

San Diego Union-Tribune

April 4, 2002

Army Gets A Pendleton Lift

\$22 million joint exercise simulates ways to sustain large force overseas

By Jeanette Steele, Staff Writer

CAMP PENDLETON - A parade of barges and ferries is delivering tanks, trucks and metal containers to the beach here.

It's not the Marines, known for hitting a spot fast and light.

It's the Army, a military branch not seen much in these parts.

With the help of Navy amphibious construction battalions from Coronado, the Army is leading a \$22 million joint military exercise called Native Atlas 2002.

About 2,500 military personnel are simulating the logistics needed to sustain a large U.S. military force in a foreign land.

Troops fighting the war against terrorism in Afghanistan are supplied by airlifts because that nation is landlocked. But the military used this over-the-shore delivery tactic to supply troops in the Gulf War, military officials said.

"It replicates going into a theater of operation with a denied or degraded port operation, so we can go in and establish a theater and bring in equipment over the beach," said Army Maj. Jim Scott, operations officer for the 143rd Transportation Command from Orlando, Fla.

The barges, causeway, vehicles and a tent city housing the participants are visible to motorists on Interstate 5.

More than 1,600 soldiers under the 32nd Transportation Group from Tampa, Fla., and up to 700 sailors from Coronado's Naval Coastal Warfare and Naval Beach groups and underwater construction and cargo-handling teams are participating.

The exercise, which began last month, has been conducted annually under various titles. This year it falls under the authority of U.S. Central Command, the military command responsible for Southwest Asia.

The remaining participants include an Air Force weather squadron detachment, Pendleton's 7th Engineer Support Battalion, the Coast Guard cutter Steadfast and the U.S. Transportation Command and Maritime Administration.

The operation's showpiece is an elevated causeway, which juts a quarter of a mile into the ocean off Pendleton's Red Beach. It took Navy Seabees 19 days to erect it, and it will be removed when the exercise ends in mid-April.

Large metal containers of inert ammunition, food and small weapons are being transferred from Navy and Maritime Administration ships to the causeway, where they are offloaded by a 140-ton crane onto trucks. The containers will eventually be trucked to Concord in Northern California to practice resupplying a force about two days away from the beach.

Bradley tanks, Humvees and 5-ton trucks are coming to the beach via barges. These vehicles are being driven or hauled up Interstate 15 to the Army's Fort Irwin, near Barstow. The 2nd Brigade of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division will use the vehicles for training at the National Training Center there.

A Bradley tank slipped off a truck yesterday morning near the interchange of state Route 78 and I-15. The upside-down tank snarled traffic during the morning commute, but there were no injuries or damage to civilian vehicles, said Marine Maj. Pete Mitchell, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command.

Another goal of the exercise is practicing fuel delivery to ground forces from the sea. About 2 million gallons of fresh water will be pumped from a ship to storage tanks on the beach, simulating how fuel would be delivered through an underwater pipeline.

An elaborate tent city has grown up on Pendleton's western edge to support the Native Atlas crews, who came from throughout the nation.

Military personnel are getting five-star treatment.

The Navy Seabees who built the camp provided hot showers, laundry machines, a gym, a cybercafe and a movie theater - all in 226 green tents spread across 50 acres. There's even a restaurant-style gathering spot with big-screen cable television and bottled cappuccino.

Camp Commandant Jay Bieszke, a Navy Seabees lieutenant, said it's one of the largest and most elaborate camps his crews have erected. "I kid that I should change my name to 'concierge,'" he said.