

Big Red One back in Africa

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Editor's note: Anton Menning is a contributing reporter for the Leavenworth Times who has been embedded with a military unit as part of the "Natural Fire" exercise in Africa. As the only U.S. reporter participating in the exercise, Menning is presenting stories during the month of August about the training exercise and other endeavors by U.S. military forces in Africa. This is the second part of a series of reports.



(Submitted Photo) Corporal Christopher Martin enjoys relaxed force protection with Tanzanian children near Msata, Tanzania.

Msata, Tanzania — Amidst an exotic background stretching from the barren wastelands of Djibouti to the Swahili Coast of East Africa, elements of the U.S. Army 1st Division, stationed at Fort Riley, provide military force protection for Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF HOA) initiatives.

"The challenge is not force protection," said Staff Sergeant Wayne "Scrap" Scarpulla, head of the A Company contingent in Tanzania. "It is changing the status quo. This is the first time we are intermixing with another foreign force."

Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 16 Regiment guards Civil Affairs units, protects water drillers, assists in humanitarian missions and deploys in defense of HOA units engaged in exercises throughout the region. It is the first time since World War II that a unit of the Big Red One deployed to Africa. The deployment will last until late March 2007.

The unit, with the motto "duty first," is the oldest continuously serving division in the U.S. Army, tracing its roots to the Revolutionary War.

Because the mission of CJTF HOA differs from other Central Command endeavors, Alpha Company often displays a softer side of the army.

“We are here to build relationships with these foreign governments and militaries — to win their hearts and minds,” said 1st Sergeant Jason Miller, scout platoon 1/16.

Working in groups as small as five, hundreds of miles from other HOA forces, presents the 1/16 with unique challenges. Often, they are the sole representatives of the United States in remote regions.

”The soldiers out here have to be very mature,” Miller said. “It would be easy to make a mistake and make the wrong impression.”

Members of Alpha Company try to maintain a low profile while working in the region. Often they wear body armor inside their uniforms and leave their weapons in nearby vehicles.

It makes it easier for the units to accomplish humanitarian missions when they occupy more of a background position, Sgt. Scarpulla said.

Adapting to and understanding different cultures and languages remains central to Alpha Company’s mission.

While working force protection during exercise “Natural Fire,” the soldiers are part of a cooperative effort with military forces in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

That is, host government military forces provide perimeter protection while 1st Division soldiers guard camp interiors, coordinate overall protection and ensure communication links to headquarters remain open.

The inquisitiveness of host nations’ soldiers often leads to impromptu military-to-military training sessions. At the camp near Msata, Tanzania, Sgt. Scarpulla’s team teaches Tanzanian Peoples Defense Forces soldiers about American equipment.

They allow TPDF soldiers to examine their weapons, try out night-vision devices and use American metal detectors during perimeter security checks.

In Uganda, informal training gives way to a structured mission. Last fall, 13 Alpha Company soldiers instructed members of the Ugandan military during a 13-week course that was the equivalent of U.S. basic training.

Currently, a five-member team led by Captain Bryan Hill is preparing to train the next group of Ugandan soldiers in an advanced non-commissioned officer course.

“When bullets aren’t flying it means things are good,” Scarpulla said. “It can’t be better. We have two good forces working together.”