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Paraguay: A Third World Country or a State of Mind?

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SMNRC Class #509-09

MOS 68W

Medical Readiness Training Exercise, Paraguay, 03/13/2003-04/13/2003

11/30/2008

Unclassified

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Abstract

Americans are known for living luxurious lifestyles, higher education, and a value system based on equality. What we fail to identify with are the struggles of people around the globe just to survive – a reality absent in the American mind. As U.S. forces battle in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, American troops continue to take part in humanitarian and peacekeeping work around the world. The goal is to provide medical treatment, health education, and help set the conditions for stability and economic prosperity in poor, rural communities. In 2003, I deployed with the 73rd Field Hospital to Paraguay to participate in a medical humanitarian mission. The experience and lasting impression far exceeded what we offered to the Paraguayan people.

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I watched in awe as darkness obscured the hundreds of silhouettes of men, women, and children as they slowly walked the last mile of their journeys along the dirt road in Paraguay, making their way to a nearby village. Many spent days traveling by foot, and just as dawn broke, they finally arrived at the small one-story school where they and hundreds of others anticipated receiving some type of medical care from the American military health team. Dressed in their “Sunday best”, each hurried through the grassy pasture and joined the others already forming a line outside our makeshift clinic. I listened to the chatter as they compared ailments and shared their experiences from past humanitarian medical missions. There was an intense anticipation and excitement in the air, both from the villagers and Americans alike.

Like the medical missions before, our medical teams would provide health education classes, an initial consultation with de-worming and immunizations, and finally perform a medical assessment with treatment from a doctor, dentist, optometrist, or other health care provider. As final preparations were completed to open the clinic, both the Americans and the villagers knew it would be a long and demanding day, but there would be many benefits gained. If nothing more, each patient would leave the clinic feeling a sense of relief and a little better than when they arrived, and each Soldier would know that they were the cause of that satisfaction. Additionally, our veterinarian team ventured out to local farm areas to provide education and veterinary care for animals.

Medical Readiness Training Exercise

The U.S. Army carries out medical missions in developing countries around the world to improve relations, stay abreast of potential disaster or combat situations, and, of

course, to help the local populations. Medical Readiness Training Exercises, referred to as MEDRETES and pronounced med-ready, are conducted by military medical units where personnel perform medical evaluation, treatment, and health education for persons in impoverished regions. Since the primary mission of these exercises is the training of military personnel, the U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) has actively pursued these training opportunities to provide training in environments which closely resemble what Soldiers might experience in times of conflict. That was the intent of our mission in Paraguay.

Paraguay MEDRETE

Our operation in Paraguay was humanitarian in nature and was performed in the strip made up by the states of Concepción, San Pedro, and Alto Paraná, the areas of most peasant movement presence. Our MEDRETE provided medical attention and personal hygiene education to persons oblivious to the simple practices of hand-washing, sanitation, and brushing teeth. We gave medical, dental, vision care, and veterinarian assistance to poor, rural communities in remote regions not covered by the states. I supported the mission as not only as the sole optician with over 3,000 pair of eyewear to dispense, but also as a senior noncommissioned officer (NCO) with a medical team to lead and high expectations to exceed.

Personnel Staffing. Our team included 35 USAR medical personnel, additional local health workers and volunteers, and eight Peace Corps members that we utilized as translators. In addition, we worked alongside Paraguayan military, host nation security, doctors, and liaison officers. Diplomats, Governors, and persons of high political stature constantly visited and requested personal medical evaluations and treatment from each of our various specialists. We were fully prepared for them and the mission, equipped with a

plethora of health education materials, medications, optical equipment, surgical kits, bandages, immunizations, and various other medical supplies - a miniature field hospital.

As reserve component personnel, this humanitarian mission was an exciting break from the usual annual training experience of providing site support at a familiar training area. As a result, our unit went into the MEDRETE with a high level of enthusiasm and commitment. The Soldiers remained excited about their work and provided a very positive impression to the communities being served. The civilians saw the U.S. military in a benevolent role that showed Soldiers were capable of being supportive rather than feared. Likewise, the Paraguayan military saw a very positive role model in our Soldiers.

NCO Role

The entire operation was NCO led, trained, and mission focused from the onset. As a medical unit and personnel scheduled to participate in the MEDRETE, we completed extensive preparations through ongoing unit training. With every member of the team involved, the NCOs conducted various deployment planning activities, medical-specific preparations, country briefings, and cultural training based on the locations of the mission. We utilized detailed checklists to guarantee required actions were accomplished for each phase of the mission: pre-deployment, deployment, mission execution, redeployment, and post-deployment. Ultimately, we rehearsed procedures applicable to wartime contingency situations but with the intent of performing a successful humanitarian mission. We trained for the worst case scenario and honed in on our skills.

Performance. As with every mission and assignment that NCOs are charged with, the actions of the NCOs on this humanitarian mission were no different. Regardless of the shortfalls, mishaps, and adversity that we faced, the NCOs took the lead from day one

determined to successfully accomplish the mission. It was obvious from the onset of this humanitarian mission that the success of the American military ultimately rested on the actions of the enlisted Soldiers. These actions would be the direct reflection of the state of our unit's training, morale, and motivation that we had to perform the job.

Despite the circumstances and conditions, the NCOs were committed to providing well-trained Soldiers, resources, and other critical support to the Paraguayan citizens. The NCO was the action Soldier at all levels of the medical operation, putting the commander's plan into action and coordinating efforts necessary to ensure mission success. The officers accompanying us on the mission were doctors and nurses only, so there was no additional support from training or operations officers. This was not a factor and reflected very little on the planning, coordination, and implementation of the mission. As NCOs, we were trained and motivated, presenting a positive attitude even in the most trying times and passing this on to one another through continual communication.

Responsibilities. Being on a humanitarian mission was a whole different world. It opened our eyes to how our foreign services operate, the hidden truth behind the meaning of third world country, and more so, how important and diverse the NCO responsibility can be. The NCOs planned, coordinated, and supervised activities pertaining to the mission organization, training, tactical, and technical operations. We supervised the entire operation start to finish, from performing supply and related service operations to preparation of orders, standard operating instructions, reports, and related technical materials. We performed duty as liaison between the staff and the host country military and civilian population, as well as, supported Soldiers to improve effectiveness of the support and medical activities. As leaders, we continuously exhibited self-discipline,

initiative, confidence, and intelligence. Even when we were required to make decisions quickly and to take initiative, we always focused on successful mission accomplishment and showing respect for subordinates, military officers, and the Paraguayan people.

Along with the Paraguayan military, we were responsible for the enforcement of discipline and the ground-level supervision of Soldiers. Not only did this evolve where NCOs acted as supervisors, but our experience enabled us to provide much needed advice and counsel to the officers and Soldiers alike. Being physically fit, we were able to perform under physical and mental pressures, enduring the long work days in temperatures over 100 degrees. This steadfast, dependable leadership was vital to the successes of our unit, and the humanitarian mission was no exception.

We served as the principal supervisors and performed related duties as the advisor to the Commander, project Director, and Chiefs of Departments and staff agencies on all matters pertaining to the mission and our personnel in a multifunctional medical treatment facility. As the leaders on this mission, the NCOs led from the front and adjusted to the constantly ever-changing environment. Although we were judged by our ability to make sound, timely decisions and had to accept ultimate responsibility for those decisions, mission accomplishment was first and foremost throughout. Through it all, it was a great opportunity with valuable training that not every service member or NCO will experience, but one that will not be forgotten.

Cultural Insight

Throughout my stay in Paraguay, I had many opportunities to observe the culture and to become familiar with the roles and customs of their society. Through interaction with the people living in rural, low economics, and indigenous areas, I found that the

standard of life was minimal: concerns revolved around nothing more than the necessity to provide food and to sustain life. Most of the people were farmers, supplying family and neighbors with the foods just to survive from day to day. Travel was by foot, unless there happened to be a member of the community with a horse and sometimes, a vehicle.

The women cared for the children and girls were taught from a very young age that it was their duty and future to bear children. Men tended to pursue the young girls, even at the raw age of twelve, looking to satisfy sexual desires and to procreate. Girls became available around this tender age, sometimes even earlier, and were often pregnant by their early teens. Ironically though, by the time these girls would be legal in America, most of them look as if they are ten to twenty years beyond their actual age. Even as difficult as their lives seemed to me, the Paraguayans were happy and content with having the bare minimum. I must admit that I found a sense of inspiration, admiration, and tranquility in the fact that the entire culture was completely oblivious to the daily rat race that we live here in the U.S. and seemed at peace with their way of life.

Little technological advances, one-room adobe houses, hand-made clothing usually void of footwear, and days of lounging outside their doors kept these people at peace. It did not seem to matter that they washed their clothes in the dirty river, or that they utilized the same river for bathing, sanitation, and drinking, or that the nearest paved road was hours away. They missed nothing and there is little interest to what is happening outside of their community and even less emphasis on acquiring material worth. The culture was happy with having only the basics and surviving one day at a time; but more importantly, there existed a support system of family and friends that surpassed what any amount of money could provide.

Lessons Learned

The diverse images brought to mind by my experience on this humanitarian mission are snapshots of the complexity of military missions other than war. To me, they illustrate the shifting military focus from waging war to waging peace. Regarding benefits, the MEDRETE proved its value in the training for our medical Soldiers as a means of applying and enhancing the operational readiness skills. Although the primary function of the U.S. military is to engage in and win our nation's wars, it is evident that we must also be willing and able to successfully carry out military operations other than war. Humanitarian assistance is one mission other than war that continues to promote our nation's interests. In addition to supporting our national military strategy of flexible and selective engagement, these missions enhance the operational readiness skills of military personnel and incidentally provide significant benefits to host country populations.

Assessment. Despite the number of issues and problems identified with the mission, the after action reports repeatedly highlighted the benefit of the valuable medical readiness training and opportunities ascertained during the MEDRETE. Most significantly, the Soldiers noted that they received realistic, hands-on training they could not conduct at our unit's home location. More importantly, we were able to complete specialty-specific, individual-specific, and mission-specific unit training in a field setting.

Feedback identified that personnel gained valuable cultural understanding in the course of working with host nation military and health care personnel, as well as the local population. Several after-action reports also commented on the challenging opportunities for the practical application of leadership skills that the mission provided. These reports included personal insight and lessons learned in which we thoroughly identified problems

and recommendations for the mission. In turn, our unit was able to utilize the reports to improve training, institute new training methods, and in preparation for future missions.

The results and effectiveness of the mission were measured through the use of the unit mission essential task list (METL). Considering the positive assessment regarding the benefits and effectiveness of the training, the significance of the METL became apparent. After the mission of 2003 and lessons learned, the 73rd Field Hospital placed more emphasis and importance on the use of our unit METL during training and exercises and has continued to refine the process of performance measurement.

Community Impact. It has been said that the “Journey of a thousand leagues begins with a single step.” Our MEDRETE in Paraguay provided medical and veterinary treatment to more than 10,000 patients over two ten-day periods. Although it occurred as a local event and provided competent care to a rural, underserved populace, it impacted the entire nation of Paraguay at the community level. The impact on the community was significant as it fostered understanding with the host nation and between participating militaries, displaying the efforts of the U.S. in a positive light. Our MEDRETE provided an excellent opportunity for the U.S. Army reserve component medical force to serve as a vital resource to a peacetime strategy. Although our medical team provided services to only minimal portion of the country, we realized the importance to never neglect any opportunity for peace that is within our control, regardless how small it may seem.

It was recognized that our medical personnel were able to go in and help win the hearts and minds of the Paraguayan people. Winning the good will of the people in this foreign land was valuable to promoting our national interests rather than promoting power through force or coercion. This deployment truly represented a win-win situation.

Not only did our Soldiers get a unique training opportunity in an environment that would be hard, if not impossible, to duplicate at home, the host nation received much needed support which ostensibly improved the health status of the populations in our area of operations.

Conclusion

As darkness set on the horizon, the last patients departed from the medical clinic to begin the journey back to their villages. With health education material and medication in hand, the faces of hundreds lit the roadway with smiles and a look of appreciation and satisfaction. Our staff convened to review the day's events and to discuss the plan for the following day's mission. The day was long, busy, and very tiring, but more rewarding than anything. The sights and sounds of that day in Paraguay were replayed: the sad eyes of terrified children, the cherub-like faces of infants in the arms of pre-teen mothers, the old woman desperate to share her story, the whimpering of the little girl waiting for an immunization, the challenges of crowd control, the amputee farmer, the malnourished animals, the expressions of gratitude, and numerous other images etched in my memory.

The volunteers and veterinary teams wrapped up their work detail, physically drained and with their own thoughts and cherished memories of the day's events. Although the assigned duties and activities of each team were diverse, each individual shared a sense of accomplishment and a common expectation. We put forth our best efforts and serviced the community like a fully functioning medical clinic, executing each step of the way just as we had trained to participate in this medical readiness exercise. At the same time, we hoped that our performance and what we accomplished in this training exercise and humanitarian mission would have lasting benefits.