
Civil Affairs Sailors Work to Improve Humanitarian Effort Outcomes

By

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The Navy's budding civil affairs force will help sustain U.S. military humanitarian efforts in developing countries, the force's commander told online journalists and bloggers in an August 8, 2008 teleconference.

Many past humanitarian missions were completed with little thought to how the country would maintain the project, Navy Capt. Robert S. McKenna, commander of the Maritime Civil Affairs Group, explained. For example, he said, a school would be built without attention to who would attend the school, who would teach, or where the budget for maintenance and teaching materials would come from.

"So now," McKenna said, "instead of doing this in an ad hoc nature, we're building a force that understands civil affairs and understands effects-based operations."

McKenna explained that the Maritime Civil Affairs Group, which was established in July 2006, spent the past two years creating a training program to develop civil affairs teams. Since the Navy never had a civil affairs force, he said, officials solicited the assistance of the Army to craft the six-month training pipeline.

The training, McKenna said, familiarizes sailors with the 16 functional areas that form the basis of civil affairs work. Sailors also receive training in foreign languages and port assessment, and they complete a month-long expeditionary combat skills course, he said.

"We can't make experts, obviously, in 16 different areas," he said. "So, they know enough about those areas to be able to go out and do a good assessment." Sailors are considered civil affairs generalists when they complete the training, McKenna explained.

The Maritime Civil Affairs Group already has deployed teams to Africa, Iraq, Southeast Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean to assist with ongoing civil affairs and humanitarian missions.

"We have another team that just departed to go to the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa," he said. "They're going over there to do a 45-day pre-deployment site survey in preparation for a commitment, where we'll send two teams in December for a six-month deployment."

The civil affairs forces' role, McKenna said, is to provide strategy and planning for humanitarian projects and to advise combatant commanders and Navy component commanders. He added that civil affairs teams should be on the ground long before a ship arrives, assessing the area's needs.

"We need to be out way ahead of the ship so we can establish those relationships that we need, and we can liaison with civil authorities there," he said. "And we can find out where they need help and where we can give help."

Despite involvement in a few current missions, McKenna said, it's going to take time for the Navy to build a professional civil affairs force.

"I think over the next five to 10 years you're going to see this force grow and become more widely known and more widely used," he said. "And it's going to become a strong force for our national defense."