

Engineers in Haiti – Getting Things Done

In September 1993, the United Nations authorized United Nations Mission in Haiti (UNMIH) with the mandate to assist in modernizing the armed forces of Haiti and establishing a new police force. In July 1994, the mandate was expanded to include assisting the Haitian Government in sustaining the secure and stable environment, professionalizing the Haitian armed forces, creating a separate police force, and assisting in establishing an environment conducive to free and fair elections.



Rehabilitation of L'École St-Val-Rey

In March 1995, approximately 500 Canadian Forces personnel deployed to Haiti under the task force name Canadian Contingent United Nations Mission in Haiti (CCUNMIH). They were tasked with the provision of logistical and construction support to the overall UNMIH operations. The Canadian contingent included aviation, engineering, transportation and administrative support personnel from across the country, primarily from a mixture of Air Command units and formations. The Canadian Airfield Engineering Squadron (Haiti) deployed as part of Operation PIVOT.

The engineer contingent was joined by 157 engineers from the US Army Corps of Engineers to form the Canadian-American (Can-Am) Engineer Battalion. This unit included a detachment from 1 Construction Engineer Unit and was headquarters in Port-au-Prince. The main task of the Can-Am battalion was to provide the construction, maintenance and tear-down of UN base camps throughout Haiti. In addition, they carried out other engineer tasks in support of the mission and performed many humanitarian deeds.

The base camps consisted of prefabricated trailers for kitchen and ablutions facilities, water and POL storage using inflatable bladders, and US Army tents with tent flooring for sleeping accommodation. Other tasks included the construction of ammunition storage, a bridge on a main supply route. The engineers also responded to a number of emergency situations such as fighting fires in Port-au-Prince and helping restore order in a prison riot. The joint operation proceeded very well but was handicapped by the slow delivery of stores through the UN supply chain.

The delay in securing supplies meant the engineers had time to carry out humanitarian tasks in the local area. On 24 Sept 1995, they were tasked with the restoration of the annex of L'École St-Val-Rey in Gonaives. The structure was of concrete block construction on a concrete slab

foundation with a corrugated metal roof over timber trusses. It measured about 125 feet long by 20 feet in width.

The building had fallen into disrepair and, before any work could be done, it had to be cleaned up. The location had been used as a garbage dump and public washroom. The school yard was contaminated by several sewers and could best be described as a swamp. The work proceeded in temperatures that reached 140 degrees F and was complicated by the local labour conditions. The site and equipment had to be guarded to prevent looting and the labourers proved somewhat erratic in their work habits.

The project was very gratifying for all involved. Local tradesmen benefited from learning construction techniques that were new to them. The military fire fighters were involved by providing first aid treatment for many of the local children. For the personnel of the flight it provided valuable experience working under somewhat primitive conditions and they felt that they had been of assistance to the local population.

On 24 Oct 1995, the Minister of National Defence, David Collenette, formally opened the building. In his address, MGen J.W. Kinzer (US Army), the force commander, made the comment: "Thank God for the Engineers - they're the only ones who get things done".