

## GORSKE ENOTE NEMŠKIH OBOROŽENIH SIL

## THE GERMAN ARMED FORCES MOUNTAIN TROOPS

**Povzetek** V članku je predstavljen kratek zgodovinski pregled gorskih enot nemških oboroženih sil. Opisan je njihov razvoj od začetkov, ko so delovale kot specializirane enote pehote, prek obdobja obeh vojn in hladne vojne do današnjega položaja v kompleksnem in večdimenzionalnem bojevanju. Na kratko so predstavljene tudi posebne kompetence pripadnikov teh enot, v nadaljevanju pa avtor predstavi še trenutno opremo in strukturo gorskih enot ter njihove sedanje zmogljivosti. Članek ponuja tudi kratek pregled sodelovanja enot in njihovih pripadnikov na mednarodnih misijah, na katerih nemške oborožene sile sodelujejo. Na koncu je predstavljena vaja brigadne ravni Edelweiss 2015 kot primer izzivov, s katerimi se srečujejo nemška kopenska vojska in njene gorske enote v okolju kompleksnega in večdimenzionalnega bojevanja.

**Ključne besede** *Nemške oborožene sile, gorsko bojevanje, naloge, taktične operacije, misije v podporo miru.*

**Abstract** The article provides a short historical overview about the German Armed Forces Mountain Troops. It describes the development from its beginnings as specialized infantry through two World Wars and the cold war era until today's situation in a complex and multidimensional warfighting environment. In addition, a short view into some specific qualifications of the Mountain Troops is given. Furthermore, it highlights the current equipment and structure to show the present capability profile of the German Armed Forces Mountain Troops. Moreover, the article gives a short overview of the participation of units and soldiers in international missions, the German military was and is involved in. Finally, the Brigade Battle Exercise EDELWEISS2015 is presented as an illustration of the challenges the German Army and its Mountain Forces have to face in the afore mentioned complex and multidimensional warfighting environment.

**Key words** *German Armed Forces, mountain warfare, missions, tactical operations, peace support missions.*

## Introduction

The German Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 "BAYERN" ("BAVARIA"), the core of German Armed Forces mountain troops, is specialized in infantry warfighting in difficult to extreme terrain, including high altitudes, and under extreme climate and weather conditions.

In addition to regular peacetime activities, this unique unit looks back on a vast operational experience, having been deployed to multiple theatre environments on the Balkans, Afghanistan and some African countries such as Somalia and Mali. To be able to master its specific tasks, training and practice concepts as well as a demanding training environment are required, which cannot be carried out solely at a national level. For this reason, close cooperation with other European nations like Austria or France is paramount. This article provides an overview of the history and the capabilities of German mountain troops and offers an insight into the current implementation of the current training concept with reference to the recent Brigade Combat Exercise EDELWEISS 2015.

## 1 HISTORY OF GERMAN MOUNTAIN TROOPS

Despite the fact that mountain warfare always had played a role in German war history, the history of German mountain troops, specifically dedicated to mountain warfare, is a rather young one. It all started during the First World War, when Germany had to face French alpine troops in the Vosges Mountains and, later in 1915, decided to support the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the alpine theatre, fighting the Dolomites campaign. For this reason, the German Empire trained and equipped specialized forces, mostly from its southern states like Baden, Württemberg and Bavaria. This circumstance marks the origin of regular German Mountain Troops. From this time on, German Mountain Troops wore the Edelweiss, a metal version of a flower, which only grows at high altitude, on their caps. This symbol was donated by Austrian-Hungarian Mountain Troops, showing their gratitude for the support they received by their German brothers-in-arms.

Since the Versailles Treaty denied Germany any mountain troops, Germany started to inaugurate the capability of mountain warfighting again in 1937. Throughout the Second World War, Germany had 18 Mountain Divisions available, which, of course, did not operate only in their designated high-altitude terrain, but were mostly used as regular infantry divisions. However, due to their character as specialized infantry, they were often utilized as a spearhead for smaller scale operations, like the Norwegian campaign, or, together with paratroopers, the landing on the Greek island of Crete.

During the Second World War, the German Mountain Infantry did not only excel in bravery, but was also responsible for war crimes, which had been subject to various investigations in the post-war era (Jeschonnek, 2015, p. 79).

After the Second World War and with the foundation of the *Bundeswehr* (Federal Armed Forces) in 1956, Germany considered the capability of mountain warfare as crucial for success even in early cold war scenarios. Therefore, the Bundeswehr's 1<sup>st</sup> Mountain Division was inaugurated as the eighth of twelve divisions, which formed the major fighting force of the new German Army. Initially, the 1<sup>st</sup> Mountain Division encompassed the Battle Groups A8 and B8, the Army Aviation Company 8, the Mountain Signals Company 8, the Mountain Armoured Reconnaissance Company 8, the Mountain Artillery Regiment 8, the Mountain Engineer Battalion 8 and four subordinated mountain infantry battalions.

Since then, as most western armies, the Bundeswehr and its units have seen severe and multiple changes in their structure, accompanied by cuts in strength and capabilities. This indeed impacted also the German Mountain troops.

In 1959, the battle groups were renamed "brigades": Battle Group A8 became the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 (home garrison: Bad Reichenhall) and B8 became the Mountain Infantry Brigade 22 (home garrison: Mittenwald). In 1960, a new and unique unit in the German military was introduced with the first pack animal platoon. It was the precursor of today's Operations and Training Centre for Pack Animals 230 (*Einsatz- und Ausbildungszentrum für Tragtierwesen 230*). In 1981, the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 was restructured and all mountain infantry battalions of the German Army were attached to this brigade. The Mountain Infantry Brigade 22 was transformed into the Mechanized Infantry Brigade 22, which also moved their home garrison from Mittenwald to Murnau. Due to operational considerations after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the latter was disbanded in 1993.

After the conclusion of the German reunification in 1990, the Infantry Battalion 571 in Schneeberg, Saxony became part of the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 as Mountain Infantry Battalion 571 in 1996. Finally, it was disbanded in 2007.

On the 26 June 2001, the parent 1<sup>st</sup> Mountain Infantry Division was disbanded in the course of a reorganisation of the German Army and the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 was attached to the 10<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, the only remaining division-sized unit in Southern Germany.

In 2003, the Mountain Maintenance Battalion 8 joined the brigade as Mountain Logistic Battalion 8 and the Mountain Engineer Battalion 8, which had been temporarily outside of the Mountain Troops, was re-attached to the brigade from Engineer Brigade 60 as well. In 2004, the Federal Ministry of Defence took the decision to keep the capability of Mountain Warfighting in the German Armed Forces.

Consequently, the current garrisons of the Brigade were massively enlarged and the brigade received a new structure with three Mountain Infantry Battalions, one Mountain Engineer Battalion, one Mountain Reconnaissance Battalion, one Mountain Logistic Battalion, one Mountain Signals Battalion and the Operations and Training Centre for Pack Animals. In 2008, the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. On the occasion of this event, the brigade received its epithet *Bayern* (Bavaria) by the Prime Minister of the Federal State of Bavaria (editorial office German Army, 2014).

## 2 CURRENT STRUCTURE AND EQUIPMENT

Since its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the brigade was again subject to some slight structural adjustments.

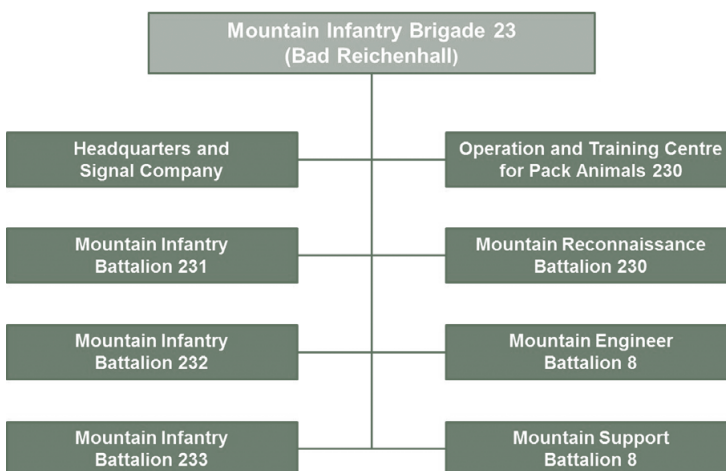
Currently, the brigade is organized as follows

- Headquarters and Signals Company in Bad Reichenhall,
- Mountain Infantry Battalion 231 in Bad Reichenhall,
- Mountain Infantry Battalion 232 in Bischofswiesen,
- Mountain Infantry Battalion 233 in Mittenwald,
- Mountain Reconnaissance Battalion 230 in Füssen,
- Mountain Support Battalion 8 in Füssen
- Mountain Engineer Battalion 8 in Ingolstadt,
- Operation and Training Centre for Pack Animals 230 in Bad Reichenhall.

Nowadays, more than 6,500 soldiers serve in the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23, which makes it the Bundeswehr’s strongest brigade in personnel figures.

**Figure 1:**  
Structure  
Mountain  
Infantry  
Brigade 23

Slika 1:  
Struktura 23.  
brigade gorske  
pehote



The three Mountain Infantry Battalions (231, 232 and 233) represent the core of the brigade's fighting force. In addition to three (light) mountain infantry companies, each battalion consists of an additional heavy mountain infantry company, a training and support company, and a headquarters and support company. The heavy company is comprised of a mortar platoon, a reconnaissance platoon, an antitank platoon and a machine cannon platoon. The headquarters and support company has a high-altitude mountain infantry platoon, where specialized assets and *Heeresbergführer* (army mountain guides) are pooled.

Mountain Infantry Battalion 231 differs from 232 and 233 in its tactical mobility on the ground, being equipped with BOXER-type MRAVs (multi-role armoured vehicle) whereas Mountain Infantry Battalions 232 and 233 utilize the tracked BV 206/206S for tactical movement.

The Mountain Reconnaissance Battalion 230 is structured into a headquarters and support company, two highly mobile reconnaissance companies, one unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) company and a supply company. The reconnaissance companies are equipped with either the FENNEK reconnaissance vehicle or the BV 206 S in a reconnaissance version. The UAV company is comprised of a radar platoon and two different UAV platoons, including a human intelligence (HUMINT) platoon. The headquarters and support company provides a high altitude mountain reconnaissance platoon, which is a unique unit within German armed forces, providing reconnaissance capabilities on highest alpine terrain and under harshest climate conditions.

The Mountain Engineer Battalion 8 is structured into a headquarters and support company, two mountain engineer companies and an armoured engineer company. The headquarters and support company has the special skills of a diving squad and a mine-detection-dog platoon. The two mountain engineer companies are equipped with regular and mountain-specific material, including a field cable railway and rotary snowploughs. The armoured company is structured into an armoured engineer platoon, an EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) platoon, a folding dry support bridge platoon and an engineer construction equipment platoon.

The Mountain Support Battalion 8 is structured into a headquarters and support company, three supply companies and a non-active transportation company. The supply companies are dislocated at the brigade's garrisons Bad Reichenhall, Mittenwald and Füssen, where also the battalions' HQ is stationed. Each of them comprises a supply echelon, a maintenance echelon and a transportation platoon.

The Operations and Training Centre for Pack Animals 230 is another special feature of the brigade. Being directly subordinated to the brigade HQ, it guarantees mobility in high alpine terrain and under all possible weather conditions. The company-sized unit has both pack mules and horses to transport mainly equipment and, for special tasks, also soldiers. It comprises three pack animal platoons, a company maintenance section, a blacksmith and a veterinarian team.

In addition, the German Armed Forces have the *Ausbildungsstützpunkt Gebirgs- und Winterkampf* (training base for mountain and winter warfare) in MITTENWALD at their disposal. Although this training base is stationed at a brigade garrison location, it is not subordinated to the brigade but to the German Army Infantry School. However, the brigade has a very close and special relationship with this training centre. It provides expertise and vital alpine training opportunities for all the brigade's soldiers. E.g., together with its Austrian counterpart, all army mountain guides and specialized mountain personnel receive their training at this installation (Friedrich K. Jeschonnek, 2015, pp. 78-79).

### 3 THE ARMY MOUNTAIN GUIDE (“HEERESBERGFÜHRER”)

The army mountain guides are specifically qualified experts in high altitude mountain warfare. All the brigade's units are equipped with these assets. Being officers or non-commissioned officers (NCOs), they are advising military leaders on all tactical levels during the preparation and execution of military operations in difficult and/or alpine terrain, including high altitudes and extreme climate and weather conditions. The army mountain guides evaluate terrain structures, recommend climbing routes and assess the weather and avalanche situation as a prerequisite for successful military planning and operations. Furthermore, they significantly contribute to the training and improvement of mountain skills of all brigade units. Moreover, they are qualified to lead mountain medical teams in combat and peace-time search-and-rescue missions. Additionally, the army mountain guide, also referred to as a “scout”, is qualified to support the deployment of specialized and Special Forces to their mission areas in the mountains, if deemed necessary. The army mountain guide training is one of the longest and hardest in the German Armed Forces. It takes more than a year, has extensive, both winter and summer, training periods and takes place inter alia in Germany, Austria, France and Italy (Matthias Duchscherer, 2013).

### 4 MISSIONS

From 1993 to 1994, the commander of Mountain Infantry Brigade 23, Colonel Holger Kammerhoff took command of 2<sup>nd</sup> German Contingent UNOSOM II in Belet Uen, Somalia. This mission marked the first deployment of German mountain troops to an overseas theatre after the Second World War. From 1995 to 1996, the brigade deployed soldiers to Croatia as security forces several times. From 1996 to 1999, some 900 brigade members were deployed to IFOR (Implementation Force), SFOR (Stabilization Force) and “Extraction Force” in the former Yugoslavia. In 2000, the Mountain Infantry Battalion 232 was in charge to train the first joint KFOR/SFOR (Kosovo Forces/Stabilization Forces) for their mission. From 2002 to 2003, the KFOR task force headquarters were manned by brigade officers and NCOs. In 2003, the commanders of mountain infantry battalions 232 and 233 commanded battle groups West and East in Kabul, Afghanistan, starting a more than decade-long mission history in this rugged and war-torn country.

Since 2003, units and separate detachments of Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 have been regularly deployed to several missions in the Balkans, Afghanistan and again Africa. As one of the most experienced combat units of the German Armed Forces, this history will for sure continue. Today, soldiers of the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 are currently deployed to missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia and Kosovo (Editorial office German army, 2014).

## 5 BRIGADE BATTLE EXERCISE EDELWEISS 2015

In 2014, when the ISAF mission concluded, the operating environment of German combat troops, including the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 changed. The German Armed Forces are now moving from a “forces on mission” approach to a “forces in readiness” approach. For a successful implementation of this transformation, the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 has to re-enforce mountain warfare training events and exercises. It is a movement “back to the roots”.

The Brigade Battle Exercise EDELWEISS, conducted in springtime 2015, was an important element to benchmark the progress of this development. The exercise locations exceeded the brigade’s peacetime garrisons and included the Austrian high alpine training area Litzum-Walchen, close to the city of Innsbruck.

**Figure 2:**  
Boarding during  
Field Integration  
Training

**Slika 2:**  
Vkrcaње med  
terenskim  
integracijskim  
usposabljanjem



**Figure 3:**  
Support by Pack  
Animal

**Slika 3:**  
Podpora  
tovornih živali



## 5.1 Situation

Opposing forces were operating in an area at heights up to 2500 metres. They allegedly ran a training camp and brought a friendly air defence system under their control.

A battalion task force under the lead of Mountain Infantry Battalion 233 was tasked to repel the enemy forces and to secure or destroy the air defence system. An Austrian company force, derived from the 6<sup>th</sup> (AUT) Infantry Brigade was part of the task force to intensify the bi-national cooperation between German and Austrian armed forces. This scenario took place as part of a notional European stabilization mission.

## 5.2 Mission preparation

One year before the mission, the Mountain Infantry Battalion 233 received the order to generate troops as response forces for the European Union. According to the notional situation the battalion should be combat ready and take charge of response forces at the beginning of 2015.

As the situation developed, the battalion task force was activated and got the deployment order. One week prior to STARTEX, all task-force troops were deployed in the vicinity of Mittenwald, home garrison of Mountain Infantry Battalion 233. At that location, the Battalion Task Force 233, including the Austrian company, forces



**Figure 4:**  
Soldiers  
survey their  
withdrawing  
comrades

**Slika 4:**  
Vojaki  
nadzorujejo  
umik svojih  
tovarišev



of the Mountain Reconnaissance Battalion 230, Mountain Support Battalion 8 and Mountain Engineer Battalion 8, completed their field integration training.

### 5.3 Battle Exercise

During the field integration training, the high altitude mountain reconnaissance platoon already started to reconnoitre the area of operations. Once the field integration was concluded, the main bulk of the task force deployed as well. Between the departure and the accomplishing of the objective, the battalion task force 233 had to overcome the altitude difference of 1100 metres and to coordinate the attack in two parallel high-alpine valleys within four days. In March, the area of operations had wintry conditions with piles of snow and ice. The temperature fell partly below  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

The operation was supported by Austrian Army close air support helicopters and high-trajectory weapons of the Mountain Infantry Battalion 233. These elements of manoeuvre had to be coordinated by the forward air controllers of the task force. Furthermore, light cargo helicopters supported the task force by deploying soldiers and equipment in the area of operations. Nevertheless, most forces were ground-deployed.

The second company of the Mountain Infantry Battalion 232 formed the opposing forces. During the force integration training of the task force, the company prepared

**Figure 5:**  
Support by light  
cargo helicopter

**Slika 5:**  
Podpora lahkega  
tovornega  
helikopterja



**Figure 6:**  
Shooting mortar  
position

**Slika 6:**  
Položaj za  
streljanje z  
minometom



**Figure 7:**  
Machine gun in  
firing

**Slika 7:**  
Streljanje z  
mitraljezom



delay and defence operations in the area. Both exercise parties were equipped with the AGDUS duel-simulator training system. Under these circumstances, a realistic battle scenario was given.

#### **5.4 Summary of the Brigade Combat Exercise EDELWEISS 2015**

About one thousand soldiers participate at the Brigade Combat Exercise EDELWEISS 2015. In this exercise, the brigade trained defence and attack tactics in alpine terrain and under very demanding weather conditions. The complex scenario required the whole spectrum of military mountain warfare in winter, which was perfectly mastered by all exercise participants.

Subsequent to the task force operation, several live-firing exercises and mountain-specific trainings took place. This three week exercise marked the peak of a series of exercise in 2014/15 and will see a continuation in fall 2016 in the same area.

**Conclusion** The Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 has a multifaceted and eventful history. As one of the first German brigade units after the Second World War, it was established in the early Cold-War era and saw first combat missions after the fall of the Berlin wall. Warfare in rugged, even extreme terrain and non-permissive climate conditions requires specially trained and equipped forces. Throughout all recent developments in military strategy and challenges in the global security environment, it proved to

be right to contain a unit with unique character and expertise such as the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23.

Over time, the brigade's ability and range grew from pure mountain warfare, to skills in urban warfare, fighting under extreme climate and weather conditions, even mechanized warfare and, of course, mountain rescue skills. With this wide range of capabilities, the brigade is an important mainstay of the German Army for future challenges in the security environment within the framework of collective security systems.

The brigade will maintain an important portion of future tasks in the German Armed Forces and its international allies. The challenge today is to intensify the cooperation at the international level in order to keep and improve the high skill level of mountain warfare. Currently, the Mountain Infantry Brigade 23 cooperates with Austria, France and Poland and is interested in further cooperation with other NATO and EU countries to improve mountain warfare skills and fighting under extreme weather conditions.

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*Figure 2, 3 and 5:* Hauptman Sebastian Zäch,

*Figure 4, 6 and 7:* Oberstleutnant Johannes Schwegler