

# Theater Civil Affairs Soldiers A Force at Risk

By WILLIAM R. FLORIG

**T**he future of the joint civil affairs (CA) force looks bleak. If drastic measures are not taken, this unique capability will soon be a shadow of its former self. To make it relevant for the nationbuilding operations of the future, the Active force needs to be greatly expanded while the Reserve Component must be right-sized and realigned to reflect recruiting and membership realities that are part of Reserve life. Establishing a habitual relationship with a combatant command is the way ahead for this expanded CA force, without all the bureaucratic layers of headquarters that get in the way.

The best proposal to fix the civil affairs force is an Active Component expansion to five larger battalions assigned to the combatant commands, and the creation of a smaller, more capable Reserve CA force aligned with these battalions. Without steps to alleviate the stress on the Reserve Component civil affairs force, it will cease to be relevant or effective.

## The Problem

Since September 11, 2001, Army and Marine Corps civil affairs forces have undergone tremendous stress because of operational deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq. The Army Reserve provides a large percentage of CA Soldiers today, with the Marine Corps adding a small force from the Marine Reserve. Because of Presidential call-up to execute the war on terror, mobilizing future civil affairs forces for regional contingencies and supporting combatant commanders' theater strategies are jeopardized. To overcome operating tempo

and mobilization constraints, Active duty CA battalions should be created and allocated to support geographic combatant commanders. These battalions must be larger than current proposals call for and assigned directly to the combatant commanders. The Reserve CA force must also be redesigned and downsized to reflect recruiting and retention realities.

Four years of sustained combat operations have had a telling effect on both the Army Active and Reserve Component civil affairs units. The Army's only Active duty CA unit, the recently expanded 96<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion, has seen a heavy operating tempo. This battalion consists of six companies that are regionally oriented and focused on a combatant commander's theater of operations. The force is adequate for short duration contingency operations and has served its purpose well. But for long conflicts such as the war on terror, these companies are overtaxed and too often must be reallocated to cover shortfalls in other theaters. Stated an executive officer of one of the companies concerning the constant deployment of the 96<sup>th</sup>, "You're either there, you just got home, or you're getting ready to go."<sup>1</sup>

The secondary effect of replacing other regionally focused companies in-theater is that they eventually lose their regional specialization due to focus on one theater only. This robs other combatant commanders of the CA experts required to execute their own operations and to support the Theater Security Cooperation Plan.

A striking example occurred during Operation *Unified Assistance*, the tsunami relief effort led by U.S. Pacific Command

(USPACOM) from December 26, 2004, to February 21, 2005. During this relief effort, the 96<sup>th</sup> could muster only 18 Soldiers for the operation out of an authorized strength of 48. The shortage was due to recurrent deployments and augmentation of civil affairs companies attached to U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) for operations in Iraq. This lack of rapid reaction CA capability forced to request Reserve Component forces, which were already stretched to the breaking point. If the entire 96<sup>th</sup> had been available, a strong capability could have been established in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Requested Reserve forces were not used because the Secretary of Defense decided not to leave any U.S. forces in the affected countries after the initial relief effort was complete.

Furthermore, the 96<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion can rarely field more than 2 civil affairs teams per quarter to assist with the entire USPACOM area of responsibility, which consists of 43 countries, 20 territories and possessions, and 10 American territories. When those teams are in-theater, they are focused exclusively on the USPACOM commander's priority in regard to the war on terror, leaving no capability for additional theater engagement. Instead, these teams should have the focus of an entire battalion, with 4 companies and 20 civil affairs teams for regular use and rotation in-theater in support of the commander. Additionally, included in the USPACOM theater are Indonesia, the Philippines, and other countries that receive scant civil affairs support to shape the environment and build host-nation capacity to combat terrorism.

## Civil Affairs Realities

But why build more Active Component capability at greater cost when we have such a large Reserve Component force to draw from? Unfortunately, operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have left the Reserve civil affairs force in a broken state that will take years to repair. Writing in *Army*, Mark Kimmey argues for Active Component expansion and analyzes why the Reserve Component is not the solution to continued joint CA support for lengthy conflicts or peacetime theater support.<sup>2</sup>

Kimmey believes the Army Reserve civil affairs force has done a tremendous job in Afghanistan and Iraq despite personnel and resource constraints, but the current force is past the breaking point. During the last 3 years of mobilizations, for instance, nearly every available CA Soldier was mobilized and spent

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a year or more in Iraq or Afghanistan. These Reservists have civilian jobs and cannot mobilize for successive years. Deployment stresses are just beginning to be seen, and many skilled civil affairs Soldiers will likely leave the force and take their irreplaceable skills with them due to the high operating tempo. A Reservist cannot participate in successive mobilizations without risking both career and family.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, Reserve CA specialties are too frequently filled with Soldiers who have little if any experience in the necessary skill sets. Education and language abilities, for example, are lacking. For years, U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command has claimed that CA skills are so specialized that they can only be found in the Reserve force. This idea has been oversold to the Army and the Department of Defense as a whole. Very rarely are the specialized teams filled with officers or noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who can do the job.

The Reserve force is composed of civil affairs generalists, not specialists. Too often units are happy just to have bodies of the correct rank to fill slots, regardless of the civilian skills brought to the table. According to Kimmey, “CA officers and NCOs are currently pressed into jobs they might know something about, but too often we expect a Reservist who works for a bank to know how to set up a banking system. It should be obvious that this does not work very well.”<sup>4</sup>

With the current focus on USCENTCOM, the language skills of our civil affairs forces, both Active and Reserve, are also eroding. During Operation *Unified Assistance*, the 96<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion, anticipating operations in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, could provide only one linguist in the Bahasa language for Indonesia, and no Sinhalese or Tamil speakers for Sri Lanka. The rest of the teams had no useful language skills except Thai, in which the need was minimal. CA forces are much less useful downrange without language skills.

In Iraq, moreover, the United States often relies on host-nation or contract personnel instead of civil affairs Soldiers to provide language support. These interpreters are often of questionable value, wasting time and losing things in translation. The Reserve forces simply have too few linguists trained and even fewer ready to commit to the year or more away from career and family to learn a language of use to DOD only—a deficiency that must be corrected.

Equipment has been another problem for mobilizing Army Reserve CA battalions for *Iraqi Freedom*. While the only Active Component CA battalion (the 96<sup>th</sup>) had the latest weapons, communications, and vehicles, the Reserve battalions initially did not have the state-of-the-art communications equipment or command and control systems used by regular units. Personnel did not even see these systems until they drew them in-theater, and few operators were trained before arrival. Also, the battalions did not have the shorter M4 carbine so essential for firing from confined spaces in vehicular and urban operations. The bottom line is that the Reserve battalions could not communicate with their regular Army counterparts and had inadequate weaponry for all but the smallest, short-duration firefights.

More generally, there is a wide gap in military education between Reserve CA leaders and their Active counterparts. This is also the case with training. Reservists receive only 24 training days yearly, much of it administratively oriented and poorly resourced, and 2 weeks of unit annual training. That cannot compare with the time, quality, and resources dedicated to Active Component training. The education and training issues are hardly the fault of the Reserve Component. Reservists do their best, given time and resource constraints, but their effort is still inadequate to provide the quality of support required by modern warfare and nationbuilding.

By spring 2005, after the fourth civil affairs command was mobilized, it was apparent that the CA force was in trouble. For 2 years, units were sent into theater as composite organizations filled ad hoc with Soldiers from up to 10 other CA units. The practice of “in-lieu-of sourcing” became commonplace and called for the creation of civil affairs Soldiers from other Army branches and other Service components, sending them to a 2-week course with limited additional specialized training. Due to a lack of qualified personnel, some Soldiers have already performed multiyear rotations, but this is not an option for most Reservists. To fill a fifth rotation of wartime CA units, the Secretary of Defense’s last option is either to remobilize involuntarily most of the personnel who served during the first year of the war or throw together more marginally competent composite units. This is politically untenable and is not in touch with the reality of the exhaustion of the civil affairs force.

The Marine Corps’ 3<sup>d</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Groups (CAGs), approximately 400

Marines, make up the all-Reserve Marine CA force. They have been deployed continuously since the war on terror began in 2001. The Marines decided to expand the force just for the Iraq conflict by creating the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> CAGs of nearly 200 personnel, who arrived in Iraq to support the I Marine Expeditionary Force. Sandra Erwin writes, “The Marine Corps created the 5<sup>th</sup> CAG for this deployment to ease the deployment cycles of the 3<sup>d</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> CAGs and to create additional civil affairs assets. The unit was established in late 2004 and shipped down to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for training from January until February 2005.”<sup>5</sup> The creation of a composite 5<sup>th</sup> CAG demonstrates how worn out the Marine civil affairs Reservists are. Of note, these CAGs will be disbanded once their mission in Iraq is complete. In the end, if the Army were serious about supporting all of DOD with CA forces, the Marines would not need CAGs.

### The Way Ahead

Current proposals by the U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command reflect a simple expansion of the Active duty CA force to four battalions with the creation of a brigade headquarters, a mere doubling of the current Active Component force. While a step in the right direction, this proposal contains no innovative attempts to transform civil affairs or its command and control. It is also predicated on budget constraints and personnel caps. To provide a capable, expanded CA force for the future, DOD and the Army need to discover where excess legacy capability is located in the Active and Reserve Components to build this more

U.S. Marine Corps 3<sup>d</sup> Civil Affairs Group patrols Harwan, Iraq, during humanitarian mission

FEATURE



Soldiers from 478<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion unload furniture donated to school in Dominican Republic, Exercise *New Horizons 2006*

U.S. Army South (Miguel A. Negron)

capable force. The stressed Reserve force needs to be downsized while this Active Component model is expanded to meet future nationbuilding challenges.

Creation of the civil-military operations center capability at the company level needs to remain in the battalion structure; however, each of the CA teams should be expanded to 8 personnel—an additional 512 Soldiers. This will ensure that the teams can operate in places such as Iraq, where force protection conditions demand eight or more Soldiers to embark on an operation. It will not require conventional commanders or Special Forces teams to commit their valuable assets to protect the team. The current four-man structure is insufficient to operate autonomously.

In addition, a fifth battalion should be created, adding 197 more Soldiers attached to U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). This battalion would be the initial surge capability for any of the four geographic combatant commands in a contingency or war. The USSOCOM battalion should have a company servicing each Special Forces team that is regionally aligned with the theater Special Operations Command, and the focus of the company should be specific to Special Operations Forces and complement the regional battalion, allowing it to focus on the war on terror and Theater Security Cooperation Plan events for the geographic combatant commander's theater strategy.

The creation of a brigade headquarters, the 95<sup>th</sup> CA Brigade, is also a problematic part of the current proposal. In a major regional contingency, it is unlikely that the command and control structure of 96 Soldiers will be deployed or needed by a geographic combatant command, and in the event of multiple

conflicts, its effectiveness is limited. The role of the brigade headquarters is to provide command, control, communications, computers, and information management capability and to plan, coordinate, and enable operational/strategic level stabilization and reconstruction, focused on the national (civil) center of gravity. In addition, it must provide rapidly deployable, plug-and-play, civil affairs planning

teams and have the ability to receive and fuse civil information from units into a tactical/strategic-level common operational picture.<sup>6</sup> In fact, this Army proposal could be used in-theater for a year at most.

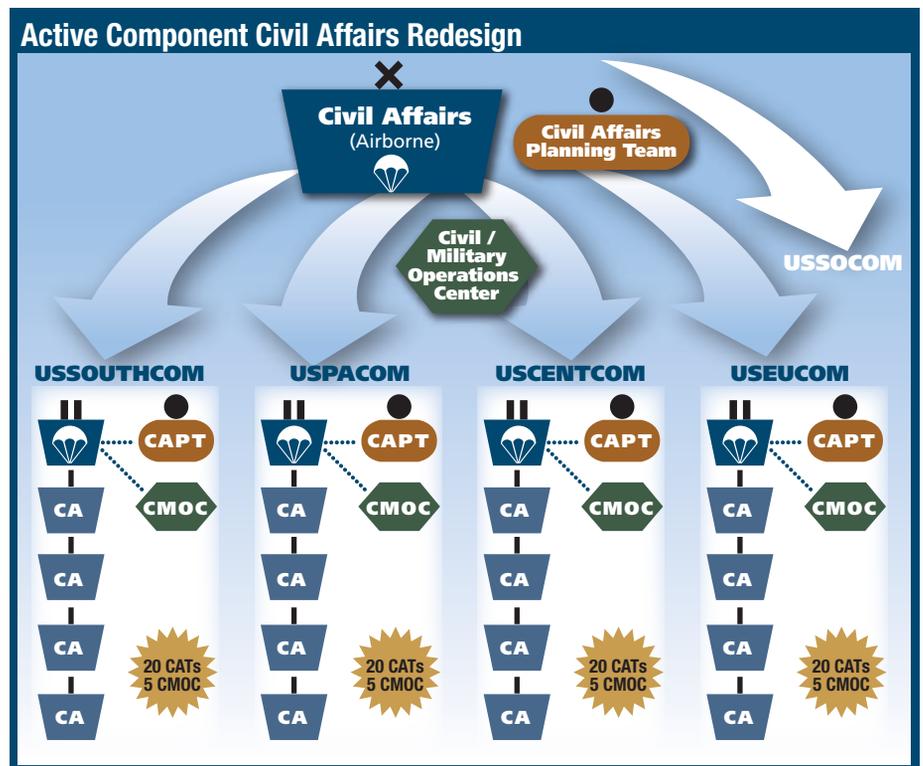
**Transforming Civil Affairs**

Instead, a simpler design is one that will place the more than 15 civil-military operations planners and staff in a more robust cell. Rather than the brigade headquarters arriving in-theater, unfamiliar with the culture and strategy of a combatant command, the geographic combatant command or the Army Special Operations Command cells would be

there as part of the organic staff and participate in deliberate and crisis action planning habitually in theater (see figure). This design would pay tremendous dividends, as these Soldiers would be familiar with the theater, its major plans, and all the civil-military operations staff.

Interagency players such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) should have permanent positions at the regional combatant commands under the auspices of a joint interagency coordination group to magnify the effectiveness of the civil affairs staff and command and control element. Once in-theater for war or a contingency, the regionally aligned CA battalion would be attached to the combatant command and under operational control of the commander of the Army Special Operations Command as directed by the combatant command. For administration and service support, the unit would be garrisoned by the Army theater component. This institutionalized relationship would be priceless.

The role of the Active Component CA brigade should be limited to that of force provider and trainer only. It is difficult to fathom how this brigade, as proposed by the U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command, could seriously stay in meaningful contact with five combatant commands while training and maintaining the



Active Component battalions, which should be their primary focus.

Basing in-theater is not discussed in current plans for transformation. Habitual, mutually supportive relationships simply cannot be maintained from North Carolina. The idea of stationing all five battalions at Fort Bragg is senseless if their purpose is to support the geographic combatant commands; each battalion should be garrisoned near its respective command. The USPACOM battalion, for instance, should be in Hawaii. Getting the battalions away from Fort Bragg would allow them to maintain an unparalleled relationship with the commands. The first step now should be to move the 96<sup>th</sup> and 97<sup>th</sup> Battalions' companies in the next 24 to 36 months to bases close to their geographic combatant command and start building from there.

The stationing and assignment of an Active Component civil affairs battalion with each command would have great benefits for the theater commander. With 20 civil affairs teams and 5 civil-military operations centers per company, the regional combatant command could place 5 or more civil affairs teams downrange quarterly in target countries. These teams could monitor and execute humanitarian assistance projects with the host nation and ensure that host-nation forces are trained and monies are properly spent. This synchronized joint and combined effort maximizes resources and contributes to changing population attitudes in ongoing insurgencies. Over time it should prove to targeted populations that the United States is not only friendly but also genuinely interested in their welfare.

Long-term repetitive involvement of the same companies and Soldiers with the host nation will build lasting relationships and trust that we currently do not have the luxury to cultivate. This is also true of the interagency process. The U.S. Agency for International Development, for instance, is the biggest player the non-DOD U.S. Government has in counterinsurgency. Its spending dwarfs any of the humanitarian assistance programs of the geographic combatant commands. Too often, however, military humanitarian assistance projects are not synchronized or linked with anything that USAID and host-nation agencies are doing. Theater civil affairs Soldiers could and would make this synchronization a reality.

To be effective, the Reserve civil affairs force structure needs reengineering. It is unrealistic to expand this force when the Army



Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (Bart A. Bauer)

Civil affairs Soldier speaks with Iraqi civilians through interpreter

Reserve had problems filling the units it had before the war on terror began. Rarely was a CA battalion filled to more than 70 percent strength, and of that, only 50 to 75 percent was qualified to deploy. The expanded force of 28 battalions should be cut back to 20 or fewer, and the remaining battalions should reflect the units that have had high unit strengths and no problems filling positions.

Civil affairs battalions in remote rural areas should be disbanded and moved to population centers to recruit the diverse peoples who speak the languages that are so needed in the field. Units that have failed should fold their colors to free up slots for other units and the Active Component. To assist in filling out the new Active battalions' quality Reserve Component, NCOs and junior officers should be drawn into Active duty with incentives. The 20 Reserve battalions should be apportioned to provide surge capability and continual reinforcement capability to the combatant commander. In addition, the U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command should be eliminated and turned into a training center and school for all things related to civil affairs and civil-military operations. This should eliminate another bureaucratic level in the chain of command and facilitate the relationship between civil affairs battalions and their combatant commands.

Reserve civil affairs units should be assigned to the U.S. Army Reserve Command, where they could be manned, trained, and equipped like all other Army Reserve units. The assignment of CA Reserve forces under U.S. Special Operations Command never truly

worked and is the direct contributor to the fraying of this fine force. Current U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command expansion plans for the Active Component units take us into the middle of the next decade. That is far too slow to meet current and emerging needs that might arise if the United States continues nationbuilding. An interim solution should call for basing the 95<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Brigade's respective companies with their combatant commands now and assigning the Reserve Component civil affairs command with all subordinate units who, in turn, report directly to the theater army to support the combatant command. If current trends continue, the Reserve civil affairs force will shatter and the Active Component expansion will proceed too slowly to be effective in the midterm. **JFQ**

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Donna Miles, "Civil Affairs Mission Continues to Grow in Iraq, Afghanistan," Armed Forces Press Service, April 29, 2004, 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Kimmy, "Transforming Civil Affairs," *Army* 55, no. 3 (March 2005).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Sandra I. Erwin, "Civil Affairs: As Demands for Nation-Building Troops Soar, Leaders Ponder Reorganization," *National Defense* 39 (May 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Ritchie Moore and Mike Warmack, "Civil Affairs (CA) Transformation," presentation to the Joint Special Operations University's Joint Civil-Military Operations Course, March 24, 2005.