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Table of Contents

Time to Split

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Split - Dutch Base commander Cpt. Frans Jongsma is the kind of person you call when you need to close a base. Efficient, professional and always calm, he took care of boarding up the Arnheim base in the Netherlands and the Hohne base in Germany.

His mission in the area started last July when he arrived in the sunbathed port of Split in Croatia, the Dutch Army's point of debarkation (POD), but this job would be different from the others he has done.

"Here we are closing a base and the people still have their jobs. They will be moving to Zagreb, the new POD for the Dutch," said Jongsma. "In the other closings I've experienced, people had to find other jobs and that can be hard."

But on a recent Sunday afternoon, as some of the 16 men under his command prepared a barbecue with a backdrop of the deep blue water of the Adriatic sea, it was hard to imagine that the base was expected to be cleared by Oct. 15.



"The Zagreb POD will be bigger than this one, allowing us to take care of more people at the same time," explained Jongsma. "But Split is not actually closing -- it will just be in a sleep mode. If there is bad weather in Zagreb, and planes can't land, the soldiers will go through Split."

One of the reasons for the move is that during the winter the Kupres Tunnel, the main access to Sarajevo from Split, gets snowed in. This forces troops to make a 10-hour drive to get around it, whereas from Zagreb the road heads straight without any major obstacles.

Few people, however, realize the importance of the POD. It's not just the place where soldiers store their weapons and ammo after their tour and take a rest before going back home.

"The POD is the first contact for the soldiers coming into the theater, and many don't know what to expect," said Jongsma. "But it's also the last contact with the theater that people take home as they go back, and they are like horses coming out of a pen. They must remember that rules still apply because they are still on duty."

For the men working on the base, the sunshine isn't always welcome, said WO1 Gerben Spiekerman Van Weezenburg, head of cargo.



"Sometimes the cargo doors to the Fokker 50 don't open, and we have to unload or load the bags by hand and under this heat it's terrible," said Spiekerman Van Weezenburg.

Each month, as many as 200 people come through the POD and the base's containers are used to store flack jackets, helmets, weapons and ammo. The POD is also responsible for issuing ID cards and providing a money exchange.

"We are not here for ourselves. We are here to help people come in and out," said Jongsma. "We provide optimal service."

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