Cobra Gold '99

Tests the Eight-Step Training Model

By First Lieutenant Matthew Luzzatto

For several years, the eight-step training model has been a helpful guide that many units have adopted as their standard operating procedure. Closely resembling troop-leading procedures, the training model refined the existing standard into a straightforward method for conducting quality training. This past year, the 864th Engineer Combat Battalion (Heavy), Fort Lewis, Washington, put the eight-step training model to the test and proved its effectiveness during the 84th's deployment to Thailand as part of Cobra Gold '99.

Cobra Gold '99 joined the U.S. and Thai militaries to build four multipurpose village activity centers in less then a month. Varying slightly in design, each building rested on an 80- by 40-foot concrete pad with precast concrete columns. On top of the columns was a steel-framed roof support system with a heavy concrete tile cover. Each building consisted of some variation of block construction and might include end walls, various rooms, or decorative block with steel-mesh enclosures. Built adjacent to existing school compounds, the new activity centers furnished much-needed classrooms and functional meeting spaces to these remote and economically depressed villages. In addition, U.S. and Thai soldiers received valuable joint operations construction experience.

With a firm understanding of the mission's scope, the 864th began to execute the eight-step training model early on so as to use this valuable training mission to the fullest.

Plan the Training

One year before the mission's execution, the battalion S3 attended a Cobra Gold '99 preplanning meeting in Bangkok and, in July 1998, a Concept Development Conference was held in Hawaii. Throughout the rest of 1998, the battalion staff continued to collect information and coordinate future contracts for the mission that was planned for May 1999. Meanwhile the battalion's construction section gathered everything it could from previous Cobra Gold missions. After-action reviews and plans from those exercises helped ensure that many of the challenges faced in the past would not arise again.

Train and Certify Leaders

In early January 1999, the task force narrowed the concept of the operation to four construction sites—three would be completed by Alpha Company's two vertical construction platoons, and Seabees from the 5th Naval Marine Construction Battalion would complete the fourth. During the battalion's annual construction conference, OICs and NCOICs updated their project-management skills, to include learning to use the new Sure Track software program by Primavara. More importantly this conference allowed battalion leaders to ensure that project leaders understood and adhered to the battalion's high standards.

As a final predeployment certification, each OIC gave the battalion commander a preconstruction brief that included details of how the OIC planned to accomplish each mission. The briefs were of special importance because the construction sites were located hours from each other and in some of the most

Soldiers from the 864th Engineer Battalion construct the foundation system for a multipurpose building in Thailand.

remote areas of Thailand. This meant that the majority of the command and control would rely on expertise of the site OICs and NCOICs.

Recon the Site

In February a reconnaissance team consisting of Alpha Company's executive officer, a site NCOIC, and part of the battalion's construction section visited Thailand to get a first-hand look at the sites. The team took photographs and videos and established the basis of good relations with each village leader. The team determined the best means of providing each site with essential life-support supplies and contracts. Meanwhile, the battalion's construction team established and finalized bill-of-material contracts and met with its Thai army counterparts for each site.

Issue the Plan

After compiling information from the reconnaissance team and the OIC's planning, the task force issued a comprehensive plan early in March 1999.

Rehearse

To ensure the success of a mission, there is no substitute for quality construction rehearsals. So for more than a year before the execution of Cobra Gold '99, the 864th sought construction missions that were similar to those it would perform in Thailand. In August 1998, Alpha Company's 1st Platoon completed a mission for the 3d Ranger Battalion that involved constructing four different walls at one of the ranges so the rangers could train on urban demolition. While constructing three of these walls, the company placed more than 1,500 concrete masonry blocks—an outstanding rehearsal for Cobra Gold, where it placed more than 3,000 blocks. Alpha Company's 2d Platoon constructed a 50- by 100-foot Butler building at the post's Regional Correctional Facility. This project involved pouring a 60- by 105-foot concrete pad, which was excellent preparation for the 80- by 40-foot pads it built in Thailand.

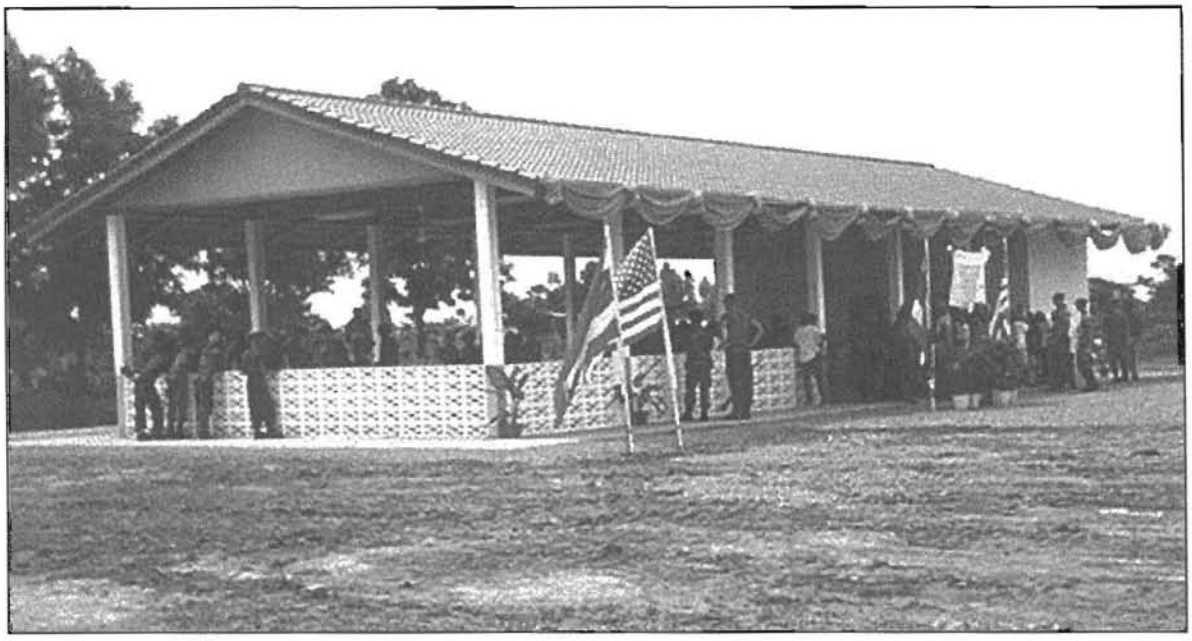
Before the deployment, Alpha Company focused on some of the more unique construction challenges it would face. For example, the platoons had never constructed the type of roof they would build in Thailand, so for practice they took on a small project in the company's motorpool. For years, Alpha Company's vertical platoons had practiced laying block on a small 16- by 14-foot pad. The battalion's construction section designed and built a roof for the pad that was similar to the roof design and materials the company would use in Thailand. In completing the roof, Alpha Company discovered many of the challenges that might arise and resolved in detail how to meet these challenges long before the company arrived in Thailand.

The foundations of the buildings in Thailand were also unique. With concrete footers and precast reinforced concrete columns as the structures' main support system, Alpha Company incorporated a grade beam system that tied each of the columns together. To rehearse this particular task, the company constructed a similar foundation system with only four columns. As an added benefit, this foundation would act as the company's new block training foundation, replacing the shed it had put a roof on earlier. Just as with the roof, the lessons learned from constructing this new foundation system helped leaders avoid construction problems in Thailand before they occurred.

Rehearsals such as these offered not only an opportunity for leaders to refine their plan but also gave the soldiers and NCOs a chance to practice and determine the best and most efficient way to accomplish each task. By conducting rehearsals that closely mirrored the actual training in Thailand, the task force ensured that all sites could meet the deadline for completing the construction projects.

Execute

On 15 April, the task force sent the construction section and Alpha Company's executive officer to Korat, Thailand, to ensure that coordination the reconnaissance team had done earlier was still in place. On 20 April, the four-man advanced party



Thai military and civilians join soldiers from the 864th Engineer Battalion at one of the Cobra Gold '99 projects.

teams deployed to ensure that the footers were placed and the columns erected within 10 days. The main body of 85 soldiers departed from McChord Air Force Base, Washington, on 28 May and began the 29-hour flight to Thailand. They had 20 days to complete the remaining 90 percent of the project. By the time the 864th left Thailand, it not only had built four outstanding structures but also had strengthened relations with the Thai military and civilians.

Conduct an AAR

Throughout the project, OICs maintained a log of after-action-review comments, as-built drawings, and a record of additional bill-of-materials (BOM) purchases. When it returned to Fort Lewis, the construction section compiled this information with its own comments and those of the leaders into a valuable package for the next Cobra Gold exercise.

Retrain

Using the lessons learned from Cobra Gold '99, the 864th Engineer Battalion staff already has started to plan for the battalion's involvement in Cobra Gold 2001. Although Cobra Gold '99 was quite successful, everything did not go according to plan during the exercise. All of the sites experienced design changes, BOM shortages, and some weather problems. Yet, the effects of these ever-present challenges on the overall mission were minimal because of the time saved and the lessons learned during the battalion's execution of the eight-step training model.

Conclusion

Planning as much as a year before executing the mission limited the number of design changes. *Training and certifying leaders* gave them the confidence and skill to make the right call in the face of adverse conditions and situations. *Reconnaissance of the site* ensured that leaders knew what to plan and could provide soldiers what they needed to get the job done. *Issuing the plan* ensured that everyone down to the lowest level understood their role in the training's execution. *Rehearsals* revealed problems to be addressed and trained soldiers on tasks where they lacked proficiency. *Execution* gave everyone an opportunity to see what they could do with what they had learned in a real-world training situation. The *after-action review* provided quality feedback on what to maintain and what to change the next time around when the battalion *retrains* during the Cobra Gold 2001 exercise.

Although the 864th was commended for completing one of the most successful missions in the 18-year history of Cobra Gold, the success was also a tribute to the effectiveness of the Army's eight-step training model.

First Lieutenant Luzzatto is a vertical construction platoon leader, A Company, 864th Engineer Combat Battalion (H), at Fort Lewis, Washington. He served as battalion construction officer for the 864th while deployed to Kosovo from July 1999 to January 2000. First Lieutenant Luzzatto is a graduate of the United States Military Academy and the Engineer Officer Basic Course.