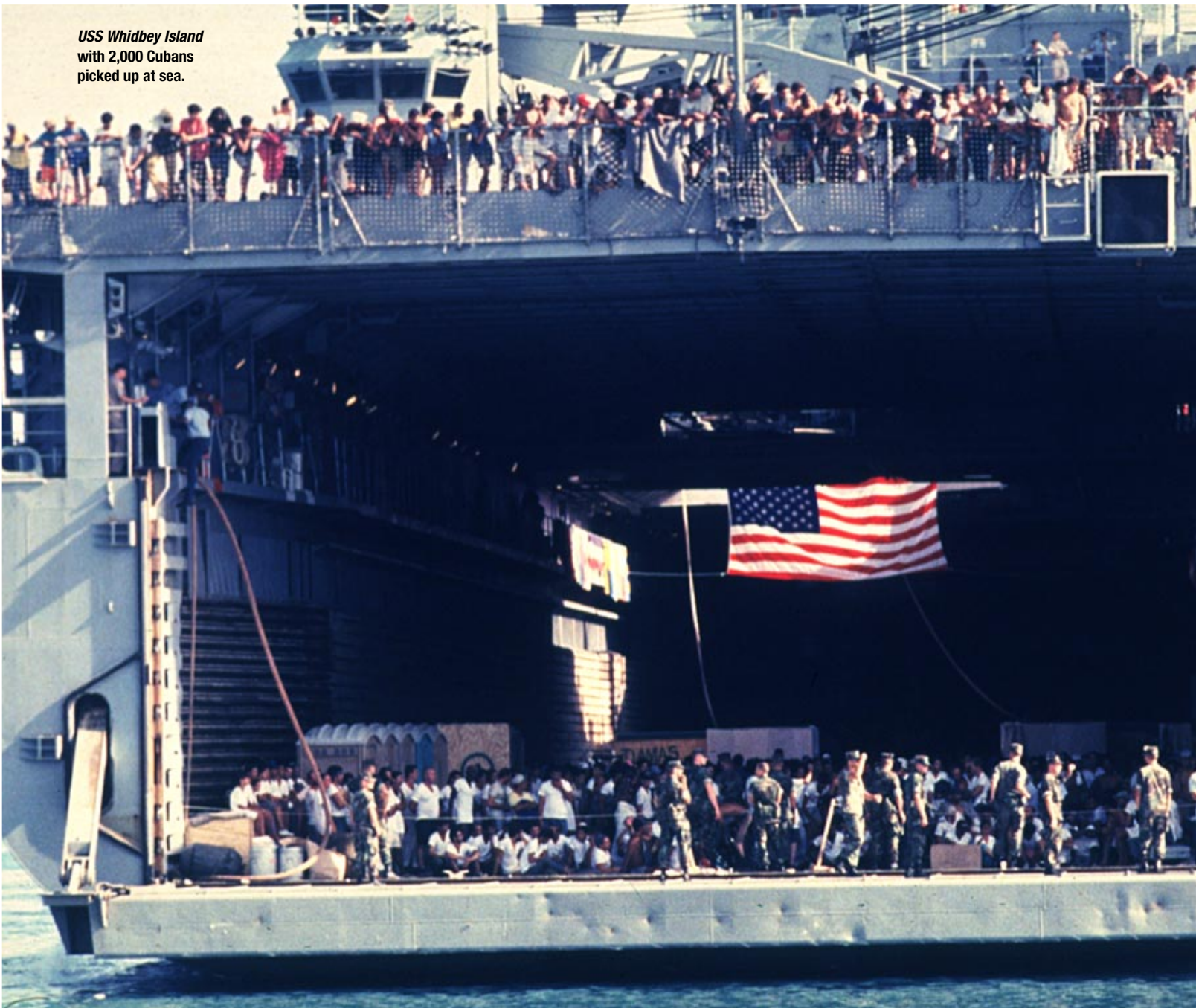

A Guantanamo Diary— Operation Sea

USS Whidbey Island
with 2,000 Cubans
picked up at sea.



Signal



support to Sea Signal included civilian containment and civic assistance

By W. D A R R E N P I T T S

By late summer 1994 the expansion of refugee operations just to the south of Florida had reached a crisis. The U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba was already host to more than 14,000 Haitian refugees. With existing camps at McCall airfield filling to capacity, U.S. personnel immediately began construction of others in the Radio Range complex. As Coast Guard and Navy vessels began interdicting more than 3,000 Cuban rafters per day, it was distressing to realize that they also would have to be quartered. Gitmo was ill-prepared to provide for the security, health, and welfare of an additional 34,000 Cubans at what would amount to \$1 million per day.

The subsequent efforts of JTF-160 transformed Guantanamo while forcing the departure of military dependents to the United States. This survey of Operation Sea Signal focuses on security and operations associated with displaced persons with emphasis on the critical role of civil affairs (CA) and psychological operations (PSYOP).

The Mission

The rapid buildup of military infrastructure to support Sea Signal re-

vealed potential flaws in deploying CA personnel. Sufficient capabilities, which should have been a planning factor, were deployed reactively rather than proactively. The delayed arrival of the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion as well as both Army Reservists from the 416th Civil Affairs Battalion and Marine Reservists from the 4th Civil Affairs Group did not jeopardize the mission, but their presence could have facilitated communication with refugees. The initial table of organization for JTF-160, based on CA assets on the ground, was inadequate for Sea Signal. The primary mission was humanitarian assistance. CA support to Sea Signal included both civilian containment and control and civic assistance.

Civilian containment involved physical development of refugee camps as well as matters of internal communication and security. Its success depended heavily on the degree to which security forces and CA personnel augment J-3/S-3 staff and advance party/site survey teams. The planning should have identified civil affairs as a principal player in executing the JTF-160 mission.

Civic assistance provided for medical, dental, and veterinary care; basic sanitation; logistics and maintenance; and other tasks. Ideally, such projects are short term, high impact, low cost, and technologically simple, with a reasonable certainty of completion. This was a tough litmus test for Sea Signal. Although some missions are simple in concept, they are logistically difficult.

Multi-Service Operations

One aspect of integrating civil affairs assets into Sea Signal was multi-service participation. With the exception of Desert Storm and several other joint operations, not many efforts have been conducted by both Army and Marine civil affairs. Army civil affairs is a special operations forces (SOF) asset and Marine civil affairs is a proven Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) resource. As such, when a Marine head-

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DOD (Alexander C. Hicks, Jr.)

quarters is designated the lead JTF component, it is practical to first use its organic capability before seeking external support. This practice reflects the application of sound doctrine. With regard to civil affairs, the Army's ability to conduct large-scale operations such as those in Haiti could be complimented by tactically-oriented Marine CA assets which focus on operational support in the tactical AOR.

Since jointness represents the future of military operations, the Marine Corps should make its CA capabilities better known to CINCs and the Joint Staff. The Marines should consider set-

ting up both formal and informal relationships with their Army counterparts, active and Reserve. In future operations the Marine Corps should assign CA liaison officers to CINCs as well as to Army civil affairs commands. This would lead to a better appreciation of the unique CA capabilities of both services and facilitate training among active and Reserve civil affairs units.

Haitians await volunteer repatriation.



DOD

Refugee Processing

On arrival, Cuban refugees were typically put in camps to await processing at the migrant processing center. Because of a lack of vehicles, some refugees took up to two weeks to reach the center. As Coast Guard and Navy vessels continued to pick up rafters at record rates, off-loading and transporting migrants impacted on vehicular support between the camps. JTF-160 initiated a database known as the deployable mass population identification and tracking system (DMPITS), consisting of a five-station processing center. Fully staffed, it could process 1,500 migrants per day, although the average was between 800 and 1,200.



Citmo airfield converted for 10,000 migrants.

DOD (Helene Stikkel)

Despite DMPITS, family members often were housed in separate camps, some for months. This resulted in frustrating, time-consuming activities to unify families. Because of the intensive labor and transport needed for family reunification, increased participation by other organizations should be considered. Governmental organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are actual force multipliers. Among those organizations at Guantanamo, the Community Relations Service (CRS) of the Department of Justice and the World Relief Organization (WRO) were key contributors. CRS was the lead agency for implementation of the Family Reunification



DOD (Alexander C. Hicks, Jr)

Cubans on board *USCGC Tampa* being searched.

JTF-160 setting up air transportable hospital.



DOD (Alexander C. Hicks, Jr)

Military police conducting quick response training.

DOD



Program which sought to reunite family members, many of whom had been separated at sea either prior to interdiction or during DMPITS processing. Because of Sea Signal's push to send as many Cubans to Panama as possible, the program impacted on all facets of the operation. WRO, on the other hand, arranged the collection and distribution of donations for the refugee population. Both GOs and NGOs should coordinate their activities through civil affairs whenever possible.

In late August and early September, living conditions became horrendous according to one camp commander. As average daily temperatures soared over 100 degrees, trash and human waste awaited the arriving refugees as well as security forces. This environment was suddenly home to men, women, children, and infants.

According to some participants, the civil affairs contingent was initially a token (comprised of two officers and one enlisted at staff level). With more than 3,200 migrants arriving each day, security and health problems overwhelmed the facilities. There were shortages of running water, medical facilities, and sanitation (porta-potties) in the camps.

Airlift and sealift for this humanitarian mission had to be shared with JTF-180 which was gearing up for a

JTG-Bulkeley sought to provide a safe and habitable environment

showdown in Haiti. Living conditions deteriorated and tension mounted as camp populations swelled. Risks to military personnel grew exponentially and the political signals from Washington fueled the volatile fire of despair within the tent city.

The camps were being constructed and filled to capacity in a matter of days, with command then turned over to incoming military police units. Was Sea Signal really a military police mission? Refugees, furious over living conditions and the abrupt change in immigration policy, complained, demonstrated, and eventually rioted.



Military police patrolling refugee camp.

Infrastructure

JTG-Bulkeley sought to provide a safe and habitable environment for the refugees and keep the migrant population informed on their legal status and on options such as relocation to Panama (Operation Safehaven) and repatriation to Cuba. In addition, JTG-Bulkeley sought to target quality of life issues to improve migrant living conditions.

Civil affairs focused on developing and sustaining camp infrastructure. Military police and civil affairs commanders met with Cuban camp leaders daily, often going tent to tent. A critical aspect of their job was simply listening, providing information, making assessments, and advising the commander. As soon as health and comfort problems were resolved, other issues which had been festering under the surface quickly arose.

With CA assistance the camps elected government councils (camp leaders) to represent their concerns. Typically, they raised issues on their

legal status, family reunification, problems of the sick and elderly, unaccompanied minors, and treatment by the security forces. Easing tensions and the segregation of single males and troublemakers enabled camp commanders to delegate greater responsibility

for internal activities to these democratically elected leaders.

CA personnel had interpreters whose background, maturity, and proficiency could vary on a daily basis. Some were school-trained while others spoke fluent Spanish but could not read the language. There were also difficulties arising from variations in dialect. But the mission could not have been accomplished without linguists. More than once, Spanish-speaking personnel identified and defused volatile situations before they turned violent.

Crisis, however, was not always the order of the day. Cuban teachers taught English to children. Men worked in makeshift craft shops. Recreational programs entertained and occupied the general population. By mid-October, security concerns had given way to intramural baseball, and some Cubans even opted to go on daily runs with members of the security force.



Erecting tents to house JTF-160 personnel.



Cuban refugees being served on food line.

Shortly after the August 1994 demonstrations, the migrant camps were designated as being for single males, families, or unaccompanied minors, although single females and married couples still were housed with single men in many cases. The maximum population of each camp was set at 2,500. In October 1994, additional sub-camps were created to segregate Cubans who wanted to be repatriated or relocated to Panama. Moreover, MAG 291 and Camp X-Ray were established to administratively segregate those who endangered the safety and welfare of others. Those migrants who committed infractions were moved to MAG-291 for 7–30 days. Felons and those who posed serious and documented threats went to Camp X-Ray

indefinitely. From a security perspective Camp X-Ray was impressive, although it was not a prison as some have suggested. Infractions committed by detainees included theft, assault and battery, prostitution, and black market activities. Their segregation was intended to avoid a breakdown or disruption of law, order, and discipline in the camps. Some refugees made improvised weapons out of cot ends, tent poles, soda cans, et al. which were routinely confiscated in security sweeps.

PSYOP Support

It is important to note that psychological operations were neither authorized nor conducted by JTF-160. But PSYOP support in the form of a

military information support team (MIST) was invaluable although initially separate from the CA effort. MIST provided excellent products and programs for security forces as well as civil affairs. The stated mission of the team was to assist with population control, safety, and sanitation to increase force protection.

MIST executed its mission by publishing *¿Que Pasa?*, a weekly newspaper for the Cuban camps, and operating “Radio Esperanza,” which broadcasted from 0900 to 1700 daily. The paper initially was ignored by the Cubans who said it looked official and did not adequately address their interests, namely, obtaining visas and gaining entry to the United States. Eventually, MIST and civil affairs linked up, and Cuban-written contributions were soon introduced into *¿Que Pasa?* Thereafter readership and overall receptiveness quickly improved. MIST personnel came from the 1st PSYOP Battalion and the Dissemination Battalion of the 4th PSYOP Group and operated with civil affairs until September 1994. MIST provided extremely valuable service to both the JTF staff and refugee population.

PSYOP assets were deployed to Cuba before January 1992 to support Operation GTMO. Planning for the operation assumed no more than 2,500 migrants, and discussions at U.S. Atlantic Command focused on whether PSYOP support was even needed for this type of mission. In the final analysis it is important that PSYOP be put under the operational control of civil affairs since it allows for coordinated activities and more effective support in such operations.

Security and Infrastructure

The security mission was clear: to maintain control of the refugee population and to protect American personnel assigned to the base. Two Army military police battalions, reinforced by two Air Force security police companies, provided internal security. A Marine infantry regiment was responsible for external security. The rules of engagement (ROE) for security forces stressed the humanitarian nature of the operation and only came into play during demonstrations, outbursts of frustration, and intentional acts of violent misconduct.

Military police company commanders typically had responsibility for two refugee camps. Internal as well as external guards were posted and patrolled the camps continuously. They carried nightsticks and hand-held radios. Each watchtower had a two-man team. Marines, on the other hand, provided perimeter security and carried M-16s. A quick reaction force was kept on standby to quell riots or extract problem refugees from volatile situations. A few refugees jumped the wire and attempted to swim home. This was an ever-present danger and American personnel could only assist swimmers who requested help.

The ongoing nature of Sea Signal represents a unique opportunity for security forces and civil affairs to master civilian containment and control procedures. The handling of large numbers of displaced people raises several important questions for planners and

supported CINCs. First, are JFCs deploying and integrating CA assets in contingency operations at the appropriate time? Also, will valid requirements be ignored or minimized because the capabilities reside primarily in the Reserve components? More than 90 percent of civil affairs personnel are Reservists, and there is only one active duty civil affairs battalion.

Given the lessons of Operation GTMO in 1992 and those learned from Sea Signal, further debate and perhaps some top-level guidance regarding civil affairs deployment and employment is needed before the next JTF reinvents the wheel. The execution of two simultaneous civil affairs operations (in

despite the aggressive efforts by JTF-160 civil affairs was an afterthought

Haiti and Cuba) at the low end of the spectrum challenged those who participated. What opportunities exist, if any, for facilitating joint CA training for these operations?

With regard to Guantanamo, one can only speculate on the rapid planning that accompanied the tasking for Sea Signal. In anticipation of future operations, should force planners overestimate the CA dimension of the mission, given the lead time to marshal operational support?

Despite the aggressive efforts by the staff of JTF-160, civil affairs was an afterthought. Critical tasks must be performed from the outset of an operation. The world watches CNN. When a crisis is real, everyone knows it. The question for joint planners and warfighters is whether the OPLANS and their respective force lists reflect initial use of Reserve civil affairs units? Or perhaps a better question is should they include them?

JTF-160 enveloped a gray area of low intensity conflict contingencies—part security, but mostly civil affairs. Most junior officers would argue that both security forces and CA personnel should have arrived on the same aircraft. If Sea Signal is an indication of the new politico-military landscape, force planning for security and civic assistance missions requires serious rethinking.

On May 2, 1995, almost nine months after Sea Signal began, the administration announced a reversal in policy. All but a handful of the Cubans would be allowed to enter the United States. According to *The New York Times*, “[Cubans] were being admitted for humanitarian reasons and because Washington feared rioting this summer at the naval base. But recognizing that the decision to admit them could set off a new flood of boat people, the administration said that it would in the future return all Cuban refugees who flee [from Cuba] to that communist country.”

What should we be ready for next? With regard to civil affairs, Sea Signal reflected both an earnest application of past lessons and blatant oversight of others. **JFQ**