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***Cobra Gold 2010:* District's FEST-A, Royal Thai Military Conduct Infrastructure Reconnaissance of Cobra Gold HCA Projects**

By Dino W. Buchanan, Honolulu District Public Affairs

(FORT SHAFTER, HI NR 11-10) During 28 years of the annual Cobra Gold exercises, U.S., Thai and other Southeast Asian military engineers constructed various humanitarian-related structures - mostly schools and utility facilities - each year as part of the overall exercise scenario.

But after 28 years, joint military and exercise officials realized there has been no follow-up evaluation or inspection of these buildings.

“To my knowledge, no one has revisited these previously constructed Humanitarian Civil Assistance (HCA) projects to assess their conditions,” said U.S. Army Maj. Evan Ting, commander of Honolulu District’s 565th Engineering Detachment, better known as the District’s Forward Engineering Support Team - Advance (FEST - A). “With an average of five to six structures built during each of the Cobra Gold exercises, there can be more 100 buildings that haven’t been revisited since they were constructed.”

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During this year's three-week Cobra Gold 2010 exercise, the Honolulu District FEST-A, a group of U.S. Marines from the 3rd Civil Affairs Group (3rd CAG), Royal Thai Armed Forces Engineer and Civil Affairs officers, interpreters, and a U.S. Army 322nd Civil Affairs representative conducted a joint/combined/coalition mission, logging nearly 1,700 road miles while traveling throughout northern and central Thailand to the various former Cobra Gold exercise construction sites. Their mission: Conduct infrastructure reconnaissance (commonly referred to with the U.S. Army acronym SWEAT-MSO), and create the FIRST viable, perpetual working database of technical construction information about past Cobra Gold engineer-constructed HCA projects.

Pacific Ocean Division and Honolulu District commanders as well as U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) and Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group - Thailand (JUSMAG-Thai) were interested in the conditions of these U.S and coalition forces-constructed HCA projects. During planning for this mission, the FEST found there was no known single database identifying the locations of these previously built HCA projects.

“By creating this new database, we can document structural integrity, identify life-safety issues, inventory HCA locations by GPS and store site information in one convenient location assessable by stakeholders,” said Maj. Ting. “This can be a great tool for those planning future projects or for use in future assessments. In addition, the database would document facility usage and verify buildings are being used for what they were intended. We can also provide our team findings and recommendations for design changes, which can improve the facilities and the quality of life for the Thai people.”

According to Maj. Ting the idea of creating a viable database was discussed as a viable need and possible project for the 2010 Cobra Gold exercise by the FEST-A, U.S. forces and Royal Thai engineers and coordinated through USARPAC, U.S. Pacific Command and JUSMAG - Thailand at a pre-Cobra Gold planning conference.

“Representatives from USARPAC, JUSMAG and USACE said ‘great idea’ and let’s make it happen,” Maj. Ting said. “We later asked the Thai military forces and their civil affairs groups to assist us and the mission became a true high-visibility, joint effort. The Marines’ 3rd CAG asked to join us as well. And because of the visibility, the Coalition Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force (JCMOTF) and the Coalition Task Force staff tracked our movements and progress throughout the Cobra Gold exercise.”

The FEST-A overall mission for the exercise was “to conduct infrastructure surveys of previously constructed Humanitarian-Civic Assistance (HCA) projects in the vicinities of Utapao, Chiang Mai, Tak, and Chanthaburi and provide the data and engineering support to USARPAC, JUSMAG-Thai and the Corps of Engineers, while meeting exercise objective of host nation partnering.”

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Maj. Ting added that a critical aspect of the mission - in the spirit of the Cobra Gold exercise and emphasized by leadership - was “to build rapport and partnerships with our Thai counterparts.”

Six of the normally eight-member FEST-A traversing the Thai countryside were Maj. Ting, Cartographer Dave Hinkle, Environmental Engineer Ismael Delgado, Civil Engineer Ed McBride, Electrical Engineer Lu Tran, Mechanical Engineer Jon Hosaka and one Thai language interpreter.

“One of the FEST’s primary missions is infrastructure reconnaissance, so this mission was great, real-world training for our team,” said Maj. Ting.

Accompanying the FEST on the one-week surveying mission was a contingent of 3rd CAG U.S. Marines, Royal Thai Armed Forces Engineers and Civil Affairs (Mobile Development Units 32 and 33), Thai language interpreters and local civic leaders. The group scoured previous Cobra Gold HCA exercise-constructed structures looking at structural integrity and conditions, construction quality of electrical connectivity, water supply and quality of sanitation.

Maj. Ting said in an interview after the exercise that the Cobra Gold database assignment gave his FEST their first opportunity to conduct SWEAT-MSO (Sewer, Water, Electricity, Academic, Trash and Medical Safety and Other [which can include structural/architectural, drainage or plumbing and ventilation]) infrastructure survey training as a (mostly) complete team in a forward-deployed status.

“The data we collected using portable IKE (It Knows Everything) survey devices was later uploaded online whereby USARPAC and JUSMAG-Thailand could have ‘one-stop’ access to all the information, which included photographs, GPS coordinates and technical details,” Maj. Ting said.

The majority of the survey information gathering centered on the SWEAT (minus the academic portion, which the Civil Affairs surveyed) and Other categories assessing the projects utilizing a green, amber, red and black grading scale.

He added that travel between nine designated project sites and the exercise base camps was an experience unto itself as the group convoyed over a large swath of very scenic Thai landscape - from near the Burma border in the north to the Southeast of Thailand near the Cambodian border - all within one week.

“The trip to one of our first sites had us driving from Chiang Mai in northern Thailand for three hours to the town of Baan Hauxtontong near the Burma border, where we saw people living in straw and timber huts with no electricity or running water - it was a very remote site.”

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Overall findings by the engineers proved to be very favorable as a large majority of the targeted buildings were deemed structurally sound, were being used appropriately and generally well maintained. The FEST-A also determined the local Thai users were also pleased with the HCA facilities.

“Our team methodically examined technical issues and helped identify what changes could be made to get the structures or sanitation up to acceptable or desired standards. Most of the targeted project sites graded out green – they look pretty darn good considering their age. Bottom line is they’re all structurally sound. The U.S. forces along with the coalition forces who built these structures did a great job. We identified drainage, ventilation, electrical issues and made recommendations to the Thai Mobile Development Units (Thai equivalent of Civil Affairs) for improvements. Some recommendations involved moving electrical outlets to higher levels to alleviate safety issues for school children and even adding natural lighting or improving ventilation with larger openings in walls.”

At a few locations some buildings lacked natural lighting or ventilation; several had issues with electrical connectivity/maintenance, while others had non-functional ceiling fans and lighting.

As part of the Cobra Gold exercise the FEST–A was given the opportunity to support USARPAC Command Deputy Chief of Staff, Engineering (DSCENG) on two Engineer Related Construction (ERC) projects, which included an electrical infrastructure survey of Utapao Air Base Red Horse compound that would provide technical project scoping to USARPAC.

During Maj. Ting’s mission briefings to USARPAC DCSENG, CJCMOTF, and JUSMAG-Thai everyone agreed that it’s necessary to incorporate FEST teams in post HCA assessments for all future Cobra Gold and other PACOM exercises.

“JUSMAG-Thai was so pleased with our performance and our end product that they said there is a definite NEED to have this evaluation done every year during the (Cobra Gold) exercise. They still have many structures to evaluate.”

“While gaining invaluable field training during the Cobra Gold 2010 mission, our FEST-A also supported a vital priority to both the U.S. and Thailand by assessing how previously constructed humanitarian facilities were being maintained and discern design and construction lessons,” said Honolulu District Commander Lt. Col. Jon J. Chytka. “The team certainly has proven their worth as a multi-functional engineer team and as great U.S. ambassadors.”

Maj. Ting said that despite the hectic exercise mission schedule the FEST made significant strides in team building and training while filling a viable need.

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“Our FEST couldn’t have had a better training opportunity as we created a real product for a real world need in a short period of time. I think it would be difficult to duplicate our team’s accomplishment or experience during another mission. The opportunity to help people in need is extremely satisfying.”

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