

U.S. ARMY DIVERS IN OPERATIONS OTHER THAN WAR

By Captain Daniel Coffey

The U.S. Army is performing more and more operations other than war (OOTW). These missions provide opportunities for the United States to help other countries in times of need and bolster its foreign policy at the same time. The U.S. Army Diving Company recently participated in Operation Fuerte Apoyo (Strong Support)—providing disaster relief in Central America after Hurricane Mitch. One mission during the deployment was to salvage two sunken vessels that blocked much of a pier that is vital to the Honduran economy. The mission is one example of how U.S. Army divers can help during OOTW. Some of the lessons we learned may be useful to units involved in other operations.

Diving Units

The U.S. Army "Deep Sea" diving community is comprised of six separately deployable detachments. The main body of five detachments is based at Fort Eustis, Virginia, and structured as the U.S. Army Diving Company "Provisional." The remaining detachment is in Hawaii. The U.S. Army divers' mission is to provide engineer diving support to major commands, task forces, government agencies, and sister services throughout the world. Their capabilities encompass everything from underwater construction/repair and salvage operations to inland waterway mobility and countermobility operations. More specifically, diving units conduct the following operations:

- Ship salvage
- Underwater obstacle reduction and removal
- Hydrographic surveys
- Channel and harbor inspections
- Pipeline placement and inspections
- Ship husbandry (maintenance and inspections)
- Water bottom sampling
- Lock and dam inspections and repair
- Bridge inspections and repair
- Port construction and rehabilitation
- Civilian contract quality control
- Personnel, vehicles, and equipment search, salvage, and recovery
- Near- and far-shore reconnaissance in support of river-crossing operations
- Emergency medical recompression treatment

Deployment

On 25 November 1998, the 7th Transportation Group was notified to organize Task Force 10 to participate in Hurricane Mitch relief operations. The task force included line haul units, cargo watercraft, and cargo transfer units. Its primary mission was to transport equipment, supplies, and personnel throughout Central America. The 544th Diving Detachment was also organized under Task Force 10 and was instructed to deploy with the assets needed to accomplish all possible diving missions.

The Mission

Task Force 10 deployed to Central America on 9 December. The first 45 days were spent performing ship husbandry and hydrographic surveys. About mid-January, we were given the mission to survey two sunken Honduran navy vessels in Puerto Castilla, Honduras, for possible salvage. One was a patrol (PT) boat, and the other was a fishing trawler seized during drug raids. These vessels, each more than 100 feet long, were blocking about half of the pier where much of the country's fruit shipments were loaded. After surveying the area, we estimated that we could accomplish the mission in about 21 days once we were on site.



A crane lifts the bow of the PT boat onto the pier at Puerto Castilla.

Logistically, a great deal of coordination was required. The first challenge was to find a suitable place to land our vessel to off-load equipment. We needed a ramp and would need U.S. Army engineer support from units already in country to help build it. However, moving heavy equipment through Honduras was virtually impossible because of bridge and road conditions.

We found an area that looked as if it had been used years ago as a landing ramp. Construction materials were scattered, but with proper equipment, we could reconstruct it. The port had heavy equipment on site that we could use, and the head of the Port Authority arranged for personnel to help us. We completed the ramp in one day. *This drove home the lesson to use resources that are on hand whenever possible.*

The main body of divers arrived on 24 January, and we began working the following day. We split the mission into two phases—one to recover the PT boat and the other to remove the fishing trawler.

The PT boat was too badly damaged to use again. However, the vessel represented one-fifth of the Honduran navy's fleet, so they needed to salvage the engines and weapons to use on other vessels. Our plan was to use two 40-foot cranes with cable slings to lift the boat until water and the ship's weight caused it to break into sections. Then we could lift the pieces out with the cranes.

During our first lift attempt, about 30-35 feet of the bow ripped off and was removed. We tried to make the vessel more accessible by pulling it closer to shore, but the vessel was too heavy. We had to cut the remainder of the boat into pieces by hand, which was a very time-intensive process.

Removing the PT boat took the crew almost 21 days, but the second crew worked concurrently to take out the fishing boat. The vessel was in 40 feet of water with a large hole in its port side. We planned to patch the hole underwater, then raise the boat to the surface with the cranes. It was a difficult and dangerous process. We rigged the vessel for lifting and tried to raise it, but it would not budge. Every option we tried was unsuccessful, so we ordered two 150-ton cranes from Fort Eustis. A week after these cranes arrived, we removed the vessel. After pumping water out (see photo on page 9), we towed the vessel to deeper water and sank it.

Never underestimate the time or resources it will take to complete a mission. Our original estimate of 21 days was based on a best-case scenario—that we could recover both vessels with the two 40-ton cranes in the area. But underestimating the equipment caused us to require about 49 days to complete the mission.

Over and over, we saw how important it is to use assets on hand. We used the host nation's military as well as U.S. assets in the area. The Honduran navy had a base a mile from the work site, and their divers were eager to help. Their knowledge of the vessels and expertise were extremely useful during the recovery effort. When crowds became a problem, they stationed an armed guard on-site.

U.S. National Guard units in the area provided bulldozer winch support during one phase of the operation. At times the U.S. National Guard, the Honduran military, and the 544th Diving Detachment worked together to remove the sunken vessels.

We learned from government and military representatives on site that our operation had the attention of the country's top naval general and the Honduran president. The mission also warranted an on-site visit by General Reimer, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army. *Never underestimate the importance of your OOTW mission. Something routine in the United States may be monumental in underdeveloped countries.*

Operating in a foreign country presents unique challenges, and one of them is the language barrier. *In OOTW, it is imperative that you communicate well with the host nation. To do this, someone in the unit must speak the host nation's language fluently.*

A Valuable Asset

The U.S Army has one of the most unique and least-known assets in the military—deep-sea divers. Engineer diving units have capabilities that facilitate the successful completion of numerous missions, including OOTW. Operations other than war present tremendous opportunities to work with and help countries in need. Although these operations involve unique and challenging problems, the lessons learned and the impact the work has on the country make it an incredibly rewarding experience.

The Army needs more divers! If you are a specialist (E4) or below and are interested in an exciting career change, contact the Army Liaison Office at the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center, Panama City, Florida. The telephone number is (850) 235-5261; the web site is *http://members.aol.com/alondstc/diverapp.htm.*

Captain Coffey is attending the Engineer Officer Advanced Course before reporting for duty in Hawaii. Previous assignments include the 544th Engineer Team (Dive), Fort Eustis, Virginia.