

By a special correspondent

In the centre of Luxembourg City, on Liberty Avenue, is an imposing building which epitomises the country's modern defence stance. Once occupied by General Omar Bradley as his armies drove on towards Germany, it was subsequently the site of meetings which led to the Common Market and thence inexorably to the European Union and the European Security and Defence Policy.

Until 1944, Luxembourg had no army. Since then it has enjoyed unbroken peace. Recently its Parliament agreed to increase authorised manpower to 1400.

Of the current 1000, 37 are deployed worldwide (including a platoon guarding Kabul airport). Pathetic as this sounds, it's pretty good by European standards. From amongst 2 million people in its armed forces, Europe is supposed to be able to mobilise a corps of 60,000 within 60 days, and deploy and sustain them in the field, along with air and navy elements, for a year. It never has, and most believe it never could. These numbers are around the 3.7% that Luxembourg achieves right now.

A fully professional army, one can't help thinking that the Luxembourgers are hampered by citizen-in-uniform concepts. Regulars sign up for 3 years plus a further year running themselves in for civvy street. And as you can't get a job as a policeman or some sort of civil servant, motivation might sometimes be suspect.

Nevertheless, they are organised into 9 operational units, one of which is a tactical unit within the Franco-German Brigade – they recognise that they're always going to have to be integrated into a foreign unit. There's also an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platoon.

But in the tiny Luxembourg setup (they are both pleased and a trifle wistful that with the accession of Malta they are no longer the smallest EU nation) there are the seeds of a way forward for the disparate, and basically useless beyond gendarmerie actions, European forces.

Specialisation

Luxembourg is working towards role specialisation by taking up niche capabilities. These include water purification and mine clearance.

They have a programme of replacing tactical protected vehicles, with deliveries starting next year which are compatible with the French and Belgians. They follow NATO deployability criteria, of course.

They have an A400M European airlifter on order for 2017, and are looking at UAVs. That's worth thinking about as a significant contribution to a pressing European capability problem.

This is all very encouraging, and deserves two and a half cheers and notice by others. One only hopes that when someone shouts for them, they come running to do the required task rather than, as in the past, having to hang around while their politicians debate for months about whether they should go.