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Providing PACOM Humanitarian Assistance in South East Asia

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(FORT SHAFTER, HI NR 06-09) *In this retrospective, Paul Bowen shares his experiences while coordinating Humanitarian Assistance (HA) Projects for the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) in 2008 - 2009.*

A telephone call can change your life. When I heard my supervisor's voice on the phone (Derek Chow, Honolulu District chief of Civil Works), I assumed he wanted a routine update on recent project activities on Palau.

Instead, he surprised me by asking if I wanted to take on project management duties in the planning and construction or renovation of 25 Pacific Command Humanitarian Assistance projects in far off Indonesia, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

Things haven't stopped moving since then.

These projects consisted of constructing and renovating schools, medical clinics and flood management operations centers.

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2-2-2 SE ASIA HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

The purpose of the PACOM Humanitarian Assistance mission is to help residents improve their lives and thereby enhance and create a positive image of the United States in Southeast Asia countries.

Sites are selected with the assistance of the local U.S. Embassy country team and foreign governments in locations where the U.S. can provide assistance to developing countries in the region.

In Indonesia, most of the work was renovation or construction of new additions to primary and secondary schools. Construction of latrine facilities and water systems had a primary emphasis in the construction work as they were deemed very important for the health of the students.

In Cambodia and Vietnam, the projects consisted of a combination of constructing new schools as well as large scale renovations of high schools and the construction of multi-story medical clinics and flood management operation centers.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is able to assist PACOM with project management oversight in the areas of contracting, funds management and oversight of construction. The Corps' objective is to provide quality construction at an affordable price.

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3-3-3 SE ASIA HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

I know most Corps engineers reading this have - from time to time - had projects or taskings they felt were so complicated and insurmountable that they wanted to just run away. My initial thoughts for taking on the management of these projects were that this was going to be difficult and a challenge.

The total budget for oversight and construction for the 25 projects was approximately \$7.2 million. The cost of construction for each project varied from simple school and latrine renovations in Indonesia at a cost of \$50,000 to major new construction and renovation projects in Cambodia and Vietnam at more than \$500,000.

Following a week of analyzing the suggested project budgets, cost estimates, construction costs and scopes of work, I realized these projects were in need of a lot of effort and creativity to make them successful. Based on the contractor bids, the budget was significantly short-funded for construction, but I believed that with cooperation and teamwork the projects could be accomplished.

It took several months of intense work from multiple sources, including essential financial knowledge and funds management expertise from my co-worker (Honolulu District biologist) Cindy Barger, and a plan was finally put in place.

This was accomplished with key support from Derek Chow and POH Deputy Chief, Programs and Project Management Steve Cayetano.

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4-4-4 SE ASIA HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

There were numerous consultations and guidance plus the willingness to provide additional funding from the customer, Lt. Col. Jeffery Harris, PACOM Humanitarian Assistance Program Manager. This assistance proved invaluable. Technical and support advice also came from Rod Markuten, Mark Schnabel and Senior Executive Jim Bersson of the Corps' Pacific Ocean Division.

In the end, a financial plan was put in place to build 24 of the 25 projects. The sole abbreviated project, a flood management operation center in Vietnam was halted with a complete design and has a very good chance of being constructed with next year's PACOM HA funding. The process demonstrated to me the power of unrelenting perseverance and working as a team to accomplish a common goal.

A large amount of contract support was required from the Corps' Far East (South Korea) District (FED) in order to facilitate a very tight time table of fund availability. The decision was made to use an existing Far East District indefinite delivery/ indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract.

FED contracting experts were able to issue the contracts on short notice and obtain the services of CH2M Hill as the prime contractor. CH2M Hill served as the overall project manager and subcontracted the necessary quality assurance, design and construction contractors to execute the projects.

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5-5-5 SE ASIA HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

In October of 2008, I scheduled inspection visits of the specific construction sites to observe construction methods, adherence of the work to contract drawings and overall quality of construction.

All of the new construction consisted of stone or concrete foundations connected to poured-in-place steel-reinforced concrete beams progressing to a ring beam for roof truss connections. An infill of locally made bricks or cinderblocks was used to fill in the area between the support columns and the foundation and ring beams.

The infill was skim-coated with a mixture of sand and cement to create a relatively smooth finished surface. Windows were locally made of wood with single pane glass and pivoted outward in an awning style. The roof trusses were made of locally harvested wood and anchored to concrete ring beams at the top of the wall, while the roof materials were generally clay tile in Central Java and corrugated galvanized steel sheeting in Sulawesi due to necessity of material transport by boat. Roofing in Cambodia and Vietnam varied depending upon the availability and existing style of the location.

Some of the larger school renovations in Cambodia were required due to concrete roofs that exhibited various states of failure. Remediation of the existing schools varied as some schools were 50 years old with solid brick walls and locking-peg wood joinery.

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6-6-6 SE ASIA HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Other more recently built schools had the same concrete post and beam construction as our present day construction. In addition to renovation inside the buildings, the construction and renovation of latrines and bathroom facilities was a large part of every renovation and construction site.

A few construction site locations in Indonesia were quite small and a constant point of consideration at these sites again was the location of the latrines in relation to water wells. In addition, inspections were conducted on site safety and personal protective equipment at every location with recommendations for corrective actions.

My first destination was Indonesia, which had 13 project sites divided into two regions, Central Java and Sulawesi. Most of the sites in Indonesia were a combination of construction of new and/or renovations of primary schools and associated sanitation facilities. One school site, Sutopati, is only 27 miles from the very active Indonesian Merapi volcano.

Nearly all of the schools were located in remote villages where western visitors are a rare sight. The Sulawesi locations were accessible only by boat as they were located on Lembeh Island. The villages were small and are mostly reliant on fishing for a living with many having colorful painted boats on the waterfront tied to rickety old wooden docks which conjure picturesque storybook images.

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7-7-7 SE ASIA HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

When walking onto various school grounds children would peep over window ledges to see who the strangers were. The teachers often lost control of their classes and in some cases the teachers gave up and let the children come out to meet us and shake hands.

Most of the children knew bits of English and wanted to impress me with their knowledge. "Good Day, Mister," said with loud boisterous voices was a favorite.

In anticipation of meeting the children at the different schools, I purchased a dozen soccer balls and bags of Halloween candy to hand out. As I had deflated the balls to fit inside my luggage while in transit, I had to hand pump air into the balls at each school location before handing them out.

Because the children were very eager to play with a real soccer ball, the balls were first given to a teacher or principal to defray a ruckus over ownership. After an hour or so of inspections and meeting the students, each site visit usually ended with numerous good-byes by teachers and children wildly kicking soccer balls - possibly induced by a sugar-high from the Halloween candy.

After completion of site inspections in Indonesia I flew via Bangkok - where I slept on the marble airport floor for five hours in transit - to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This episode is somewhat normal for me as through my previous Asia travel experiences I have learned the best places to catch a few winks are at airports.

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8-8-8 SE ASIA HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Upon arriving in Phnom Penh, I bypassed the taxi stand to take a “*tuk tuk*” to the hotel. This is a small two-wheeled, open air carriage towed behind an often smoke-belching motorcycle. Using this transport has a distinct colonial feel as your senses are bombarded by all the sights, sounds and smells of the area. I prefer the *tuk tuk* as it allows me to experience what an average person in Phnom Penh feels everyday.

In Cambodia, the seven project sites consisted of renovations and new construction of primary schools, high schools and medical clinics. I was pleased with the progress of work on the sites and the dedication of the workers. Issues such as how to evaluate bamboo scaffolding presented unique work site challenges.

Traveling from Phnom Penh to remote sites involved long trips on rough roads, past miles of rice paddies and small villages. The people were quite friendly and warm toward Americans and they often wanted to stand beside me to see how tall I was. The local quality assurance (QA) contractor for Cambodia and Vietnam - New Horizons Chief Executive Officer John Troha - was my guide. Troha is an architect by trade who hails from Pennsylvania and moved penniless to Vietnam 19 years ago. He has a striking resemblance to a pirate, a trait he did not hide, and which he enjoys immensely.

Vietnam was the last stop for the trip and I didn't know what to expect as it was my first time in country. Arriving at Da Nang International airport, the first thing I saw was the Vietnam red flag with the single star, which drove home where I was.

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9-9-9 SE ASIA HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

I soon discovered people are pretty much the same everywhere regardless of nationality or politics. As work was just getting underway, there was not much to inspect other than mobilization to sites and initial civil works issues.

In the small village of Hoa Phu (about 80 miles northwest of Hanoi) where a new school was to be built, the locals insisted on having a groundbreaking ceremony on very short notice. Since I was the only available representative from the U.S. Government, I was requested to give a speech at the event. I hurriedly assembled a 15 minute speech the night before and spoke to a gathering of approximately 100 people the following day via a translator. My speech was well received and the post-ceremony handshaking went on for 30 minutes afterwards.

My last night in Vietnam was spent in the capital city of Hanoi to discuss projects with the U.S. Embassy staff. At the end of the day, I walked around the back streets of Hanoi into the old section of the city which features a distinct French-flavored cluster of closely-encroaching buildings on cobblestone streets.

In this area I saw a motorbike repair shop where the mechanic work was conducted on the sidewalk - grease included - and a carpenter shop with sawdust flying about while the workers were building store display shelves.

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10-10-10 SE ASIA HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

In the middle of this beehive of everyday activity I sipped a Hanoi-brand beer at a narrow café no more than 10 feet wide watching the world go by. For a person like me who appreciates adventure, it didn't get any better than this.

I left Vietnam on a plane bound for Tokyo for the last leg of my return trip home to my office in Palau. A four hour nap on a familiar piece of tile floor at the New Tokyo International Airport (Narita) felt like my home turf already.

At some point during this trip I came to a realization that I had the greatest Corps job in the world.

It felt good providing assistance to other people of other countries while in the service of my own country. I was having adventures most people only dream about. And while I was initially shell-shocked by the details and scale of these projects, I still feel that your career and life's opportunities are what you make of them. I'm resolute in thanks for my life's work opportunities – and those opportunities to help the less fortunate people of Southeast Asia.

While emptying my suitcase at home in Palau – and the assorted U.S. Dollars, Indonesian Rupiah, Vietnamese Dong, Cambodian Riel, Thai Baht and Japanese Yen - I visualized the fact that while I was in Southeast Asia I was part engineer, part Doctor Livingston and part diplomat; a surreal experience in providing valuable and tangible humanitarian assistance for people who don't get a helping hand very often.

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