

Prime BEEF Goes to Sea

Air Force CEs sail with Seabees for SOUTHCOM mission

**Maj Thomas DeFazio
5 CES/CEO**

The few, the proud, the Prime BEEF engineers! When U.S. Marine Corps engineers scheduled to deploy to Operation CONTINUING PROMISE 08 (CP08) had to deploy to Southwest Asia instead, Prime BEEF engineers from Minot AFB, N.D., were tasked for the mission.

From August to December 2008, I had the great privilege of commanding a 60-person contingent on CP08, a sea-based joint humanitarian and civic assistance mission to six Caribbean and South American nations: Nicaragua, Colombia, Curacao, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Dominican Republic. While we can't confirm we are the first group of Air Force CEs to deploy on a Navy vessel, we are definitely one of the few.

The engineering team consisted of 40 Airmen from the 5th Civil Engineer Squadron and 20 Navy Seabees from Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit. I had prior "Navy" experience, having served as an exchange officer with the Seabees of the "Fearless" Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 74 from 1997-99. The OIC of CBMU 202, Chief Warrant Officer Dave Joyner, a seasoned 26-year Seabee, was my AOIC for CP08.

The purpose of CP08 was to strengthen and advance U.S. relations with Caribbean and Latin American countries and demonstrate a continued commitment to the region, as part of the vision of the SOUTHCOM commander, Admiral James G. Stavridis, to provide "An interagency oriented organization seeking to support security and stability in the Americas." During CP08, engineers worked alongside medical and dental personnel, linguists, ship's crew, non-government organizations (Project HOPE and Operation

SMILE), and foreign military members on projects focused on improving healthcare, education, and childcare centers and providing safe areas for communities to congregate.

In early August, our 60-engineer contingent embarked from Norfolk, Va., on the amphibious assault ship USS Kearsarge, a tremendously flexible and capable grey-haul platform, under the mission command of Commodore Fernandez "Frank" Ponds and the ship command of Captain Walter Towns. As is sometimes the case, our prior planning barely survived first contact. Our first CP08 visit — to Nicaragua — was met with heavy rains, heat and humidity, and a slight-graded sea shore (bad for amphibious operations). Just three weeks into our mission, our second mission stop — to Colombia — was cut short by several days and our planned third stop — to Panama — was cancelled when we were diverted to Haiti for humanitarian assistance/disaster relief efforts after a string of hurricanes and tropical storms hit the island, causing serious damage and casualties. After a quick port visit to Puerto Rico, we resumed our scheduled CP08 mission and the 5 CES engineers actually ended up sailing to seven countries. Following are some of our mission details.

Predeployment Planning and Logistics

Predeployment planning was extensive and involved two mid-planning conferences, a final planning conference, and a pre-sail conference. Each consisted of approximately 120 personnel representing 80 different organizations. Additionally, pre-deployment site survey teams visited the host nations in late February and early March to determine the nature of work, scope of projects, site logistics, and equipment requirements. Local construction materials were available in all but two countries, Nicaragua and Panama.

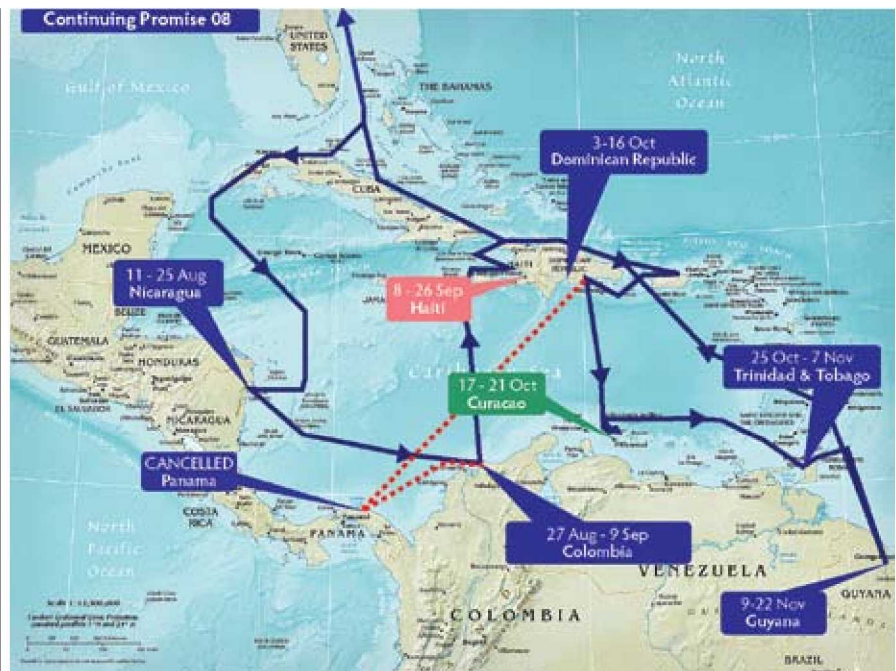
Photo above: The amphibious assault ship USS Kearsarge (LHD 3) is underway on Oct. 16, 2008, off the coast of the Dominican Republic after launching a landing craft utility during Continuing Promise 2008. (U.S. Navy photo by MC3 William S. Parker)

With allotted funding of \$600K (\$100K per country), \$575,482 was expended on materials and services for the engineering mission. We brought \$330K worth of materials with us, including all materials for the two previously mentioned countries, \$46K worth of lumber (a late add after extreme cost estimates were given from the country prime vendors), and eight commercial-grade playground sets (these were a hit in every country). Collectively, we also brought 32 pieces of CE support equipment, conexes of Air Force and Seabee tools, 10 tents, 10 generators, and life support items. The Seabees brought most of the heavy equipment (e.g. five 15-ton trucks, three Humvees, etc.); we brought two bobcats (with attachments) and three small utility vehicles. All were stored in the expansive upper and lower vehicle storage areas of the USS Kearsarge normally used to store the equipment of a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The coordination of who was bringing what was a job in itself.

Twelve members of our ADVON party arrived in Norfolk on July 19 to inventory and palletize our materials and equipment that had been delivered to the pier, before loading them onto the ship, scheduled for August 1-4. This was our first unexpected challenge: while an MEU comes fully prepared and equipped to handle its own logistics, we didn't. With all the ship's crew enjoying its last few days of predeployment liberty – a typical scenario, we learned – we were left scrambling with just a few dedicated standby duty forklift operators (since we were not qualified to drive on the ship). Two 18-hour days later, our "stuff" was loaded. With all of our engineers, materials, and equipment on board, we left port on August 6.

Accomplishing the Mission

In an odd twist from our usual mission, we and the medical/dental contingent were the supported elements of this mission. Overall, the engineering component of the humanitarian/civic assistance mission completed 23 proj-



► Nicaragua

Community Education Center – built 2 standard 16'x32' SEAHuts
Municipal Park – repaired gazebo and lighting; improved grounds/playground
Juan Comenius HS – installed 9 classroom (25'x30') ceilings and perimeter chain link fence
Central School – built 2 frame shelters

► Colombia

Yulu community well – built new roof structure
Los Alps School – built L-shaped school (= 4 SEAHuts)
San Cristobal Hospital – renovated 4 bathrooms, evaluated/fixd 72 lights and 4 A/C units
Palmira Village – installed 3,000- gallon water tank/built playground

► Dominican Republic

Sabana Grande School – built 4-classroom modified SEAHut; improved grounds/playground/basketball courts
Bonao Caribe Clinic – renovated clinic floor-to-roof top; landscaped grounds
Socorro Sanchez School – built CMU block food prep/storage area; renovated library
Villa Altagracia – built playground

► Curacao

Willemstad Hospital - relocated electric panel; installed generator

► Trinidad and Tobago

St. Jude's School – renovated 44-room complex (ceilings, walls, electrical, plumbing)
All-In-One Child Development Center – renovated bathroom; added lights/security lights/shed/playground/fence
Cyril Ross Nursery – improved drainage; repaired roof; cleaned site; painted

► Guyana

East Ruimveldt Community Center – Installed 1,500-foot perimeter fence; painted 7,000-sq ft center; installed playground, awning, exterior lights
West Demerara Hospital Canteen – built CMU block canteen w/serving counter, sinks, picnic tables
Houston HS – renovated library; repaired bathroom

Note: CP08 was diverted to Haiti for disaster relief support and mission to Panama was subsequently cancelled.

ects in five countries – Nicaragua, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana — valued at \$1.87M, and worked a total of 3,939 direct labor mandays (U.S. engineers, community relations personnel, and host nation engineers). Completed projects included three new schools, five renovated schools, five renovated clinics, 10 recreation projects, and five infrastructure repairs. An overview of the projects by country is given in sidebar on previous page.

Once on scene, we often re-scoped the projects to meet the people's needs. My SNCOs did a fantastic job with this, adding more than was asked or expected. The ship's crew was invaluable to the success of the engineering mission, providing many hours of skilled and unskilled labor in every country.

Each country provided its own unique logistics and communications challenges. In four countries we either established tent camps (Nicaragua and Guyana) or stayed in barracks provided by the host nation (Dominican Republic and Trinidad and Tobago) and traveled to and from the



SSgt Arthur Malecki of the 5 CES, Minot, N.D., helps make repairs to The Best Hospital in West Demarara, Guyana. (U.S. Navy photo by MC Ernest Scott)

camp to the work sites daily. In Colombia, we remained on the ship and traveled in landing crafts to shore, then bussed and convoyed to the job sites. Primary communications were made via cell phones back to Virginia then back down to the ship, which created poor reception and connectivity. Transportation assets for moving personnel, equipment, and materials ashore included two SH-60 Sea Hawk and six MH-53 Sea Dragon helicopters, as well as three landing craft. I cannot say enough about the skill and professionalism of these support units.

Detour to Haiti

The CP08 humanitarian mission was temporarily put on hold in September, when the USS Kearsarge and embarked personnel were diverted to Haiti in support of a disaster relief mission.

Following the devastating effects of three consecutive hurricanes and tropical storms, engineers aided in the movement and delivery of almost 2,000 tons of relief supplies via helicopter and landing craft. Engineers also completed 15 bridge assessments, and 450 miles of roadway surveys and restored a 2,000-foot water pipeline in a remote village. In all, we validated 47 projects valued at \$90M, and prepared storyboards for the 4th Fleet Commander to report to Congress.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The mission was extremely challenging given the timetable and logistical complexities. Because of the diversion, we worked 57 days straight without a day off, and 113 out of 118 days overall. It was hard to develop a work rhythm. Every country was different and we only averaged 10-14 days in each country, so we literally had to "hit the ground running." Getting to and from ship to shore was time consuming; we usually loitered 3 to 20 nautical miles offshore, sailing out further every few nights to perform daily ship maintenance. Travel to and from the job sites could eat up a lot of our time. We would usually have three sites in a country, each separated by an hour or more drive. One of our biggest challenges was loading and unloading the ship. As we left each country, we would have to backload the ship with the next country and its projects in mind.

We learned much along the way and came back with some very good lessons for future missions:

To make the most of our time, we started buying materials for upcoming countries in the country we were currently in. We set up a workshop on the ship to prepare or pre-build as much as possible while we were underway. More time could have been spent in preliminary site surveying. As we came "new" to a site, it was often difficult to design off the limited photos we were provided. In many cases, it was harder to do renovation than new construction, because the new materials often didn't fit with the existing ones. It

became important not to overbuy materials, because we couldn't bring back any lumber back with us. As it was, we had to do a top-to-bottom agricultural wash-down of the ship and equipment before returning to the United States.

Spanish-speaking personnel were by far the most valuable team members for this particular mission — at least one Spanish speaker, with an understanding of construction terms, per unit was necessary. We were very fortunate to have seven internal to our unit. Finally, one of the worst lessons we learned: a 15-ton truck can't swim as it nose dives off the end of a landing craft into five feet of surf.

Rewards

Operation CONTINUING PROMISE 2008 concluded on Dec. 2, 2008 when the USS Kearsarge pulled into Pier 8 at Norfolk Naval Station, Va. Engineers from the 5 CES debarked and returned to Minot AFB and 52 inches of snow, exhausted but proud of our success.

Some of our most rewarding experiences involved the inspirational people we encountered. One of our CEs, A1C Joel Mendoza, a native Nicaraguan, received a surprise visit with his mother and father. "I never thought in a million

years I would return home and get the opportunity to help out," said A1C Mendoza.

In concert with the U.S. Ambassadors of each country, we were able to bring our message to the highest levels of government, presidents, prime ministers, chiefs of staff, military counterparts, governors and mayors. And while we were only there for very short periods of time, our accomplishments truly were remarkable. Everywhere we went there was gratitude. "I want to thank the Americans. You are very generous and caring ...the most beautiful thing a nation can do," said Sister Helena of St. Jude's School for Girls, in Trinidad and Tobago.

CP08 provided our engineers with training, cross-training, and a service-to-service exchange of expertise. We exceeded all the mission requirements we were given, and under budget. We consistently received accolades from our hosts, in person and in the press. CP08 was also a wonderful opportunity to showcase what our professional military engineers, Air Force and Seabees alike, can do.

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A1C Pasha Hughes, left, of the 5 CES, and Navy Seabee Hugo Lerma work together building a new playground for a local community in Guyana. (U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Gina Wollman)