French Air Force General Denis Mercier currently leads the Transformation of NATO. He was appointed Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT) during a change of command ceremony held on 30 September in Norfolk, Virginia, the United States. Being one of the two NATO Strategic Commands and the only permanent NATO headquarters in North America, Allied Command Transformation plays an essential role in maintaining and strengthening the vital transatlantic link between Europe and North America and leading the transformation of NATO’s military structure, forces, capabilities and doctrine. Previous to this assignment, General Mercier served as the French Air Force Chief of Staff, leading French airmen and airwomen on many fronts, including North Africa and the Middle East, as well during the air policing mission over the Baltic States. The following interview took place on 9 November 2015, during SACT’s first official visit to the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC).

Interview by Inci Kucukaksoy, JWC PAO. Photographs by CPO Vincent Micheletti, French Navy.

Sir, first we would like to thank you for giving us this exclusive interview for The Three Swords Magazine. What were your thoughts when you learned that you had been designated as NATO’s new SACT?
— It is a Commander’s duty and my pleasure to answer questions from all ACT members and organizations. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address the JWC and to reach out to your readers. Upon my appointment, I felt a strong sense of pride and motivation to lead the Allied Command Transformation, but I was also humbled by the faith and trust placed in me. The very uncertain world we live in makes leading the Transformation a challenging mission; and also ensuring that we will enable our Alliance to continue to fulfill its three core tasks, namely Collective Defence, Crisis Management and Cooperative Security, today and in the future. All in all, I remain confident in our ability to keep this Transformation moving forward.
The General’s focus was “Building NATO’s fight strong posture, which is the operational ability..."
JWC is NATO’s premier organization for joint operational level training and warfare. What are your expectations from the Centre?
— NATO’s posture requires a high level of training in all kinds of environments and development of future concepts and doctrine. It is JWC’s role to take into account new and emerging threats, such as cyber threats, hybrid warfare, ballistic missiles, etc. Let me share something with you: when I went to the three consecutive Distinguished Visitor (DV) days of exercise TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15 (TRJE15), I had one concern, which was ‘were we being too ambitious?’ But the feedback I got from the various levels involved was overwhelmingly positive, participating headquarters came away delighted and felt that the experience that this exercise had given them had changed them. To me this indicated that the more ambitious we are with our exercises, the better they become. So, I would encourage you to always aim high, be more ambitious in your scenarios and in preparing the exercises you are entrusted with.

How effective are exercises in achieving NATO’s effectiveness and efficiency?
— In these exercises we can train all the different levels of the Chain of Command, from the tactical units up to the Strategic Commands. This full range of effectiveness, from a clear demonstration of the credibility of our posture at the strategic level down to the proof of our interoperability at the tactical level, is the guarantee of the effectiveness of the exercises. They are built around realistic scenarios, which can cover all the range of the threats that the Alliance must face. What I saw during TRJE15 has completely fulfilled those requirements, and the lessons learned during the exercise will help us to further strengthen the efficiency of our Alliance.

What are your observations from TRJE15?
— I am very satisfied with exercise TRJE15 and with what I witnessed during the DV days in Italy, Spain and Portugal. This large-scale and very ambitious exercise has achieved its objectives and will help the Alliance develop the right posture. It also pleases me to see that TRJE15 allowed us to experiment with new concepts and train on new threats, such as hybrid warfare and cyber-attacks. Further, the exercise involved many Partners and international organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as industry observers. However, the aim was not to train together, but to test our interoperability and coordination efforts in all kinds of environments, which we also achieved.

Do you have people that you look to for guidance and inspiration?
— You, the JWC, first of all. You and the other ACT Centres, the JALLC in Monsanto, Portugal, and the JFTC in Bydgoszcz, Poland. In the ACT organization as a whole, we have a wide spectrum of capabilities and we need to exploit them all. I would like to stress that you are not working for me; you are working with me, in order to enable the NATO Alliance to face any future challenge.

To conclude, what is your message to NATO’s Transformation community?
— I have been impressed with the professionalism and the unique skills that I’ve seen during my visits to the various Centres. We will continue to rely on you for the preparation of Allied forces, and we will be asking more and more of you, in order to reach the highest level of readiness for our Alliance. In other words: we must strive to become even more ambitious! –