

ATSS-MH (870)

MEMORANDUM FOR Commandant, United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas 79918-8002

SUBJECT: Access Agreement for Personal Experience Papers

1. I, Richard V Cortes, have submitted a Personal Experience Paper to the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives regarding events and experiences from my participation in Balance Torch that may be of historical significance to the United States Army and the Noncommissioned Officer Corps.

2. I understand the manuscript and attached documents will be accessioned into the historical holdings of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives and will belong to the United States Government to be used in any manner deemed in the best interests of the United States Army as determined by the Chief of Military History or his representative. I also understand that I may retain a copy for my own use subject to classification restrictions.

3. I hereby expressly and voluntarily relinquish all rights and interest in the paper to the United States Army with the following caveat/exception:

- () None
() Other:

I understand that the information in this paper may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and therefore, may be releasable to the public contrary to my wishes. I further understand that, within the limits of the law, the United States Army will attempt to honor the restrictions I have requested to be placed on this material.

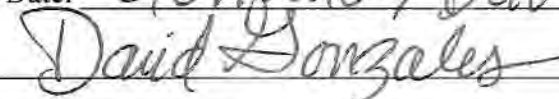
Date: 10 NOV 10

Printed Name: Cortes Richard V.

Signature: 

Accepted on behalf of the United States Army by:

Printed Name/Date: Gonzales, David 3 Dec 10

Signature: 

USASMA FORM 7273-R, APR 06

Special Forces Engineer Sergeant

Sergeant Major Richard Cortes

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

SMNRC Class 35 Phase II

MOS 18Z

Joint Combined Exchange Training Balance Torch 1-93 10/15/1992 – 12/07/1992

11/06/2010

Unclassified

Abstract

In October 1992, SGM Richard Cortes deployed to Thailand for Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) Balance Torch 1-93. He was a new member of Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 114. His story will tell of how his Team Sergeant, a senior Special Forces veteran, set the course for his development as a Special Forces Soldier.

In September of 1992 I reported to 1st BN, 1st Special Forces Group, (Airborne) (1/1 SFG(A)). I was assigned to Operational Detachment Alpha 114 (ODA 114). It was there I met my new Team Sergeant, Master Sergeant Charles Miller. He was a normal looking guy, other than being older than everyone else. I was to find out later that he was a Vietnam War veteran. He looked me over and directed me to the Senior Engineer Sergeant. I was told that we would be deploying to Thailand in a few weeks. I was excited; this was to be my first deployment with Special Forces. In the weeks that followed we prepared for our trip. We would be teaching Small Unit Tactics and Marksmanship to members of the Royal Thai Army. We practiced the classes we would be teaching, I was given only small tasks mostly as Assistant Instructor (AI).

One day while we were preparing for the deployment, MSG Miller pulled me aside and told me I would be giving the Team classes on Demolitions the next day. I was shocked; I stammered that I needed time to prepare. He just looked at me and said, "You're an expert right?" I replied that I was and he said, "So be one." I stayed up all night preparing and rehearsing what I would present to my team. The next day the classes went off without a hitch. MSG Miller told me, "Good job, that's what I expected from a guy who was a 12B (Combat Engineer), Sapper Leader Graduate, and honor graduate of the 18C course." I had passed my first test. This was only the first of several tests that I would be given.

We deployed and I found myself in a strange new land. I had attended language school after the Special Forces Qualification Course, but for Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines, not Thai. The food was different; it was delicious but incredibly spicy. We were living off the economy so I quickly had to learn the words for the food I liked and how to say "not spicy". They drove on the opposite side of the road from us. There were ornate Buddhist

Temples everywhere. After we had been there about a week MSG Miller approached me and directed me to take the Operational Fund (OPFUND) to town and purchase target materials for the range. I looked at him with what I assume was a dumbfounded look and he said, "Figure it out." My other team mates looked at me with a knowing look and I instantly knew that I couldn't ask them for help. I was able to elicit help from one of the Thai Officers who spoke some English. We found another soldier who owned a pickup and headed to town. I was able to get everything on my list. However, I'm sure that I paid way too much for it. My skills at bartering with Asian businessmen and shop owners would need further development.

My next test would occur later that same week. We had been working with the Thai Soldiers on the pistol range for two days when MSG Miller approached me again. I was informed that I would be running the range the next day. This was significant since I didn't speak Thai and the Thai Soldiers didn't speak English. I immediately got with one of the Thai speakers on the team and came up with a list of commands and words that I would have to master for the next day's training. With the help of my Team Mates and the English speaking Thais I was able to pull it off. It wasn't smooth, but it wasn't really expected to be.

It was at the end of our third week in country when my Team Sergeant approached me again. He had a smile on his face and was carrying a sand bag in one hand. He looked at me and told me there were 24 compasses in the sand bag and that we didn't need them anymore but ODA 112 in Chiang Mai did. This was to be the biggest test yet. I was to take the compasses to our sister team in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, approximately 300 miles away. I had to use public transportation; I couldn't fly or hire a car to get there. I could hitch-hike, take the bus and ride the train. We were training on a small camp near Khon Kaen in central Thailand. I quickly packed a small backpack with a few days worth of clothing and the compasses. I grabbed a map

and quickly realized the task ahead of me. There wasn't a direct bus line or rail line from Khon Kaen to Chiang Mai. So with backpack and phrase book in hand I walked to the front gate of the camp.

The first leg of my journey was several miles to town. I was able to hitch a ride on the back of a scooter that was going my way. When I got to the bus station it was cacophony of sights and sounds. I quickly became overwhelmed by everything going on around me, there were passengers going to and fro, loud busses rumbling, and street hawkers selling their wares. I took a deep breath, and with my phrase book turned to the transportation section and went to the ticket counter. I tried to purchase a round trip ticket to Chiang Mai but was informed that it wasn't possible, I would have to go to Nakhon Ratchasima and purchase a transfer ticket from there. I did and was told that if I hurried I could catch the next bus which left in a few minutes. I ran for the terminal but quickly became confused and disoriented. I made the next bus an hour later. The ride was miserable, it was hopelessly overcrowded and the seats were made for small statured Asians, not a 6 foot 2 inch tall Green Beret. It was already late when we arrived at the bus station and it was nearly deserted. I went to the ticket counter and using pointy talky with my phrase book tried to buy a ticket on the next bus to Chiang Mai. It wasn't happening, between the girl behind the counter and I, we couldn't get our points across. This went on for a bit until an English speaking Thai came to my help. He informed me that the next bus wouldn't be until the morning but there was a bus departing to Bangkok in a few minutes. I could take it to the Bangkok train station and catch a train from there. I was understandably hesitant but they assured me that I would arrive at my destination earlier and in more comfort. I took their advice and headed to the Capitol of the Kingdom, Bangkok.

I was unprepared for what I encountered when I got off the bus in the morning. Bangkok was huge and oppressive. I got off the bus at the train station and set about looking for the ticket counter. I was approached by a guy who spoke English, and was wearing a grey button down shirt. He offered his assistance but I, being suspicious, declined his offer. He stayed close to me as I blundered my way through the station, finally getting my tickets and making my way to the right terminal. It was not until my return trip I found out that he was a member of the Tourist Police and it was his job to assist and protect travelers.

I rode the train to Chiang Mai and hitched a ride on the back of a scooter to the camp where I linked up with ODA 112. I handed the compasses over to a friend of mine who I attended training with. We compared stories of our first trip, he was jealous. He had only been allowed to shadow the experienced members of his team and they couldn't leave the camp unless they followed the two-man rule. That was when I realized how lucky I was to have MSG Miller as my Team Sergeant and mentor. By taking some risk and letting me go it alone he had already started to develop me as a Special Forces Soldier.

The lessons I learned from that first trip have stayed with me my entire career. He taught me the importance of cultural awareness and language skills to a Green Beret, self-reliance, preparedness, and not to be afraid of trying. I also learned that it is alright to fail at something new if the bullets are flying and you can learn from it. I have used these same techniques to mentor and develop my subordinates to great success over the years.