

# COBRA:

## AUSTRIA'S SPECIAL POLICE COMMANDOS



*EKO COBRA members have to learn all of the skills and capabilities. In this scenario training, an officer is applying takedown and handcuffing techniques.*

**E**insatzkommando COBRA (Special Task Force COBRA / EKO COBRA) is a police antiterrorism / SWAT-type unit of the Austrian Federal Police, available to local police elements of the Federal

Police in serious tactical situations and cases of terrorism and kidnapping.

EKO COBRA is influenced by other European anti-terrorism units (GSG 9, GIGN), and is much like a mixture of America's FBI Hostage Rescue Team and local police and sheriff's SWAT units. It is regarded as

a multifunctional partner in security matters and to law enforcement officers in tactical operations. EKO COBRA is active at both the national and international levels, and it is an internationally recognized antiterrorist unit.

EKO COBRA traces its roots to a



*EKO COBRA members have the opportunity to undergo additional specialized training, such as precision parachuting.*



*COBRA operators are excellent at rope work.*

specialized unit of Austria's Gendarmerie founded 1849, a military corps responsible to the Habsburg monarchy. Its duties then evolved into maintaining public order and policing. Earlier still, a military police corps

operated in Austro-Hungary in the 1700s was the predecessor to the later Gendarmerie.

A post-war Gendarmerie was formed shortly after World War II so Austria would have a force able to counter Soviet post-war activities and counter the threat of an invasion. Before the building of the Austrian army in 1955, the Gendarmerie had heavily armed units.

In 1973, a special Gendarmerie unit was formed and named

Gendameriekommando Bad Voeslau. This unit was temporarily posted at the Castle of Bad Schoenau to be close to the railroad line that was a target of terrorists. Later, the unit moved to Burstyn barracks in Zwoelfaxing,

while the Castle of Schoenau served as headquarters of the Gendarmerie Operations Command.

While overall, Austria was not a target for terrorist activities, Gendameriekommando Bad Voeslau responded to Palestinian terrorists opposing Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union who were using the spa town of Bad Voeslau as a staging area for their trip to Israel. These refugees arrived by train and had to be protected.

In 1973, two heavily armed Palestinian terrorists from an organization known as El Saika (Eagles of the Revolution) entered Austria by train and took an elderly Jewish couple and an Austrian customs officer hostage. This incident, though resolved without bloodshed, was a shock to Austrians, who desired security within their democracy.

In another case, the infamous terrorist Carlos the Jackal, whose real name was Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, was the leader of the team that took 42 OPEC ministers hostage in Vienna, Austria. Their release was later negotiated.

These events were the beginning of a violent wave of terrorism that shocked the international community. Banks and official printing plants (from which thousands of blank birth certificates and driver's licenses were stolen) were raided. Businessmen were kidnapped and either ransomed or executed. Then Israel's raid on Entebbe and the German Border Police GSG-9's assault on a hijacked Lufthansa airliner in Mogadishu, Somalia, demonstrated that a properly trained and equipped team could deal with such events.

Both the kidnapping and killing by the RAF of Hans-Martin Schleyer, the chairman of the German Employers' Association and the Mogadishu incident prompted Austria to build a spe-

cial antiterrorism unit Gendarmerie-einsatzkommando – GEK (Gendarmerie Operations Command) in 1978.

GEK was the reorganization of

Gendarmeriekommando Bad Voeslau. It became a unit of the Austrian Federal Gendarmerie, under the control of the Austrian Ministry of the

Interior, and in charge of performing special operations within the field of public law enforcement. Gendarmerie officers from all over Austria were encouraged to apply.

Its first commander, Oberst Johannes Pecher, made sure the unit had close ties to the best counter-terrorism units of that time: Germany's GSG-9 and Israel's Sayeret Mat'Kal. GEK continues to cross train with different special operations groups and is one the best such units in the world—if not the best.

In 1993, the legal basis for the activities of Gendarmerie Operations Command was an addendum to the Code of Police Practice in the form of an ordinance governing special task forces. GEK was mandated to 1) to stop dangerous attacks against people with the use of specially trained law enforcement officers. If such officers were either not available in sufficient numbers at local or regional level, then Gendarmerie Operations Command would respond to such threats; (2) conduct VIP protection for high-risk dignitaries; and 3) provide air marshal service on board Austrian civil aircraft, as well as security services in the course of diplomatic missions.

GEK's main tasks were defined as resolving hostage situations, arrests of armed and dangerous violent criminals, support of CID special units operations in the fight against organized crime, protection of people and objects at risk (mainly people rather than objects), and air marshal service on board aircraft of the Austrian Airlines Group.

In the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York, the Austrian Minister of the Interior mandated a study and review of Austria's special police units. He found reasons for concern.

Among them, it often took too long

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for officers to respond to emergencies because of the distances they had to travel, and within the police structure, there were too many management levels, differing training and equipment levels, and conflicting jurisdictions. In addition, the SWAT teams did not have consistent case-processing jurisdiction.

In 2002, there was a further reorganization, and GEK became Einsatzkommando COBRA (Special Operations Command). It was fully operational at four locations, with three more added the following year. There are now five locations and three operational field offices. EKO COBRA was a special operations task force made up of both Police and Gendarmerie officers of Austria's law enforcement and is directly subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior. The unit has been open to both male and female applicants since it was founded in 1978.

Changes dictated that EKO COBRA would be the leading special operations unit within the special operations system, with each point in the country able to be reached within 70 minutes. Also established were a uniform management system, uniform training and equipment standards, an international capability, and uninterrupted case-solving jurisdiction.

In addition there was an integration of the existing SWAT teams: GEK, 13 MEK (mobile operations commands of the Federal Police located in the cities of Austria), and eight SEG special operations of the Provincial Gendarmerie Commands (located in the rural

regions). Most of these were reorganized into EKO COBRA, with the exception of the SWAT team of the Vienna Riot Squad, also referred to as WEGA, the SWAT team of the Austrian capital Vienna. New duties were added to the workload of EKO COBRA including taking over all VIP protection and body guard services in Austria.

Incidents that EKO COBRA commonly responds to include those similar to the previous GEK units: arrests of armed and dangerous violent criminals, operations in the fight against organized crime, hostage situations, protection of people, and air marshal service on board aircraft of the Austrian Airlines Group. These are mainly in response to calls from the local elements of the federal police or in response to federal investigations.

Law enforcement reform in 2005 abolished the Austrian Gendarmerie, and policing duties were basically divided into the Federal Police, State Security, and Criminal Investigations—Interpol. In this bureaucracy-cutting modernization of Austrian law enforcement, the former law enforcement bodies of the public security constabulary, criminal investigation service, and gendarmerie were consolidated and organized into nine federal provincial commands—the Federal Police.

According to Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant Colonel) Detlef Polay of Einsatzkommando EKO COBRA Ost (East), EKO COBRA applicants are hired for attitude and then trained for

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skills. Applicants are also medically, psychologically, and athletically tested.

During six-month basic EKO COBRA training, new members have to learn all of the skills and capabilities that would enable them to successfully complete even the most delicate, difficult, and dangerous missions. Such training includes tactics, shooting, sports, driving skills, rappelling techniques, close-quarters combat, psychology and language training.

EKO COBRA members have the opportunity to undergo additional specialized training such as parachuting, scuba diving, blasting techniques, and firearms skills. Basic training and special



Police helicopters are available to EKO COBRA under the Ministry of the Interior, Police Aviation Unit.



This window entry while rappelling from a rappel tower has the EKO COBRA officer going through a glass window.

training courses for EKO COBRA members are arranged and coordinated by headquarters in Wiener Neustadt. Details concerning how such training is conducted are considered restricted information. Any officers who do not qualify must leave the unit. Team members are especially respected for their climbing skills.

Upon completion of basic training, each new EKO COBRA member is assigned to an operation module at one the operational locations or field

offices. Nationwide, there are currently 450 EKO COBRA officers, the majority of whom are on standby for operations only. EKO COBRA's administration staff is small but effective. EKO COBRA successes are based upon a dynamic leadership team, and most important, on the personal commitment of each team member. Maximum

professionalism and a minimum error potential are ongoing developments in EKO COBRA's role in domestic law enforcement and counter-terrorism.

COBRA operators are excellent at rope work. They can scale almost every building, and those they can't scale, they can fly to via helicopter. The weapons of choice are the MR 73 .357 magnum revolver or the Glock 17, the Steyr 5.56 AUG assault rifle, and Steyr SSG 69 police rifles for sniper work. Depending upon the situ-

ation, 9mm Steyr TMP machine pistols, Franchi SPAS 12, Heckler & Koch M 512, Remington 870, H&K MP5 A3, H&K MP7, Glock 18 and/or H&K MZP-1 40mm are available.

Police helicopters are available to EKO COBRA under the Ministry of the Interior Police Aviation Unit. The helicopters available are EC135 P2+Multirole Standard (this is the Eurocopter), Jet Ranger Bell 206 B, and Ecureuil AS 350 B1. EKO COBRA has some armored vehicles that are mainly used in dignitary protection.

EKO COBRA and its predecessors took part in such incidents as the prevention of the hijacking of an airborne aircraft in 1996, support in the solving of the kidnapping known as the Flick Case, resolving the spectacular hostage situation in the prison facility of Graz-Karlau, and in other cases of extortion, kidnapping, hostage taking, and serious violent crimes.

In 2008, EKO COBRA members made 405 arrests, conducted 131 premise searches, and conducted thousands of Air Marshal Deployments, demonstrating their place in Austrian law enforcement. Every EKO COBRA officer is dedicated to improving his or her performance. Such dedication is expected from those who provide professional protection to the country's citizens. EKO COBRA is fast and effective, but its strength lies in its highly motivated police officers.

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