as drones, NATO Airborne Early Warning and Control Force (NAEW&CF), and naval units at sea, in order to create the most realistic operational environment possible," Michel added.

For NATO Allies, exercises such as Tiger Meet provide more than tactical training. They help build trust between aircrews, commanders and support personnel who may one day operate together in real-world missions and operations.

"As conflicts around the globe continue to unfold, the imperative to shape superiority and ensure security in the skies remains the only route to a stable and prosperous future for our nations," Lieutenant General Grigoriadis said.

Looking ahead, organisers emphasised that multinational training and cohesion will remain essential for Alliance readiness.

"We are already working on the future editions of the NATO Tiger Meet with a long-term plan, because we believe this interoperability is essential," Michel said. "We need to continue training together to be ready to face challenges together, like tigers."

Participating units included:

- 31 Squadron, Belgian Air Force – F-16A/B MLU Fighting Falcon - Best OPS trophy
- 21° Gruppo, Italian Air Force – HH.101 Caesar - The winner of the Silver Tiger and the Special painted aircraft
- 335 Mira, Hellenic Air Force – F-16C/D Fighting Falcon
- Staffel 11, Swiss Air Force – F/A-18C/D Hornet
- Taktisches Luftwaffengeschwader 51, German Air Force – Tornado IDS and ECR
- 221 Helicopter Squadron, Czech Air Force – AH-1Y Venom – awarded for Special Tiger Spirit
- 12° Gruppo, Italian Air Force – EF-2000 Eurofighter
- Ala 15, Spanish Air and Space Force – EF-18+ Hornet
- 101/1 Squadron, Hungarian Air Force – JAS-39C/D Gripen
- 6th Tactical Squadron, Polish Air Force – F-16C/D Fighting Falcon

The winner of the Special painted aircraft and also the Silver Tiger is 12° Gruppo, Italian Air Force 12° Gruppo is also set to host NTM 2027 in Gioia del Colle.



A Belgian Air Force pilot climbs out of his F-16 after a flight.
Photo by OR-9 Fanny Chesiere



An Italian Air Force doorgunner during a training mission.
Photo by OR-6 Martin Mellquist



The Italian Air Force Eurofighter Typhoon, which won the special colour competition.
Photo by OR-9 Fanny Chesiere



The Prunariu–Popov crew reporting mission readiness prior to launch



Soiuz-40



The Prunariu–Popov crew during mission preparations. On April 7, 1981, they were visited by a Romanian Television team and interviewed by renowned journalist Alexandru Stark



The Prunariu–Popov crew during final preparations for their space mission. April 7, 1981

MAY 14, 1981 – ROMANIA REACHES THE SKY

The space flight of Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu – a page of history, a benchmark of excellence, and a strategic legacy for the future

On May 14, 1981, Romania entered an extremely select group of nations capable of sending humans into outer space. Aboard the Soyuz-40 spacecraft, aviation engineer and officer Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu became the first Romanian to cross beyond Earth's atmosphere. On the anniversary of this historic flight, we are reminded not only of a remarkable individual achievement, but also of a strategic milestone in the development of Romanian science and aviation – proof that professional excellence, sustained by rigor and vision, can carry a nation into domains once reserved for the great powers.

THE ROAD TO THE STARS

Behind the May 1981 flight stood no stroke of luck, but rather a complex process of selection, training, and determination. In the context of the 1970s, Romania's participation in a space program seemed to many more like a distant dream than a realistic prospect. Even so, the Intercosmos program opened this historic opportunity, and the selection of candidates marked the first step in an exceptionally demanding competition.

On January 1, 1978, following an initial selection process, three candidates were chosen to continue: Captain Dumitru Dediu, engineer Cristian Guran, and engineer Dumitru Prunariu. The three were sent to Moscow, where they underwent a decisive evaluation by specialists from the Institute of Biomedical Research in the field of aviation and cosmonautics. The process allowed no margin for compromise – medical and psychological standards of extraordinary rigor filtered the candidates with surgical precision. Of the three, only Dumitru Dediu and Dumitru Prunariu passed this first barrier and remained in the competition.

"*When they were looking for volunteers, we could not believe it was about space… Space seemed so far away.*" – Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu, recalling the moment of selection

The two then proceeded to the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in Zvyozdny Gorodok – Star City – near the Soviet capital, where they began training alongside candidates from Bulgaria, Hungary, Mongolia, Cuba, and later Vietnam. The candidates lived there permanently with their families, a mandatory condition that underscored the total commitment required by the mission.

The training itself was a three-year marathon. At the Yuri Gagarin Center, the future cosmonaut completed a multidisciplinary program that included intensive physical training, capsule simulations, zero-gravity exercises aboard aircraft, advanced theoretical studies in physics and astronomy, spacecraft systems training, and language instruction. All of this was intended to develop not merely a specialist, but an officer capable of operating under extreme conditions in an environment entirely hostile to human life.

From an initial group of 17 candidates across the program, the selection gradually narrowed. On May 12, 1981, the final decision was made: Dumitru Prunariu was selected to fly. His colleague, Dumitru Dediu, became the backup cosmonaut – a thankless but equally honorable role, since their training had been identical and the difference came down to fractions of points in specialty evaluations.

THE LAUNCH – THE MOMENT THAT CHANGED HISTORY

The evening of May 14, 1981, at 2016 hours Bucharest time. From the Baikonur Cosmodrome in the steppes of Kazakhstan, the engines of the launch vehicle shattered the silence of the desert. Within minutes, hundreds of tons of propellant had been consumed, lifting the Soyuz-40 spacecraft beyond the blue layer of the atmosphere and placing the crew into orbit at approximately 17,400 miles per hour. The following day, the spacecraft docked with the Salyut-6 orbital station, a rendezvous point in the vast cosmic void.

Alongside Soviet Commander Leonid Popov – a seasoned cosmonaut who, at the time, held the world record for time spent in space, at 185 days – Prunariu entered a sustained operational rhythm typical of research space missions. Every moment of the nearly eight-day mission was planned with precision, each experiment carrying clear objectives and strictly defined parameters.

Technical Data – Soyuz-40 Mission:

- **Launch: May 14, 1981, at 2016 hours Bucharest time**
- **Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan**
- **Docking with orbital station Salyut-6**
- **Duration: approximately 8 days**
- **Landing: May 22, 1981**
- **Number of experiments: 22**
- **Crew: Colonel Leonid Popov (USSR) and Lieutenant Colonel Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu (Romania)**

The transition from ground to space is, by its very nature, one of the most violent experiences to which the human body can be subjected. The multiple G-forces in the first seconds of launch, the colossal roar of the engines, the vibrations running through the entire assembly, and then, suddenly, the absolute silence of the cosmic void – all of these mark a threshold that cannot be fully described in words. Prunariu crossed it with the composure of a well-trained officer, but also with the emotion of a man who knew he was making history.

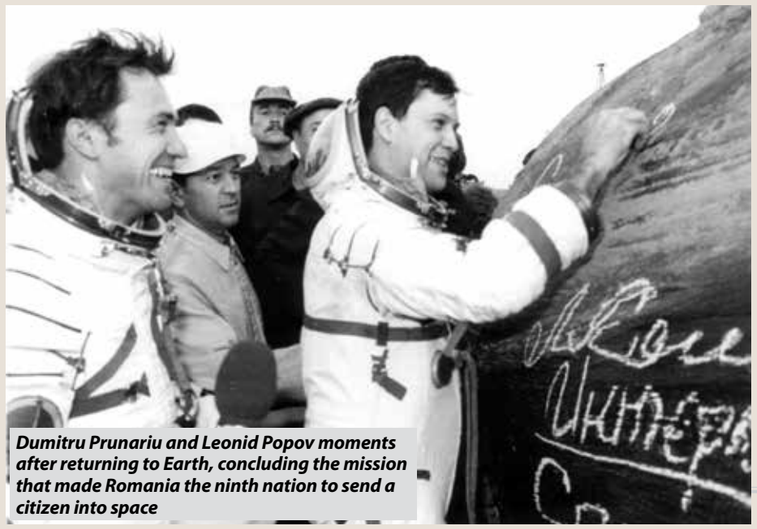
"*By completing that space flight, which has become historic, I became the 103rd human being to reach space. Romania became a country that demonstrated its scientific capability in extra-atmospheric space.*" – Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu

ROMANIAN SCIENCE ABOARD SALYUT-6

The 22 experiments conducted during the mission covered a remarkably diverse range of fields: astrophysics, cosmic radiation studies, biology, space medicine, and psychology under isolation conditions. A key point is that the majority of these experiments were conceived by Romanian researchers, giving the mission a genuine national scientific dimension.



Official portrait of the Dediu–Romanenko and Prunariu–Popov crews ahead of the Intercosmos mission. April 19, 1981



Dumitru Prunariu and Leonid Popov moments after returning to Earth, concluding the mission that made Romania the ninth nation to send a citizen into space

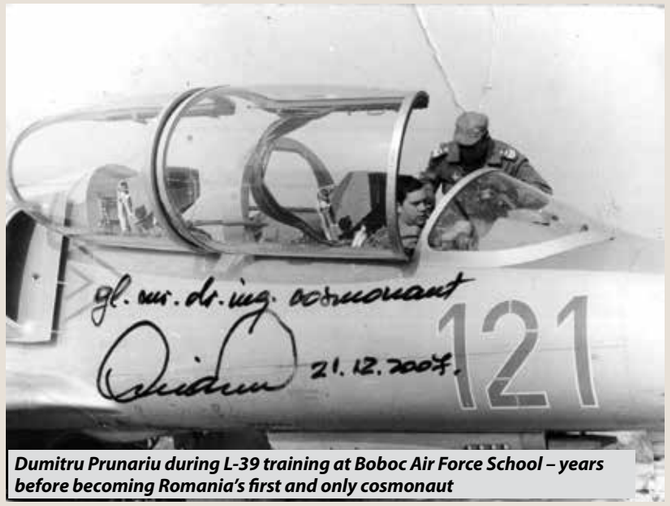
The equipment used – developed in Romania's state institutes and enterprises – stood out for its miniaturization, reliability, and low power consumption, essential qualities in the space environment, where every gram and every watt count. The fact that Romanian instruments performed flawlessly aboard the Soviet station constituted an international validation of domestic engineering capability.

Astrophysics and cosmic radiation were a priority area, with experiments aimed at measuring and characterizing high-energy particle fluxes striking spacecraft – information essential to the design of future equipment. Biology and space medicine focused on studying the adaptation of the human body to microgravity, with direct implications for future long-duration missions. Psychology experiments conducted under isolation conditions contributed to a better understanding of human behavior in small, confined teams under continuous stress – directly relevant to any future space exploration mission.

THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE – BEYOND PERFORMANCE

Beyond technical rigor and scientific results, the mission carried a profound human dimension. Adapting to microgravity – where objects float freely, liquids form perfect spheres, and the concepts of up and down become mere conventions – demands as much from the mind as from the body. Isolation from the terrestrial environment, awareness of distance from loved ones, and the perception of a fragility that cannot be imagined from the ground: all of these represent major challenges for any cosmonaut.

Viewing Earth from space produces, universally, a transformation of perspective. The planet appears small, vulnerable, and surrounded by the absolute black of the void. Borders disappear. Continents appear fragile. Oceans shimmer. This experience, which space explorers call the overview effect, gave



Dumitru Prunariu during L-39 training at Boboc Air Force School – years before becoming Romania's first and only cosmonaut



Dumitru Prunariu during flight training at Bacău. November 1977



Aboard the Soviet orbital complex Salyut 6, together with the crew of Soyuz T-4 during the historic Intercosmos mission

Prunariu a profound awareness of belonging to a shared planet.

"*I loved to anchor myself in front of a porthole and look at the Earth. I searched for Romania with emotion.*" – Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu, recalling his experience in orbit

This testimony, simple in form and powerful in meaning, captures the essence of the cosmic experience: not the distance from Earth, but the closeness of the heart to it. An officer shaped by military rigor, technical pragmatism, and total discipline, who reaches beyond the atmosphere, does not see only data and parameters – he sees home.

RECOGNITION AND DECORATIONS

The success of the Soyuz-40 mission was followed by broad recognition, both nationally and internationally. Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu was awarded the highest distinctions of the period, including the titles of Hero of the Socialist Republic of Romania and Hero of the Soviet Union, along with numerous medals recognizing his contribution to the development of international cosmonautics.

A particularly significant moment in his career came with his meeting with Hermann Oberth, one of the founding fathers of rocket theory – a legendary figure whose ideas paved the way to the cosmos decades before the rocket itself became reality. Dumitru Prunariu met the scientist in 1982 in Moscow, where both had been invited to a symposium marking the 25th anniversary of the first artificial Earth satellite. "*Oberth's presence at this anniversary was a truly exceptional event, as he had long been considered a legend and was visiting Russian territory for the first time. Our introduction was facilitated by Hermann Oberth's most important biographer, Hans Barth, an engineer and publicist from Brașov who had by then settled in Germany. When each of us was invited to say a few words about our presence at that event, I spoke about Hermann Oberth as a representative of the field, born on the soil of my country. The moment I spoke, in that context, about Oberth as a Romanian, whistles and murmurs rose from the audience – everyone believed I was trying to attribute to my country merits it did not possess. At that point, Hermann Oberth rose from his seat, came to me on stage, shook my hand, and said to me in Romanian: 'Thank you, Captain.' A dead silence fell over the room; everyone understood that everything I had said was true, and that the German scientist was, in fact, a Transylvanian Saxon,*" the Romanian cosmonaut recalled.

The symbolic relationship between the two – the pioneer of theory and the representative of its practical application – was further strengthened in 1984, when Prunariu received the Hermann Oberth Medal, the highest distinction of the German Rocket Society (Deutsche Raketen Gesellschaft). This recognition confirmed the historic and cultural connection between Romania and the development of the space domain, bringing renewed attention to Hermann Oberth's own contribution – a man originally from Transylvania.

BEYOND THE FLIGHT – A CAREER IN SERVICE TO SPACE

After returning to Earth, Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu's career continued along a path that consistently built on the experience gained during the mission. He held key positions within the Romanian military aviation establishment, in government structures responsible for research and technology, and in international organizations in the field.

His work within the Romanian Space Agency, as well as his involvement in United Nations bodies dedicated to the peaceful use of outer space – including his tenure as Chairman of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) – strengthened Romania's standing in the international space policy arena. He also played an active role in promoting science and education, becoming a benchmark figure for younger generations interested in the aerospace field.

"*The Military Aviation has always been an institution that respected those who represented it with distinction in various important activities throughout its history. Although I was not part of Military Aviation from the beginning – being, by profession, an aviation engineer – I was assimilated and became an officer who was accepted, valued, and respected within this branch. It is one more reason why I, Prunariu the man, feel fulfilled.*" – Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu

THE LEGACY OF A FLIGHT – STRATEGIC RELEVANCE FOR THE FUTURE

On the anniversary of the 1981 mission, the significance of this moment remains just as powerful – perhaps even more so, in the context of the new dynamics of space exploration. Prunariu's flight was not merely a one-time achievement, but the beginning of a tradition and a continuing aspiration. The Soyuz-40 reentry capsule – a silent witness to this adventure – can be seen today at the National Military Museum "King Ferdinand I," in the hall dedicated to aeronautics and astronautics. It is perhaps the most eloquent symbol of the fact that the flight did not belong to Prunariu alone, but to the entire nation.

Today, in an international context defined by the return of major powers to the Moon, by ambitions toward Mars, by satellite constellations revolutionizing communications and Earth observation, and by hypersonic aircraft and space domain weapons, the aerospace sector has once again become a strategic priority of the first order. Romania has a precedent, a validated body of experience, and a symbol that can – and must – inspire new generations of specialists.

"*I miss the Cosmos.*" – Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu, on a later anniversary

Four words. Each carrying its own weight. Seasoned by the experience of a man who saw Earth from the outside and could never be the same again. But also an invitation: for Romania not to content itself with the memory of a flight, but to build its future in the exploration of space.

Text: Adrian Sultănoiu
Photos: The cosmonaut's personal archive





Inside the Salyut 6 orbital station during the Intercosmos mission, alongside the crew of Soyuz T-4

Transitioning from military cadet to first assignment: The path to military leadership

by Psychologist Maria Ioana Tînc, PhD

Transitioning from military student life at military academies to integration into the military organization and assuming one's first position represents a significant milestone in every student's personal and professional development. This stage is often accompanied by numerous challenges, but also by opportunities for growth and learning. Lifelong learning focuses on both the personal and professional contexts (Drude et al., 2019), as well as how service members can identify sources of self-motivation and formal and informal learning opportunities integrated into their professional life cycle. Informal learning, as a continuous process, manifests itself in daily operational activities through direct interactions and practical experiences. These can take place within social or recreational activities - ranging from simple games or sports competitions to other activities organized by military supervisors (Popa, 2012; 2019). Through such contexts, military personnel develop their skills and knowledge by adapting to real and specific situations unique to the unit to which they belong. On the other hand, young military students must apply the knowledge acquired during their studies in tactical operational contexts. Unlike the professional context, the student period involves different demands, unfolding at a slower pace and focused primarily on theoretical instruction. Although formal courses provide the necessary conceptual foundation, empirical studies highlight that informal learning has a greater impact on the development of military leaders, as leadership is a process of continuous accumulation and formation (Díez et al., 2023).

Interest in workplace activities supports informal learning, through which new skills useful for professional development and increased job effectiveness can be acquired (Froehlich et al., 2018). In a military context, this type of learning is linked to the process of training leaders. It occurs when service members learn on their own as they face new challenges, drawing on their experiences and available resources to solve problems that arise during assigned missions. Thus, informal learning becomes essential in the development of military leaders, especially in a constantly changing professional context, where acquiring new knowledge and skills is necessary for successfully managing new challenges. Leaders have a responsibility to promote continuous learning, both on a personal and interpersonal level—they have a significant influence on their subordinates. A leader's effectiveness and willingness to engage in training throughout their career are linked to change within the military organization (Caves, 2018) as well as to the development of the group they lead. Leaders who share their knowledge and experiences with their subordinates are more likely to inspire professional development and foster the growth of other leaders within the group, which, in turn, benefits both the organization and their own team. Subordinates develop when they receive support from superiors and co-workers, an essential aspect for professional growth and effectiveness. In this regard, the 70–20–10 model (Johnson et al., 2018) posits that 70% of a military professional's learning comes from on-the-job experiences, 20% from feedback, and 10% from formal training. In other words, 90% of the learning process takes place in informal learning contexts, compared to 10% in formal learning contexts.

But how can young students, who are just starting their careers and taking on their first positions, benefit from informal learning at their workplace? In this process, there are several implications that both military supervisors and the newcomer's co-workers should take into account. Among them, feedback stands out. Accurate feedback contributes to the development of leaders (Meumann & O'Neil, 2020) and can support promotion systems. At the same time, feedback is part of the lifelong learning process, as the leader monitors the performance development of subordinates (Crans et al., 2022), and influences the continuous improvement of individual performance. Personal experiences also provide support for the leader's development (Haidar, 2021). Applying the training received to daily activities, the reflections that learning generates about themselves, and the decisions made in tactical operational contexts are part of the continuous feedback they receive. Furthermore, training sessions can be organized in which military personnel have the opportunity to make connections between the content presented and their professional experiences. Such activities could stimulate their curiosity and motivation to discover that the actions they already undertake during missions contribute to their continuous learning process, which is grounded in empirical evidence.

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