

Frederick Benjamin „Ben“ Hodges, Lieutenant General (retired) US Army, former Commanding General US Army Europe

„Bundeswehr to on take additional role in NATO – the end of free-riding“

Background on Ben

- General Ben Hodges was born in and grew up in Florida, USA. He did not come from a military family but most of his male relatives served one or two years military obligation. Ben decided to follow that military tradition, too. After graduation from high-school, he joined the US Military Academy in 1976 and left four years later with a commission in the Infantry. 1981 he became platoon leader in A Company of the 3rd battalion, 41st Infantry, 2nd Armored Division and was stationed in Germany. He quickly moved up the ranks to first lieutenant in late 1981 and to captain in 1984. He took the Infantry Officer Advanced Course at the US Army Infantry School and, upon completion in December 1984, became assistant of the 101st Airborne Division's first Brigade.
- In the following years he commanded Infantry units at the Company, Battalion, and Brigade levels in the 101st Airborne Division, including Command of the First Brigade Combat Team „Bastogne“ of the 101st Airborne Division in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (2003-2004). His other operational assignments include Chief of Operations for Multi-National Corps-Iraq in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (2005-2006) and Director of Operations, Regional Command South in Kandahar, Afghanistan (2009-2010).
- General Hodges has also served in a variety of Joint and Army Staff positions to include Tactics Instructor; Chief of Plans; 2nd Infantry Division in Korea; Aide-de-Camp to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe; Chief of Staff in 18th Airborne Corps; Director of the Pakistan Afghanistan Coordination Cell on the Joint Staff; Chief of Legislative Liaison for the US Army.
- In 2012, General Hodges became the first Commander of NATO Allied Land Command in Izmir, Turkey. His last military assignment was as Commanding General, US Army Europe from 2014 to 2017. He retired from the US Army in January 2018. Hodges is a recipient of various awards and decorations.
- Since February 2018 General Hodges holds the Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). CEPA is a non-profit public policy research institute with a transatlantic mission: to promote an economically vibrant, strategically secure, and politically free Europe with close and enduring ties to the US. Through research, analysis and programs CEPA provides fresh insight on energy, security and defense to government officials and agencies.

General Hodges, why did you join the Army in the first place and why did you stay?

„During the 70ies the US Army had abolished a compulsory military service so there was no obligation for me to conduct the service. But I am stemming from a family in which everyone served in the Army for a few years so it did not even occur to me to not follow that pattern, too. I completed my four years at the US Military Academy at West Point, New York and stayed for good because I enjoyed it very much. There were several reasons for that. I chose the Army because I like being in the middle of where the action is (*is smiling*). In addition, I felt there was a strong mission and purpose in what I did and I appreciated the physical challenge. Also, being in a group of people who were committed was very

motivating. And I sought an occasion to take over responsibility early, i.e. taking over leadership responsibility for a platoon. That mix of reasons convinced me to continue with my military career. Another motivator became clear later in my career when I realized how diversified the deployments were and how much I enjoyed the variety of challenges to cope with.“

In how many deployments abroad have you been?

„I was deployed on three Operations in total, two times in Iraq and one time in Afghanistan. My first Operation was in Iraq in 2003 when I became Commander of the 1st Brigade within the 101st Airborne Division and took part in the initial invasion. We started in Kuwait and invaded Iraq all the way to Mossul. The second deployment took place from 2004 to 2006 when I was Chief of Operations for Multi-National Corps Irak and based in the Headquarter in Bagdad. A few years later, in 2009, I went to Afghanistan as Director of Operations within the Regional Command South in Kandahar. Each deployment lasted twelve to fifteen months.“

Have you been exposed to threatening situations during your Operations?

„Yes, especially during my first deployment in Iraq in 2003. Two days before the Operation started – we were still based in our Camp Pennsylvania in Kuwait – one of our own soldiers, Sergeant Hassan Akbar, attacked several other fellow soldiers. He threw hand grenades into several tents and shot others. It was a confusing night because at first we thought this was an attack from outside. Only a few hours later we identified that one person was missing – Sergeant Akbar – and that this had been an internal attack. We found him hidden in a bunker and arrested him. Unfortunately, two soldiers died, fourteen others were heavily injured, a few took minor blessings from this attack. I also suffered a minor shrapnel wound. It turned out later that Akbar converted to Islam and was displeased with the invasion of an Islamic country. To see this happen within my unit was a real shock – even before we left Kuwait. But I was proud of how well everybody reacted that night and even more proud of how the unit moved out on time in the invasion of Iraq, despite having lost several key staff and commanders.

Over the course of the following months, there were constantly dangerous situations when we visited troops, met with the Sheikh, the mayor or the Iraqi police. Rockets were landing on our base often so everyone was aware about the threatening surrounding. But this is what you are trained for as a soldier and you are able to cope with that. For sure, the young leaders and soldiers in the units were most often at risk – and part of my duty was to ensure that any risks they faced were mitigated and that they were well trained and equipped for those risks.“

In your second deployment to Iraq in 2005, you were Chief of Operations. Which responsibilities did this include?

„I was Colonel when I came back to Iraq February 2005 and stayed until 2006. As Chief of Operations I was responsible for planning, coordination and resourcing for all missions. The tasks included to provide the different commands, to set the priorities, to ensure that resources matched the priorities. Also I helped to develop plans for the following weeks and also supported those who were responsible for developing further the capabilities of the Iraqi Armed Forces.“

How was the situation like in Iraq in 2005-2006?

„Al-Quaida was in Iraq and that affected our daily life. There were suicide bombers and attacks and the level of violence was significantly different and higher than in 2004. There was an insurgency taking

place but initially the nature of this conflict was not fully understood to its full extent by our administration in the US. A lot of discussions with our officials were necessary to get full attention and to explain what the situation in Iraq was. Also, we needed to adjust our tactics on the ground level since the Taliban applied new tactics, e.g. by using civilians as shields and extensive use of suicide bombers, on foot and in cars, to disrupt elections and disrupt recruitment of new soldiers and police.“

You have been in different roles, ranging from combat-close positions as Commander of a Brigade to staff officer positions. It seems obvious what makes the job effective in combat zone. But how can you be most effective as a staff officer?

„It is a more conceptual role, including strategic and operational issues while the tactics are left to the combat forces. Still, being highly effective over the course of an entire year in that role implies some discipline. My former mentor had advise for how to keep a fresh mindset and healthy body for a deployment that would last a year or more: 1) exercise each day, no matter which sport and for how long, 2) rest enough, at least six hours each night on average, 3) spend some time each day to read books, novels, magazine each day in order to refresh your mind and 4) take time away from the hectic rush to think through the situation and to take a bird’s perspective. Believe it or not, I follows this advice until today and find it very helpful.“

Years later, in 2012, you became first Commander of NATO Allied Land Command in Izmir, Turkey. What did this mean to you?

„That position was fascinating and I enjoyed my two years as Commander very much. In my previous role as Chief of Congressional Liaison for the Army I was based in the USA and very close to Capitol Hill. With this position at NATO, I moved to Turkey and worked together with the allies, including Danish, German, British, Italian, Spanish, Turkish and many other nations. It reminded me about how important NATO is and about how much the US Army should emphasize its allies.“

In 2014 you were appointed as Commanding General US Army Europe. Tell us about the major tasks of the US Army Europe.

„When Russia invaded Ukraine, the entire security environment in Europe changed. Still, within the US Army logic, this position did not have the highest priority given the conflicts in Middle East and Asia. As Commander of the US Army in Europe I was in charge of 30.000 soldiers with manifold missions: first, to contribute to NATO; second to support the Army, Air Force, Special Forces and Navy in terms of logistics, missile defense, with training and providing services of the military police, engineers and logistics; third, a small part of our allotment were combat forces which we looked after; four, we also welcomed and supported rotational forces, i.e. an armored brigade combat team and an army aviation (helicopter) brigade which came to Europe for nine months.“

What were your key priorities as Commander US Army Europe?

„The US Army Europe was considered rather as ‚economy of force‘ which meant we were not highest priority for the US military. Still, I had to ensure that we were successful on our mission. The US Army was shrinking at that time already and instead of the former 300.000 soldiers from the days of the cold war we were left with 30.000 soldiers. Nevertheless, it was my mission to make these 30.000 look and feel like the ten times lager allotment supporting the same key objectives we had during the cold war: 1) protect US interests, 2) deter Russia and 3) assure allies.“

And how did you achieve these objectives, given the scarcity of resources?

„There were five pillars which I followed:

- 1) I put more responsibility on young leaders by leveraging the capabilities of the younger officers, sergeants and soldiers and entrusting them with larger tasks than they would take over under normal circumstances. It implied that these young leaders had to interact with very senior ranks within the Army and allies. As a consequence, they developed and grew quicker into larger roles. It also positively affected our leadership training program. When this practice circulated back to the US, we received a multitude of applications by young leaders who wanted to take their chances in Europe. That was a comforting feedback.
- 2) I asked for more support from the allies, foremost in terms of personnel. There were several positions which I could not staff with own people given the scarce resources. I reached out to the allies for them to provide these capabilities. For example, the position as Chief of Staff was staffed with General Markus Laubenthal, an exceptionally talented officer who is today the deputy of the General Inspector of German Armed Forces. This created a circle of trust within the allies and provided a positive symbol of our close ties.
- 3) Leverage our US Reserve component. The Reserve, ca. 500.000 women and men, makes up at least half of the total strength of the US Army soldiers. These Reserve soldiers are on duty at the National Guard or still in the Reserve and can be called in for short durations of up to three months. Within the Reserve, engineers, pioneers, military police and many logistics capabilities are bundled. They are called in to ensure a sustained land combat lasting over one year. In this case, I leveraged some of these resource to fill my requirements.
- 4) I leveraged the rotational force, i.e. the additional forces from our troops in the US.
- 5) Apply dynamic presence. This meant that we said yes to every country's request for support in their exercises, programs, events. The downside was that my team was heavily booked but the upside was that the allies could feel our commitment and presence. That was worth it!“

You were responsible for an organization of up to 30.000 soldiers. Which leadership style did you apply?

„Leadership is about the willingness to accept responsibility. It is about decision making under uncertainty since you will never have complete certainty of the future. Not taking a decision has a price tag. Therefore, use all available data at a given point in time and take an educated decision – and live with the outcome. Own the result, no matter what the outcome is. If the outcome is mediocre, you have to fix it. Mistakes done by the team are acceptable and I would back them up as long as they are not criminal or due to negligence.

As a leader you need to trust others and count on the commitment of the team. Also, it is about proximity between the leader and the team. For example, when I was in Afghanistan, I was booked in meetings end to end but everyone knew that I liked to smoke my cigar at late evening in front of the container. This was the moment when I was accessible to others – and everyone who wanted to speak to me came by. These talks were coincidental but in fact this hour spent with the team turned out to be very effective team-building and important.“

What are the key values you experienced in the Army?

„It is about endurance, commitment and comradeship. In the end, you are fighting hard to protect your comrades next to you. There is not room for egocentric attitude in the team – it is a team effort. People

who will put themselves first will not be accepted. You take pride in your own unit and its legacy and will do your best to fulfill the mission and to serve in the best possible way.“

Let's talk about the image the Military has. How does the American people appraise the US Military?

„The way the American society is evaluating the Military changed over decades. During the Vietnam war for example, there were many critical voices to be heard. But overall, especially since 9/11, active soldiers as well as veterans are enjoying high respect and appreciation from the people. My fellowmen thank us for serving.“

You know that Germans have a split relation to our Armed Forces, a biased view on its capabilities and certainly much less appreciation. How do you see this?

„I respect how Germany has effectively positioned itself within NATO, attuned to what happened in World War II. Germany has accepted the responsibility to what happened back then – and that is well recognized by all allies. Now is the time to get on with it. How long do you want to carry this baggage of guilt?! My impression rather is that some use this legacy as a convenient excuse to not spend 2% of your GDP on military spendings or to accept a real leadership role in defense and security in Europe.

But with your prosperity as a country there comes a responsibility which Germany should take over now. Officials need to be honest about the threat out there and explain better how much the security is at stake. Security and prosperity have a price tag – it is not for free. Bundeswehr plays an important part in ensuring and protecting the security and wealth of Germany – and the government officials and politicians should stress this importance of service much more to the people. And the people should pay more attention to it, including a better informed view on your Armed Forces.“

Our Armed Forces – Bundeswehr – is in general much less of a topic in society than in the US. Did you experience this, too since living in Germany?

„Yes, indeed. In the USA, people are – on average – more aware about the worldwide conflicts in which our Army is involved. In Germany, I observe an ignorance on a larger scale not only of the importance of the military but also of the missions Bundeswehr is supporting. The other day for example I was invited at a university speaking to students who are studying International Affairs. Two thirds of them were not aware of the German-led enhanced forward presence battle group deployed in Lithuania as part of a NATO operation. It was eye-opening to see the level of unawareness towards Bundeswehr.“

How do you assess the importance of NATO?

„NATO is an organization of utmost importance for a balanced security situation worldwide. I am a strong believer and supporter of our allies. Also within the Congress, the support for NATO is well recognized given the threat imposed by Russia and China.“

You are a strong supporter of NATO. Where did you gain this conviction?

„I dealt with NATO matters throughout my career, starting in 1995 when I was Aide-de-camp to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe for two years. During this time, I observed closely how much effort the Commander put in to help NATO to be successful. It was difficult in the way that the typical US mindset is more inclined towards a „America first“ view. But the Commander was very engaged to change that, day by day, and that impressed me deeply. I myself gained a lot of respect for the allies. Then, later, when I was in charge at NATO Land Command or as Commander US Army Europe, it

became my mission to bring a ‚NATO mindset‘ to our forces. Instead of creating an ‚US ghetto‘ within Germany – at our headquarters in Wiesbaden – I wanted to instill a pro-NATO mindset in the forces.“

What should be the future role that Bundeswehr should take over in NATO?

„Former President Obama once said that Germans are ‚free-riders‘ in Nato. What he meant was that Germany should spend more on defense and take a more active role rather than relying on others to provide security for and around Germany. Let alone what President Trump is accusing each day (*rolling his eyes*).

Every officer I know at Bundeswehr is unsatisfied with today’s state of readiness. They know how to do this – but they are dealing with the consequences of political decisions that were made over a decade ago. Fortunately, the Ministry of Defense is attacking this problem, and hopefully soon enough that whole generations of young leaders grow up understanding the importance of maintaining readiness and having a culture of readiness in the Bundeswehr. But political leaders have got to step up, not just the Defense Minister who is actually doing a good job, I believe, but also others. This may be unpopular but it would be adequate in every respect.“

And would Bundeswehr be able to cope with such a task?

„In my point of view, Bundeswehr already fully meets the requirements of those missions they are engaged in, for example as demonstrated by the EFP Battle Group in Lithuania. The quality of the military service is good, there are talented young men and women. But this readiness only applies to those units being on missions. Bundeswehr would need to fix overall readiness as well, to modernize equipment, train people. That will cost money and will take time to implement. Foremost, it will require dedicated political support – otherwise the hands of Bundeswehr officials are tied.“

Any concrete tasks Bundeswehr should take over at this point?

„Germany should for example take on the lead in air and missile defense in the Baltic countries protecting EU infrastructure and citizens. Also, Bundeswehr could invest more in building up a logistics hub for required infrastructure (roads, tunnels, railway) and enhance the cyber protection for large hubs.“

You retired from the Army in January 2018. What is your current mission?

„I am holding the Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at CEPA. Our major task at CEPA is to educate and inform influencers in the US and in Europe about the strategically vital importance of a strong transatlantic relationship. My three priorities are firstly the involvement of the US in Europe, secondly within NATO and thirdly in Germany.“

In your current role you are a much sought-after sparring partner on military and security topics. Therefore: How do you evaluate President Trump’s decision to move away 9.500 soldiers from Germany to Poland?

„This is a wrong-headed decision that was taken and announced without prior strategic analyses. But since Congress will need to grant the money for that, there will be months of planning to come with intensive evaluations of the situation. I am semi-optimistic that not all aspects of this decision will actually be implemented in the end.“

Thank you very much General Hodges for sharing these insights with us and for providing an outside view on NATO and Bundeswehr. All the best to you and thank you for the interview!

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