

28 March 2013

Exercise ABLE ARCHER 83: Information from SHAPE Historical Files

Exercise ABLE ARCHER was held from 7-11 November 1983. It was an annual Command Post Exercise (thus involving only headquarters, not troops on the ground) of NATO's Allied Command Europe (ACE), and it was designed to practise command and staff procedures, with particular emphasis on the transition from conventional to non-conventional operations, including the use of nuclear weapons. Overall responsibility for the exercise lay with the Supreme Command Allied Powers Europe (SACEUR). The participants in the exercise were SACEUR's own headquarters SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Power Europe), its immediate subordinate headquarters known as Major Subordinate Commands, their subordinates known as Principal Subordinate Commands, and other lower-level War Headquarters throughout ACE.

One of the goals of Exercise ABLE ARCHER 83 was to practice new nuclear weapons release procedures, which had been revised as a result of ABLE ARCHER 82. The exercise scenario provided for less nuclear exercising than in the previous ten years and was designed to concentrate on decision-making processes. However, this was a purely military exercise and NATO Headquarters – thus the Alliance's political authorities - did not participate in ABLE ARCHER 83. Instead the exercise's Directing Staff (DISTAFF) simulated the NATO political authorities. There was also no involvement of national leaders in the exercise, and no such involvement was ever planned, despite some recent allegations to this effect. National involvement was limited to two small Response Cells at the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington and the Ministry of Defence in London, whose role was to simulate the nuclear powers' political authorities. Thus all participants in the exercise were military personnel, some of whom simulated the political authorities at NATO headquarters and in the national capitals.

The exercise scenario began with Orange (the hypothetical opponent) opening hostilities in all regions of ACE on 4 November (three days before the start of the exercise) and Blue (NATO) declaring a general alert. Orange initiated the use of chemical weapons on 6 November and by the end of that day had used such weapons throughout ACE. All of these events had taken place prior to the start of the exercise and were thus simply part of the written scenario. There had thus been three days of fighting and a deteriorating situation prior to the start of the exercise. This was desired because – as previously stated – the purpose of the exercise was to test procedures for transitioning from conventional to nuclear operations. As a result of Orange advances, its persistent use of chemical weapons, and its clear intentions to rapidly commit second echelon forces, SACEUR requested political guidance on the use of nuclear weapons early on Day 1 of the exercise (7 November 1983).

By the evening of 7 November the situation of the Blue forces had deteriorated further, particularly in the northern region, and increased Orange use of chemical weapons had been reported. On the morning of 8 November SACEUR requested initial use of nuclear weapons against fixed targets in Orange satellite countries. SACEUR's request was agreed late on 8 November and the weapons were fired/delivered on the morning of 9 November.

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Blue's use of nuclear weapons did not stop Orange's aggression. Therefore, SACEUR requested follow-on use of nuclear weapons late on 9 November. This request was approved in the afternoon of 10 November and follow-on use of nuclear weapons was executed on the morning of 11 November. That was the final day of the exercise, which ended in accordance with the long-planned schedule, not early as has sometimes been alleged. An after action report noted that because the exercise scenario began at a low crisis level, there was actually less nuclear play than in previous years.

In 2006 the SHAPE Historian interviewed a number of senior participants in Exercise ABLE ARCHER 83. None of them recalled any "war scare" or even any unusual Soviet reaction to the exercise. Air Chief Marshal Sir Peter Terry, the Deputy SACEUR who played the role of SACEUR during ABLE ARCHER 83, stated quite categorically that "no such scare arose at that time."



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