

Uganda Trip-Story told by Will



I am glad to be home from Uganda, below are the details about my trip.

During October, I was deployed to Uganda on a training exercise for the U.S. Army Reserve. As part of a larger multinational military exercise for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, our unit's main function was the movement of personnel and equipment over a long distance. In this column, I want to share a little bit of what my deployment was like.

Our trip began when we left Kansas City International Airport at 11:30 a.m. on Oct. 4. The next day, we arrived in Uganda around 7:30 p.m. after about a 25-hour trip with many long delays and through multiple time zones. Upon arrival we went through customs, which was fortunately no big deal. Officials stamped my passport and on I went to catch a bus to the hotel. This was the first time that I was able to stay in a hotel when deployed. While not four-star, it beat sleeping on a cot in a tent with all the mosquitoes and monkeys...yes, monkeys!

The next day we were briefed and just got our feet under us. The following day we went to the airfield to set up shop. Setting up was a big job, especially because this was the first time our unit had been involved in this type of deployment. Over the next week, we prepared to kick off the main effort.

We were to move personnel and equipment from Entebbe to Kitgum, both Ugandan cities. That distance is over a ten-hour trip by truck or less than two hours by a Chinook helicopter. Obviously, Chinook air was the primary mode of travel. On our first trip to Kitgum, we were planning to certify a refueling point, which could not be completed until the proper equipment arrived. This pretty much shut down air operations for the next two days.

When air operations resumed, I flew north to Kitgum. Every afternoon we dealt with pop-up rain showers, which make flying at that time challenging. On our way back to Entebbe, we saw a huge storm off to our west. Uganda is a pretty country from the air, although I would like to have seen more wildlife.

However, some wildlife in Uganda can be quite threatening. Some of the soldiers found a cobra near our hotel, and they saw a black mamba and a puff adder in Kitgum. The puff adder is the most deadly snake in Uganda; it's no wonder the natives are hesitant to deal with the 5-inch-round creature. The snakes gave some meaning to our being allowed hazardous duty in this region!

As part of the larger exercise and in concert with the Ugandans, an Army engineering group rebuilt the cafeteria in a local school, and a group of U.S. military doctors and dentists helped to provide medical and dental care to more than 11,000 Uganda citizens. More information on this mission, named Natural Fire 10, is available at the Africa Command website, www.africom.mil.

We also provided some "impromptu" assistance when we could. In the hotel, one of our waiters told us that he makes about \$150 a month. He was given a plot of land to build a house on, but it was going to take him two years to earn the money to complete his home. So we took up a collection in our unit and passed some bottles around the Chinook when bringing soldiers back to Entebbe. We were able to collect over \$500 to help him out.

As the Battle Captain, I spent most of my time in the Joint Operations Center, where we track all activities and, if an emergency happens, control all the resources. I was there as an expert on the Chinook helicopter. We had two emergencies. In one a dental assistant was accidentally stuck with a used needle. In the other, a Ugandan soldier was working on a school and a board fell on his head. Both patients were evacuated by Chinook. The Ugandan soldier would have likely died if we had not taken him to the hospital.

About seven days before coming home, we switched our focus to moving everything out of the field. While that created some confusion, the job was accomplished. The local people seemed very thankful for the work our soldiers did on the school and for all of the medical assistance. I believe we built good will with the other five countries involved in the effort.

Being a U.S. soldier offers many opportunities. We accomplished our training mission, and we were also able to help the people of our host country. It was an experience I'll always value.

Please feel free to contact me at anytime if I can be of assistance to you.

