

THE SPECIAL SKILLS OF UN MILITARY OBSERVERS IN CAMBODIA

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THE PEACEKEEPERS

Military Observers from around the world are discovering an essential truth — there is little that is peaceful about peacekeeping in Cambodia. Among the over 15,000 troops participating in UNTAC, there is a group of 700 UNMO's who have discovered this firsthand, and who have been tasked with a very special mission.

Military observer duty resembles little of what these officers have done before in their military careers. For them, the most important differences between conventional military operations and military observers is that observers are unarmed. The practice of using an unarmed observer might be questioned in a country where an AK-47 assault rifle can sell in the public market place for as little as US\$50 and where the State of Cambodia (SOC) and KR forces regularly engage in artillery duels. But it is a technique of peacekeeping that has proven itself over the last three decades in tumultuous regions around the world and has so far proven itself in Cambodia.

The settlement of disputes between former or current warring parties requires a non-threatening third party intermediary. An unarmed observer, therefore, is generally recognized by both sides as someone whose sole mission is peace. The unarmed observer is a military threat to neither side in the dispute. The perception of an observer's neutrality is, perhaps, his best security. Additionally, unarmed observers, in a peacekeeping situation, are often well-positioned to act and be accepted as negotiators between the factions.

Observers play a unique role in peacekeeping in that they can be assigned, in two to five-man teams, to small isolated outposts where living conditions are sometimes primitive. Nonetheless, their primary mission is the investigation and impartial and accurate reporting of significant incidents, such as ceasefire violations, which impinge on the success of the mission.

In Cambodia, these teams serve as the eyes and ears of UNTAC in the field. The accurate reporting of impartial UNMO's is essential to the peace process and ensures at least one objective observation of the incident. This objectivity often plays a key role in a later settlement of sometimes extraordinarily contentious issues.

Aside from their primary mission of reporting, observers are also called upon to negotiate with provincial factional leaders for the security of UN electoral teams who, like the observers, are spread out into the furthest reaches of the country.

Observers may also be called upon to monitor checkpoints along the borders of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, while naval observers patrol the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers, Tonle Sap Lake and the Cambodian coastal waters. Other tasks include assisting the UN police in conducting investigations into crimes



Naval observers on patrol

committed against the local populace and advising UN and non-governmental organizations on safe travel within a country which is perhaps the most heavily mined in the world. An observer's daily activities, therefore, can be unusually diverse.

Most countries do not provide observer-specialist training to their soldiers and sailors as it is a relatively new field for many military forces. As a consequence of this, and the unusual diversity and potentially hazardous nature of peacekeeping missions, the UN generally selects senior grade and highly experienced officers to fulfill the role of observer. Mature judgement is considered to be the UNMO's most valuable asset.

Observers operate in uncertain environments where problems are frequently plagued by ambiguity and expedient solutions are often out of reach. UNMO's have to literally live by their wits. They cannot shoot their way out of difficulties — they have to think their way out.

Without question, the military observers' mission in Cambodia is an important one and the overall UNTAC mission could well serve as a prototype for future peacekeeping missions of this sort. It is likely that in the future, conflicts throughout the world will require a greater need for observers and their very special skills. Based on recent experiences, that call will be met by a community of nations who share an interest in creating and maintaining peace. These are the countries who contribute to the United Nations peacekeeping forces.

Note: United States Special Forces Lt Col Robert B. Adolph Jr. is an UNTAC UNMO currently training observers in Cambodia on conflict resolution principles. He formerly served on UN duty with Observer Groups in Lebanon and Egypt.

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