

## CUBAN REFUGEE SUPPORT MISSION 1980

Throughout history military successes have often been a case of being in the right place at the right time and being ready. Such was the case with the 416 th Engineer Command in late May 1980.

The 416 th Engineer Command was assembled at Fort McCoy for annual training. The Command Headquarters and most of the Command's assigned troops. Two groups, six battalions and two independent companies. One of the largest assemblages of engineer troops ever at one location. The troops were participating in skills training and testing while the staffs were involved in a paper war game with the Balkans that had been written over the winter by the ACoF S Engineer section.

On Sunday morning, the 416 th Commander, Major General Robert Bay was in Chapel service when his Aid, Captain Coath came in to inform him that the Fifth Army Commander was on the telephone for him. General Bay was the only general on post at that time. General Bay learned that the 416 th Engineer Command was Federalized and Assigned the mission of preparing Fort McCoy to receive up to 16,000 Cuban Refugees. Other calls from the White House, from the Defense Department and from FEMA quickly followed with more details.

General Bay had the troops assembled on the parade ground, over 6,000 strong and announced, "We are going to accomplish the training we set out to do at Annual Training; we are also going to accomplish our new mission of readying this place to receive (Cuban) refugees".

The Command Engineer section was serving as controllers for the exercise. Several personnel from the section were assembled to scope the project and prepare materials estimates. The entire area was to be fenced and then it was to be subdivided into separate compounds for (1) families, (2) Single Men, (3) Single Women, (4) Homosexual Men, and (5) Homosexual Women. It was suggested that fencing could be saved by combining the last two compounds. The additional fence was built, bringing the total to over five miles of eight foot high chain link with barbed wire aprons at the top.

Estimates for materials also included 34 portable guard houses with windows, doors, lighting and electrical service. Estimates for remodeling 43 World War II dining halls including a sidewalk along each building and a roof to protect patrons from mud and rain. Estimates for construction of partitions in (??? number) barracks to accommodate family units and partitioning the latrines to men's and women's sections.

A Prisoner of War compound for training Military Police was to be used for temporary holding and screening the refugees but, a half mile of road needed to be constructed to provide access by buses. A parking lot was needed for buses and staff at the facility.

Refugees were to be flown from Florida to a Wisconsin National Guard Airfield about 35 miles away at Camp Douglas and then be brought to Fort McCoy by bus.

Material estimates were completed by Monday afternoon as other training continued. About 16:00 on Wednesday the estimating crew was reassembled and told the project was "Full go".

The Post Engineer and his staff had been locating the needed supplies on Tuesday and Wednesday. They began immediately confirming orders for immediate delivery. All of the available fencing material from Wisconsin and Minnesota suppliers was required. Since there were not enough tall steel posts available, some of the fences were built using 6 x 6 wood posts and 2x 4 aprons.

Persons of strong knowledge in every area were assigned in their strongest area. Col John Bowers was Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations. In Civilian life John had been second in command of the Federal Highway Administration Minnesota Division for several years. LTC Roger Stokes had 24 years in supervision of road construction for the Federal Highway Administration, from timber roads and National Park roads in Oregon to Interstate highways in Alabama and Illinois. LTC Stokes was assigned the road construction. COL Mike De Lapp, Architect, designed guard houses and set up an assembly line to construct them. Col De Lapp also drew the plans for converting open barracks to family apartments. COL Joe Crowe and Col Tom Hermann handled other areas.

LTC Stokes with the help of three enlisted troops got the half mile of roadway staked out before dark. At Daylight on Thursday, Mel Beleki on a motor grader and another man on a dozer began shaping the roadway earthwork. The staking crew finished staking out the parking buss parking lot. At 10:00 gravel (Wisconsin State Department of Transportation specifications) began arriving. Numerous contractors and a wide variety of trucks were coming in. Each driver had a weight ticket in duplicate. An engineer troop signed both copies, kept one to turn in for payment and consulting a table of coverage versus weight, directed the dumping. This resulted in the gravel being dumped almost exactly in its final location. Only two passes with the motor grader were required to shape it for rolling.

About noon the shift leaver on the motor grader broke off. Mel Beleki continued with out interruption using a pair of vice grips for a shift lever. The roadway was completed on Thursday. Work continued on the parking lot on Friday but, the scope was changed. It was decided to put a crushed stone base inside the compound to keep the heavy foot traffic from churning it into a mud wallow. A battalion set up lights and took over and the work continued through the night. When the stone pad was completed, the fence had to be restored where the trucks and equipment were accessing the inside of the compound. The POW compound consumed only a part of the 28,000 cubic yards of crushed stone that was placed as part of the project.

One Battalion from Indianapolis would have arrived home as the Indianapolis 500 Mile Race had just broken up. They volunteered to stay on an extra day and clean up all the odds and ends. Everyone else left at the previously scheduled times without having to adjust convoy plans.

On May 29 the first Cubans, 172 arrived. By June 7 there were 12,533 Cuban refugees. Support personnel included 954 Army, 58 Army National Guard, 127 USAR and 1,604 temporary civilians.

Refugees were resettled as rapidly as possible. As they were resettled others were arriving. The Refugee population peaked on June 15 with 13,324. The last arrivals came on August 15. By November 3 there were no more Cuban refugees and the last support unit left on November 7. The mission was officially over.

FEMA took over the operation of the camp when the Cubans began arriving. The Cubans were all issued a uniform of white T shirts, blue jeans and white tennis shoes.

Other training went on as scheduled at Fort McCoy for the summer, including Sessions of Command and General Staff College. Major Peter Bulika arrived for C & GS and was stopped at the gate and asked for his Military ID Card. Enroute to the billeting office for his room assignment he was stopped two more times. Enroute from the billeting office to his billet he was stopped again. It was then that he found out that the white T shirt, Blue jeans and white tennis shoes he was wearing were the same as the refugee issue.

In August, one evening a couple of Cubans decided to try to escape. Living before in the tropics, they did not realize how cold the Wisconsin summer nights could get or how large and hungry the Wisconsin mosquitoes could be. At daylight they were back at the gate to their compound wanting back in.

All the soldiers who participated were awarded the Humanitarian Service medal.