

# OPERATION FUERTE APOYO: DISASTER RELIEF IN NICARAGUA

By Major Jeff Eckstein

When Hurricane Mitch hit Central America in late October 1998, the country of Nicaragua suffered extreme damage. On 22 November, the 36th Engineer Group, Fort Benning, Georgia, deployed its lead elements into the country as part of the U.S. relief effort known as Operation Fuerte Apoyo (Strong Support). The 36th was the command and control headquarters for all U.S. forces deployed to Nicaragua to support disaster relief and humanitarian assistance operations after the hurricane. The group headquarters formed the nucleus of Task Force Build Hope (Nicaragua [NU]) with the group commander becoming the task force commander. The group staff received augmentation for communications, medical planning, public affairs, and humanitarian operations.

Nearly 1,700 U.S. forces deployed to Nicaragua, including aviation, medical, logistic, civil affairs, and engineer units. The 36th was charged with developing a plan to facilitate long-term recovery efforts in Nicaragua. This plan included repairing farm-to-market roads, constructing a clinic at Wiwili, preventing an epidemic outbreak, providing bilateral primary health care in devastated communities, and delivering relief supplies. Task Force Build Hope (NU) completed 125 kilometers of road; installed 24 culvert systems; constructed a 5,600-square-foot, wood-framed clinic; evaluated 4,240 Nicaraguan patients; conducted 47 surgeries; vaccinated 3,634 dogs for rabies; and delivered 681 tons of relief supplies.

## Keys to Mission Success

Operation Fuerte Apoyo proved to be a challenging and successful deployment for the 36th, and *having a known mission duration helped. From day 1, the Nicaraguan government, the U.S. Embassy, and Task Force Build Hope (NU) personnel knew that all work must be completed by*

*15 February 1999.* This made staff planning accurate and allowed the S3 to forecast requirements. A fixed date that did not move also helped prevent mission creep.

## Defining the Mission

The key to defining the mission in Nicaragua was excellent communication among the various national-level ministries, the U.S. Embassy, and the task force commander. Embassy personnel possessed background knowledge of Nicaragua and the various existing programs. The Nicaraguan government had its priorities and expectations, some of which were not disaster relief or humanitarian assistance. The task force commander had a substantial capability and, through detailed reconnaissance, had the best firsthand knowledge of the situation in the countryside. Nicaraguan priorities that were outside the task force's capability or mission were discussed up front, and all parties agreed that the United States would not do the work. By synthesizing this information, the 36th Engineer Group staff developed a scheme of operations for engineer, medical, and relief operations that provided a defined, achievable end



Soldiers from the 63rd Engineer Company (CSE) backfill soil around a corrugated PVC culvert.

state. The U.S. Embassy and the Nicaraguan government approved the end state before work began. This approach ensured that the task force was bought into the end state, limited false expectations from the host nation, eliminated mission creep, and ensured that U.S. work facilitated long-term recovery efforts.

### **Host Nation Expectations**

The Nicaraguan people and many members of the Nicaraguan government viewed U.S. relief efforts as a fix-all for the country's infrastructure problems. Although other countries responded immediately after the hurricane hit, they completed limited amounts of work. When U.S. forces arrived almost two months later, many Nicaraguans expected them to repair more roads and build new bridges, leaving the country with a vastly improved road system. The United States brought in a large number of soldiers and two shiploads of equipment, which appeared to offer an incredible capability. In reality, there were only 30 workdays available, no permanent bridging capability, and only one combat heavy battalion with a combat support equipment company.

From the first meeting, we outlined our mission—which was to repair roads—and explained our capabilities and limitations. However, we were receptive to the Nicaraguan needs. *One important aspect of dealing with such high expectations was to select an attainable goal for the engineer effort and stick to it. Coordinating with the embassy so the embassy staff could work with other agencies to assist the Nicaraguan government also was important.* The task force performed reconnaissance for various out-of-scope projects and furnished the results to the government. The task force was always clear about our mission, never hinted at doing additional work, and allowed the embassy staff to deal with providing U.S. assistance through other channels.

### **Road Selection**

When the international community responded with aid and relief supplies, some nations rebuilt roads and bridges that were damaged or destroyed. The Nicaraguan government repaired and reopened the Pan American highway throughout Nicaragua within 30 days after the hurricane. The remaining infrastructure that required work was in the countryside—usually dirt roads that were rutted, washed out, or covered by mud slides. The Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure identified more than 1,200 kilometers of such roads that needed work.

The task force commander and task force engineer conducted extensive aerial reconnaissance of all damaged areas. The task force commander decided that the priority of horizontal effort would be farm-to-market roads that branched off the Pan American highway. Using this guidance, the task force engineer section conducted ground

reconnaissance of 350 kilometers of road. Based on the time available, production estimates, and the holiday season, Task Force Build Hope (NU) agreed to rehabilitate 85 kilometers of road and install 20 culvert systems.

Several issues developed during planning. Much of the equipment in the combat heavy battalion was too large to work on many of the roads. In addition, the roads were in poor condition before the hurricane, and guidance from Joint Task Force Aguila was to restore roads to prehurricane conditions. This meant that dirt roads remained dirt roads. This plan was not what the Nicaraguans expected.

Since it was impossible to mass equipment on any given road, the task force selected many shorter roads. To ensure that U.S. efforts had a positive impact on the local populace, we planned our repairs to begin and end at a population center or main crossroad. *The key to route selection was to cover a wide area and clearly define the end state.*

### **U.S. Embassy**

*Even though the task force was given a mission by Joint Task Force Aguila, the U.S. ambassador made all commitments between the United States and the Nicaraguan government.* This arrangement prevented many problems. By working closely with the embassy staff and allowing them to coordinate with Nicaraguan ministries, there was never a disconnect on what the task force saw as the best course of action and what the ambassador wanted to accomplish. The embassy staff provided a wealth of information on the country and had established ties with the local media and police.

A representative from the Task Force Build Hope (NU) command group attended weekly meetings of the country team and reconstruction team at the embassy. Various working groups included Nicaraguan officials, embassy personnel, task force staff, and nongovernmental organizations. These working groups coordinated actions and completed staff work to ensure mission accomplishment. Some of the working groups were for security, humanitarian relief, and *New Horizons* (the U.S. Southern Command's exercise for nation assistance in Central America).

### **Base Camps**

In conjunction with selecting roads for rehabilitation, the 36th Engineer Group staff conducted reconnaissance for base camps. The Nicaraguan military offered the task force several of their military bases. Considerations for base camp locations included a water source, hardstands, permanent buildings, helicopter landing zones, security, and proximity to work sites. After selecting locations, the task force worked with the Nicaraguan armed forces to secure land and facilities and establish security forces. *By working closely with the Nicaraguans, the task force located 1,500 personnel in the interior of the country without disturbing the local populace.*

The U.S. units purified all water in the base camps and contracted for telephone and Internet service in areas serviced

by the Nicaraguan telephone company. Some areas even had cable television service. Most of the units burned their trash on-site and used either burnout latrines constructed by the engineer battalion or locally rented port-a-johns. Food was prepared in a mobile kitchen trailer. Each base camp had a different standard of living, but each made quality-of-life improvements throughout the deployment.

### **Contracting**

On the first day in Nicaragua, the commander and staff realized that two things were required before anything could be accomplished: a contracting team and funds. Initially, rental vehicles, hotel rooms, and food were out-of-pocket expenses for soldiers on deployment orders. When a contracting team—a captain and an NCO—arrived from Fort Bragg, they began purchasing or contracting for basic life support. This included water, food (initially there were limited MREs in country), lodging, transportation, cellular telephones, and fuel. During the past 25 years, embassy personnel were the only U.S. military presence in Nicaragua, so there was no infrastructure to support U.S. forces.

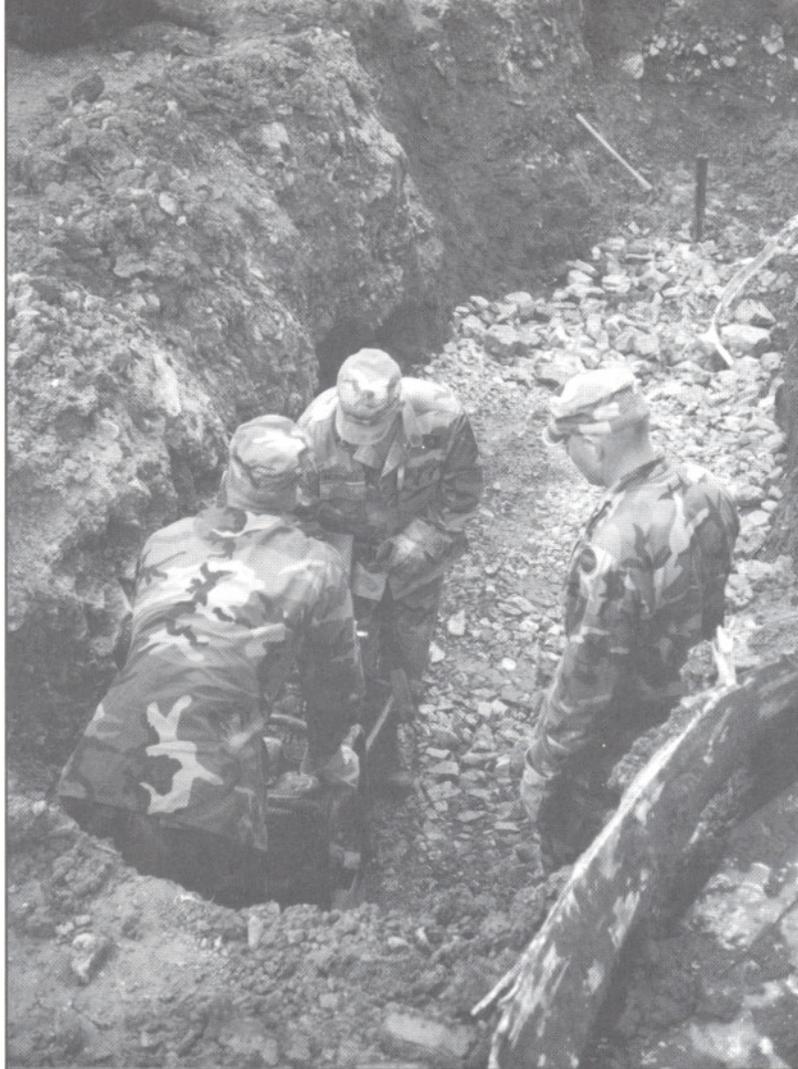
The logistics and construction efforts in Nicaragua were overwhelming for the two-man contracting team. Negotiating with contractors, coordinating requirements, and finding sources of supplies takes time. While 90 percent of the task force's requirements were available in Nicaragua, no single source could supply the necessary quantities.

Funding is always an initial hurdle in short-notice deployments. Most subordinate units deployed with field ordering officers and funds from their home station, but the limited sources of supply prevented use of the funds.

*A recommendation for improving the responsiveness of contracting teams to deployed units is to assign a contracting officer to engineer groups and brigades in the same manner that the JAG is assigned to a unit. The contracting officer would work for the installation while in garrison but would deploy with the unit. The most important aspect of contracting is to begin early.*

### **Construction Groups**

Selecting a construction group rather than a combat group proved to be valuable. The only difference in the two groups is that a construction group has a 15-person design and management section that can design, manage, and provide quality assurance for theater-of-operation construction. This



**Soldiers from the 63rd Engineer Company (CSE) compact the bedding material for a culvert.**

capability allowed the 36th Engineer Group S3 to be the task force S3 and focus on operational issues throughout the task force. The design engineer became the task force engineer and focused on the engineer mission. The design section designed a 5,600-square-foot, wood-framed clinic with indoor plumbing, a septic system, electricity, and a metal roof. The management section and quality assurance soldiers conducted ground reconnaissance and surveyed numerous project sites throughout the country, which helped in developing a project list for the embassy for *New Horizons 99*. The engineer section also helped the contracting team identify and procure construction materials.

### **Augmentation**

The 36th Engineer Group staff was the core of the Task Force Build Hope (NU) staff. A humanitarian operations officer, a medical planner, a public affairs officer, a logistics assistance officer, and a large communications package augmented the group staff.

The civil affairs team in Nicaragua led the Humanitarian Operations Cell and coordinated all humanitarian relief efforts for the task force commander. A medical planner from

the medical task force served on the staff and kept the commander informed on medical issues, such as coordination at the national level, medical evacuations, and daily medical humanitarian assistance missions. Public affairs and logistics assistance officers provided normal staff coordination and assistance to units.

The communications package enabled the task force to communicate with Joint Task Force Aguila in El Salvador and allowed limited communications with subordinate units in Nicaragua. The communications team provided DSN and Internet access and digital nonsecure voice terminal (DNVT) support. The civilian telephone system in Nicaragua did not cover the 120- by 160-mile area of task force operations. The engineer group's large communications package allowed the task force to maintain DNVT communication to three of its seven sites in Nicaragua. Without this package, the task force could not have maintained communication with the entire force throughout the country, because FM networks could not cover such distances.

A staff officer in the S3 section was designated the S3 Air, although this was not a modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) position. He coordinated flight missions for the aviation task force, subordinate units, VIP tours, staff elements, and the commander.

Another element that was not part of the staff but was located in the same operations center was the Air Force Tactical Air Liaison Control Element (TALCE). The TALCE monitored fixed-wing aircraft flights into and out of Nicaragua and provided a cargo-handling capability. The task force was without a TALCE for about three weeks, which was a disadvantage. For example, sometimes aircraft showed up without notice and needed material handling equipment that was not available. This led to contracting for a forklift to stand by. The TALCE was an invaluable asset to the task force. *Future deployments of this nature, where the need for air transport of supplies and passengers is high, should have immediate access to the TALCE or a similar element.*

### **Force Protection**

Force protection was a crucial element of Operation Fuerte Apoyo. The task force S2 coordinated with Nicaraguan intelligence officers to assign 800 Nicaraguan soldiers to provide security for work sites, base camps, and convoys. In the forward operating bases (FOBs), Nicaraguans furnished perimeter and external security while U.S. forces provided internal security and maintained a ready reaction force. Units developed battle drills to handle convoy ambushes, sniper fire, drive-by shootings, bombings, and explosions. The U.S. forces only operated during daylight hours and used a two-vehicle rule for all movements. Convoys from the port to each FOB had Nicaraguan army security and police escorts.

Health promotion and preventive medicine were important components of force protection. Soldiers kept their BDU sleeves rolled down, ate only from approved sources, ensured that potable water was always available, and sprayed for insects and rodents. These measures helped prevent serious incidents and injuries during the deployment.

### **Construction Materials**

Since construction materials were limited in country, a bill of materials (BOM) could not be bought off the shelf. For the clinic construction, the engineer section sent someone "shopping" with the contracting team so substitutions could be made. We also had problems getting accessories and hardware for items such as doors, toilets, water heaters, and lights; much of the time, the components had to be bought separately. It took merchants from one to two weeks to deliver large quantities of supplies, with any amount over 10 being considered a large quantity. Managua, the capital, was the only location in the country where all required materials were available.

Due to long lead times in ordering materials and the remote stationing of engineer units, the engineer battalion could not purchase its own BOM after it arrived in country. Therefore, the engineer section coordinated for purchasing the constructing unit's BOM before it arrived in country. This caused problems with transferring the BOM to the unit and discrepancies in what the unit wanted on hand.

Reinforced concrete pipe was used extensively for culvert systems. Each 1-meter-long section of pipe was from 1 to 2 meters in diameter and required a crane to lift it into place. Corrugated PVC pipe was available also. It was lighter and easier to install, but because such large diameters were needed, the pipe sometimes crushed or collapsed when it was installed. Efforts to retain the shape of the PVC pipe required much more work than installing concrete pipe. Personnel who were knowledgeable of construction materials were needed to help the contracting team and manage materials for the Wiwili clinic. *It was important that the task force began the procurement process before units arrived in country.* This ensured that Task Force Build Hope (NU) could complete all its work by mid-February.

### **Nicaraguan Media**

Dealing with the media anywhere is a challenge. In Nicaragua, it was no different. Since seeing U.S. forces in the country was new to many Nicaraguans, the local press was very interested in activities of Task Force Build Hope (NU). The task force worked closely with the embassy's public affairs officer to ensure that accurate information was provided to the press. The embassy coordinated several trips so Nicaraguan media could visit construction sites, medical treatment centers, and base camps and observe humanitarian relief efforts.

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The task force commander attended a press conference held by the Nicaraguan government at the start and completion of every mission. Nicaraguan officials documented the U.S. tasks to be completed and also the final accomplishments. Press coverage of U.S. activities was favorable throughout the deployment. Nicaraguan government officials quickly rebuffed isolated incidents of negative coverage, and the embassy clarified incorrect information as necessary. *In dealing with the press, always speak with one voice, keep a simple message that explains the mission, and allow the media access to all work sites.*

### **Nicaraguan Military**

The Nicaraguan military staff organization was similar to that of the United States. Seven Nicaraguan military liaison officers worked with Task Force Build Hope's (NU) primary staff officers. Each liaison officer had a thorough knowledge of our organization and capabilities.

In addition to providing security, the Nicaraguan military had a radio system that used repeaters, which made it possible to communicate throughout the country. They tracked all convoys, check points, and rest stops with the same accuracy that U.S. units reported.

The Nicaraguan military is poorly equipped and lacks many resources. Although it does not have a professional NCO corps, its officer corps is highly competent and professional, and many officers are combat veterans. The Nicaraguan armed forces executed its missions of ensuring U.S. security and providing assistance as requested to the highest standards.

### **Building a Foundation**

**T**he mission to Nicaragua for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance was a rewarding experience for the 36th Engineer Group and the entire task force. Personnel and units received valuable training in many of their mission essential tasks and gained experience in conducting an unscheduled deployment. The task force not only improved the lives of many Nicaraguans devastated by Hurricane Mitch, they also built a foundation for future military relations. 

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