



Photo by Hans Halberstadt

SMOKE FLARES BILLOW as 7th Infantry Division (Light) soldiers stay alert during a field training exercise in Panama recently.

Heat, wilds challenge troops

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FORT SHERMAN — Soldiers from the 7th Infantry Division's (Light) 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment pitted themselves against the heat, humidity and wilds of the Panamanian jungle during a two-day Field Training Exercise (FTX) recently.

The infantrymen are currently stationed at Fort Sherman on Panama's Atlantic side, where they are participating in jungle warfare training at the Jungle Operations Training Center.

During the exercise, the soldiers — from the battalion's Company A — airmobiled from Fort Sherman to the Gatun Drop Zone near the Chagres River. From there, the soldiers moved to another pick-up zone on the Chagres, where they boarded Army Landing Craft (Mechanized) and were transported to the mouth of the river, where the Chagres meets the Atlantic Ocean.

At this point in the operation, the soldiers received further instructions and their training took a new twist. The soldiers were ordered to head immediately to a nearby village to liberate

"non-combatants" being held by an "enemy" force.

For the purpose of exercise, the "non-combatants," as well as the "enemy," were portrayed by members of the 2nd Battalion, 8th Field Artillery, and the village was in a clearing in the Panamanian jungle. The new twist, according to 1st Lt. Paul Groce, battalion assistant S-3, was used as a means to test the unit's ability to react to and overcome short-notice operational changes.

The soldiers reacted well to the changes and accomplished their mission, according to Sgt. Martin Lopez, a squad leader assigned to Company A. "It was something new to us — non-combatant operations — we are used to going out and engaging the enemy in full combat," he explained. "It was a lot different than the training we usually do, but it went fine."

Once the soldiers reached their objective, they overpowered the "enemy" force and liberated the captives. Soon the soldiers had rallied the "non-combatants" and escorted them to a secure area, from which they would later be transported to Fort Sherman.

"The priority was to protect them (the non-combatants)," explained Capt. Barney Morris, commander, Company A. "So we formed a cordon around them and returned to the mouth of the Chagres."

At first light on the following day, the soldiers and their new-found "friends" boarded LCMs and returned to Fort Sherman.

The most difficult part of the training, according to Lopez, was something that caught many of the soldiers off-guard. "We normally travel at night, but you can't see a thing out here," he said. "It's slippery, it's hot, and it's different."

"It's pretty rough to move at night," he added. "You have to hold the rucksack of the person in front of you because it is so dark. It takes an hour to move 100 meters."

However, the training did provide the soldiers with a new learning experience. "This is the first time most of the soldiers have been in the jungle. The training has definitely helped them," Morris said. "They now know how to fight and survive in the jungle."