



# NATO ARMIES AND THEIR TRADITIONS

## The Reconnaissance Troops of the Hungarian Defence Forces

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Sun Tzu at around 500 B.C. wrote: Know the enemy, know yourself; your victory will never be endangered. Know the ground, know the weather; your victory will then be total.<sup>1</sup>

According to the doctrine of the Hungarian Defence Forces, a great part of that required knowledge is gathered by the reconnaissance troops, as their main task is to collect information about the enemy (its location, composition, strength and expected intent), about the terrain and the weather.

"Before World War I, operational-level reconnaissance and security missions were the role of horse cavalry. Tactical-level reconnaissance missions were assumed by the unit itself. World War I, with its massive fortifications, firepower, and eventual rise of air power and mechanization, changed all this. From 1918 to the present, various ground

forces at both the operational and tactical levels have designed reconnaissance units using different combinations of weaponry and mechanized and motorized vehicles." This is how the dawn of the reconnaissance units has been summarized in a study prepared at the US Army Combined Arms Centre.<sup>2</sup>

The Hungarian military had not been far behind from the leading military powers. The first dedicated Hungarian reconnaissance units and the independent Hungarian military intelligence had been established in 1919, right after the World War.

Reconnaissance battalions had first been organised in the 1938 order of battle of the Hungarian Royal Defence Forces.

Since the end of World War II, the reconnaissance units have been the de facto special forces of the Hungarian military. They are small, self-contained units that can



operate close to – or most of the case behind – enemy lines to accomplish their mission. The special mission needs specially trained personnel. Besides the standard military training, recon troops have been trained to operate during cold weather conditions or in mountainous areas; they are able to cross water obstacles with standard issue equipment or with improvised devices. Survival and evasion is part of their training. Every recon platoon has a sniper capability and equipment to breach obstacles and minefields. Recon troops are also trained to use standard or improvised explosive devices.

Part of their training is to plan and conduct direct actions against designated targets or capture enemy soldiers to gain the required information.

The even more specialised long-range reconnaissance units are able to operate diver teams as well.



1 - Sun Tzu: The Art of War

2 - McGrath, John J., Scouts out! : the development of reconnaissance units in modern armies Combat Studies Institute Press, US Army Combined Arms Center; Fort Leavenworth, Kansas



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Special capabilities are distinguished in the uniform. The reconnaissance insignia depicting the armoured, the long-range recce and the signals intelligence units had been introduced in the army in the 80's.

The Green Beret uniquely has only been worn by the long-range recce units. As an acknowledgement of their outstanding performance and demonstration of their equal capabilities, the personnel of the armoured recce units have also been authorised to wear it after the operations conducted along the southern Hungarian border in 1991.

The two traditional types of the reconnaissance units of the Hungarian military are the armoured reconnaissance and the long-range reconnaissance units. The first long-range recce unit, the 34th Bercsényi László Reconnaissance Battalion, has been established in 1951 and ever since this unit provides the backbone of the military parachuting within the Hungarian Defence Forces.

Due to the quality of their personnel, their training and high readiness posture, the reconnaissance units have been the favourite option of the HDF General Staff, when there was a need to deploy units to solve a delicate situation or to deploy Hungarian troops in a newly undertaken international mission. On these occasions, usually one of the reconnaissance battalions has been tasked to provide the core of the Hungarian contingent deployed to international missions.

Reconnaissance battalions distinguished themselves in providing personnel to missions such as UNFICYP, Multinational Forces and Observers on the Sinai Peninsula, IFOR, KFOR, the Iraqi operations and ISAF.

During the past years the Hungarian Defence Forces has been reorganised and downsized several times. Like other arms and services of the army, the reconnaissance organisation has also been affected and changed significantly. The last two former reconnaissance battalions were the 34th Bercsényi László Reconnaissance battalion and the 25th Bornemissza Gergely Reconnaissance battalion.

The 34th Bercsényi László Reconnaissance battalion has been reorganised and provided the core of the 34th Bercsényi László Special Operations battalion.

The 25th Bornemissza Gergely Reconnaissance battalion has been converted into a military Intelligence type unit. Besides maintaining the armoured reconnaissance and long-range reconnaissance capabilities, the unit now is capable to provide HUMINT, IMINT and EW support, together with an all-source analysis capability to the Hungarian Defence Forces.

Due to the ethos of the reconnaissance units, in spite of the demanding training there has never been a shortage of personnel



applying for the reconnaissance positions. To become a reconnaissance officer or to serve at a reconnaissance unit – even during the past era of conscription – has always been a prestigious possibility that has only been granted to a selected few. The cherry on top – as once the reconnaissance company commander stated in our first year in the military college.

