

EX TROPICAL HAMMER (TH) 08-01

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“There are many tales in the naked city”, this one takes place near a city that practically lives up to that quote. Kingston, Jamaica could be the city that coined that phrase. This is a story about an exercise that, only months ago, most of us had never heard of. A story about an exercise with a tactical overlay which coined yet another phrase an “Opsercise”. This is a story about EXERCISE TROPICAL HAMMER 08-01(EX TH) and our, the Engineer Support Unit (ESU) for Joint Task Force Afghanistan 3-08 (JTF-AFG), involvement in it.



EX TROPICAL HAMMER ESU

EX TH was conducted in support of ADM (Pol) Military Training Assistance Program (MTAP) activities in Jamaica, and in cooperation with the Jamaica Defence Force (JDF) and Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) as an Engineer Field Training Exercise (FTX). It was commanded and supported by a Real Life Support Team (RLST) cut primarily from CFJSG and CFJSR out of Kingston, ON and conducted in Jamaica from 17 Mar to 19 Apr 08.

The ESU, is an ad-hoc group of primarily Construction Engineers numbering approx 40 all ranks. Under the command of Major Steve MacEwen from 8 Wing Trenton we hail from 11 different bases, wings,

stations and ships from coast to coast. As we are not a formed unit we lack any collective support (admin, logistical, fin, weapons, tools, equip, etc, etc) which ultimately resulted in increased challenges to move and train our team.



Camp Moneague Construction Site

The EX was designed to train and confirm General Engineer Support (GES) elements for employment as part of (JTF AFG Roto 6) and GES Op Reserve. The goal was to confirm Level 3-4 GES Battle Task Standards (BTS) as well as technical engineering training prior to deployment with other arms elements.

In short, the exercise was a venue for multiple Engineer disciplines and support trades (formed units and ad-hoc) to enhance, sharpen and confirm their abilities to work in a theatre of war, but to do so while in an austere yet controllable environment. An excellent opportunity to confirm our skills before putting them to the test in Afghanistan during Roto 6.



Alpha One Construction Site

Just say the word “Jamaica” to any Canadian, and visions of white-sand beaches reflecting from the translucent turquoise waters leap crazily into our snow-bogged and frozen minds. Imagine then the wildest dreams of an eclectic group of sun starved Engineers given the word that they would be “exercising” in Jamaica. Then imagine their surprise on being stuck atop a mountain a stone’s throw from that very dream at Camp Moneague performing construction tasks under a “tactical overlay”. Or, bedded down at the end of a very active runway at Kingston’s Norman Manley International Airport working either at a camp known as Alpha-One (A1) or at the Coast Guard Base located in historical old Port Royal. Nonetheless, for the members comprising the ESU, it was a welcome change from the frozen, snow swept ranges of Petawawa ON where we had spent the month of Jan completing our Individual Battle Task Standards (IBTS) and pre-deployment training.

With the ESU HQ, along with a selection of our Fire Fighters, comfortably seconded at Alpha One the main body of troops from the ESU were bedded-down at Camp Moneague, a JDF army base located some 2 hours to the north. There, under a “tactical overlay” where full “battle-rattle” was worn on the construction site, the hard working members of the ESU performed alongside fellow Engineers from the Op Reserve/CMO (mostly 81 CEF and 86 ASU with augmentation) and Engr elements of the JDF. Together they worked tirelessly through torrential rainstorm, rivers of red mud, six-inch long centipedes, fire ant infestations and of course those annoying “tactical” injects. It’s no lie to say that thoughts of the infamous seven plagues were foremost on everyone’s minds nor would it be a stretch to say most wondered if the “locusts” would be the next to arrive.



Coast Guard Construction Site

While the ESU main body operated out of Camp Moneague, the ESU HQ was sharing resources with the GES HQ at Alpha One. The premise was to exercise the ESU HQ’s command and control of our troops from afar while having the troops employed at a Forward Operating Base (FOB) with small sections deployed to other areas as required. While there are strong arguments for and against the concept, at the very least it served nicely to provide many challenges along the way.

The construction of numerous buildings (accommodations & ablutions, school complexes, dining halls, dive stores an orderly room and a library to name a few) centered on a type of construction seldom seen in North America. The basic building block incorporated the use of “Intermodal Shipping Containers” more popularly known as Sea Containers or Seacans. These metal boxes were stacked side-by-side, end to end and one on top of another. Bolted to cement pads or stuffed inside steel clad buildings, some with 2nd floor walkways, stairs, landings and railings attached. They were cut, welded, strapped, drilled, bolted, plated and finished with sub-floors, rigid insulation, plywood, reinforcing angle iron, steel doors, windows, interior walls, roof trusses and CGI roofing. While only the larger buildings were designed to sustain a category 5 hurricane, all were constructed with due consideration to their environment.



Engineers at Soho Ranges

It would take pages to write out all the ESU stories and to name all those who so richly deserve the mention, regrettably an unattainable goal in this forum. However one who stood out was, MCpl Jean-Guy Mayer. MCpl Mayer deployed earlier than expected and worked tirelessly throughout the bed-down area set-up. His negotiation, trade and diplomacy skills resulted in extraordinarily valuable training for his JDF Fire Fighter counter parts. He was presented with the OS Engineers Coin for his efforts.



CF Fire Fighters Provide Training to JDF Counterparts

TROPICAL HAMMER 08-01 is over now. All will speak of the many challenges we faced along the way, whether it be about the amalgamation of so many Engineer units, the difficulties we faced with material acquisition, or the lack of specific trades training. While none will agree on any one topic, there can be no argument that the experiences gained by each of us while working in such an unfamiliar environment and in a uniquely rich culture, have enriched us all. The naked city has many stories, and this one has a happy ending thanks to the participation of everyone in the ESU, along with 86 ASU, 81 CEF, 192 CEF, PRT, CMO, 1 ESU and many augmentees. Working in close cooperation with the JDF and supported by the RLST, we achieved as a team the successful completion of a challenging and singularly unique training opportunity. BZ to all who participated.

“CHIMO”