



Sgt. 1st Class Marites Cabreza, a nurse with 354th Civil Affairs Brigade, Special Functioning Team, Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, tends to a patient March 29, 2008, during a medical civil action project in Goubetto, Djibouti. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Jeremy T. Lock)

Civil Affairs Teams Support Missions In Africa By Making A Difference In Locals' Lives

By Meghan Portillo — NCO Journal

Civil affairs NCOs in Africa are rewarded for their work with indelible memories. There's the joy on a child's face when she receives a new textbook, the tight handshake given by a farmer after his camel receives a vaccine, or the relief in a mother's voice after her family receives medical attention.

Civil affairs teams, usually consisting of four NCOs or an officer and three NCOs, play an important role in almost every mission on the African continent, said Sgt. Maj. Christopher Gay, who until his recent retirement was the Civil Military Operations sergeant major for U.S. Army Africa.

Whether in support of an international exercise, a multinational training operation between militaries or a medical outreach activity, civil affairs specialists (38B) work to ensure the U.S. presence has a positive impact on local populations. For instance, instead of just bringing in supplies to replace what Soldiers have exhausted from a town's limited resources, civil affairs teams conduct projects to address the

community's needs, Gay explained. If the teams can help provide clean water, electricity or proper schoolhouses for a town's children, they transform the U.S. presence from a burden to a blessing and may help prevent an extremist organization from meeting those same needs to gain support.

Gay recalled the stench in a schoolhouse where wildlife had soiled the desks. After spending \$150 and two weeks of coordinating resources, Gay and the other three NCOs on his team installed screens and ensured a sanitary environment for the children. It was a small project, he said, but it made a huge difference.

"And then of course, when you do a project, you see 500 happy faces. Who can't love that?" he said. "However, we aren't doing it just so those kids can be happy at school. At the end of the day, if we just wanted to fix schools, we would never leave Africa. ... These are not Peace Corps operations. Civil affairs operations are tools we use to address a military problem – and there is no limit to how we can get after that problem. Only our own imagination limits us."

Small teams making a big difference

Civil affairs specialists are responsible for identifying the needs of a population affected by U.S. military operations, as well as locating resources in support of missions and facilitating humanitarian assistance activities.

They are trained in interagency work, and are prepared to interact with African governments, the U.S. State Department and local authorities. The teams often support U.S. Agency for International Development projects, as well as medical civil action programs, or MEDCAPs, as the “middle man” or “go-between” for the military and other organizations. Their job is to ensure interactions run smoothly, Gay said.

Sgt. 1st Class Jon Jones, who belongs to the 82nd Civil Affairs Battalion at Fort Stewart, Ga., led a civil affairs team during a recent MEDCAP in South Africa. The joint task force offered dental extractions and cleanings, reading glasses, HIV testing and antibiotics.

“At one point in time, we were serving about 500 people a day,” Jones said. “That’s a lot of people. The line went down the road. We had to have local police to come there just to guide traffic.”

Jones and his team were there to make sure everything was running efficiently.

“If there was a machine missing or if a generator went down, we had to fix it,” Jones said. “We had to get a local person there to get gas or get some type of repairman there to get it fixed. We were there to prevent anything from going wrong, and if it did go wrong, we were there to correct it so that we could keep things going and get those people medical attention.”

‘Mil-to-mil’ training

Another aspect of the job is offering civil affairs training to African partner nations’ militaries.

Jones recalled a recent mission to train Cameroon’s civil affairs officers. The team guided the officers as they analyzed possible courses of action and how each would affect the military and the local population. The team tried to teach the officers to identify risks anytime civilians are involved, no matter what the situation might be. For example, congressional forces may need to evacuate a particular area to neutralize a threat. The way they go about that could make or break the entire mission, Jones explained.

“Who is going to run the basic services there? Don’t forget they may have fire stations and police stations. If we tell everyone to evacuate, what about the prisoners? You have got to have a plan to evacuate these people, a plan to provide those basic essential services, because everyone may not be able to leave,” Jones said. “Look at Katrina. Everyone didn’t have a place to go. We may tell people to evacuate their homes, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they are going to do it.

“For those who do evacuate, some of these places have only two main highways. So that means that



Staff Sgt. Troy Gerdeman, civil affairs specialist, assigned to Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, 402nd Civil Affairs Team, holds a goat while a community animal health care worker administers a vaccination June 9, 2011, during a veterinary civic action project, or VETCAP, in the rural village of Nabilatuk, Uganda. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Dawn M. Price)

while you have military coming in, you have local populace going out – with the traffic, the military may not even be able to get inside to neutralize the threat. What is the route for those guys to move out expediently? These are the things we have to think about and convey to that combat commander or the general in charge. You have to look at these options, or the plan is going to fail. You have to look at how it will be successful for the military as well as how it will be successful for the local populace.”

Sgt. 1st Class Robert Westbrook, also of the 82nd Civil Affairs Battalion, recently participated in a mission to train Guinea’s civil affairs staff, as well as the country’s medics and military police.

The civil affairs portion of the training focused on roadblocks and other situations in which the military interacts directly with civilians. The team taught the civil affairs staff to be cognizant of where people are

coming from, their destination and the conditions in which they are traveling, all the while keeping the area secure and doing their jobs.

“We actually practiced it and went through scenarios, and they took very well to it,” Westbrook said.

Though Westbrook saw the soldiers hang on his every word, he said the exchange of ideas benefited all involved. The civil affairs team was inspired by the African soldiers’ resourcefulness and perseverance.

“I learned a lot just working with the Guinean soldiers and talking with them,” Westbrook said. “Their day-to-day operations and how they get the job done with less was really amazing. Coming back to the United States, I really don’t have anything to complain about, because now I know it can be done with less.”

Lessons in leadership

Whatever the mission, Gay said, the most important thing civil affairs specialists can do is get to know the population they are working with. The ability to observe surroundings and adapt to the customs of a community will help a mission much more than becoming an expert in any one culture, he said.

“These teams, they become a part of the communities as much as they can,” Gay said. “We eat their food; we play soccer with them. We understand the heat of the sun determines the workday. We want to know what their norms are: how they prepare their food, how they go to school, how they go to the market. You have to understand their culture before you can understand how they would fix the problem. It has to be their solution.”

This is a lesson in leadership Gay hopes civil affairs NCOs will remember when working with their own Soldiers, and a lesson he believes all NCOs can benefit from. Just as civil affairs specialists must get to know a culture, NCOs must get to know their Soldiers – not just their names, their Social Security numbers and how much equipment they have. NCOs should know where Soldiers came from, if they had trouble in high school, if they are married, their kids’ names. Knowing the Soldiers he or she leads will make any NCO a better leader, Gay said, and just as the U.S. supports partner militaries in developing their own solutions, NCOs must learn to take a step back and encourage young Soldiers to take the lead.



Staff Sgt. Wayne Teegardin, from the 478th Civil Affairs Battalion, Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, unloads lumber in the Boulas commune of Djibouti City on Aug. 12, 2009. The lumber was used to rebuild 21 homes destroyed in a fire. (Department of Defense photo by Navy Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jesse B. Awalt)

“One of the bad things we always do – the U.S. as a whole – is we want to fix a problem, but we want to fix it to a U.S. standard. That does not work in Africa. We learned that in Afghanistan. It doesn’t work there either. You have to let them fix it. You just provide

the assistance. I think it’s a hard thing for all NCOs to do – to know when to step back and have a Soldier do it. You are actually teaching that Soldier then, even though they may not do it the way you want it done. They will learn over time to do it right.” ■



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