
Case Number 2107.0

Mission in Flux: Michigan National Guard in Liberia

By September 2014, the deadly Ebola virus had sickened nearly 4,500 in the West African countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, and killed almost half the stricken. The local governments and their public health systems were overwhelmed. On September 16, US President Barack Obama made an unprecedented commitment: to send thousands of US military to Liberia to help contain the outbreak. Never before had American troops deployed to battle a disease. They would participate in Operation United Assistance (OUA).

At the peak, nearly 3,000 troops from the 101st Airborne (Army) served in Liberia. The soldiers built health facilities, trained Liberian healthcare workers and provided transportation. In November 2014, the Pentagon announced that in the spring, 1,200 National Guard troops from six states would rotate in to replace the active duty soldiers.

But by January 2015, Ebola was on the wane in Liberia and the Pentagon rescinded the National Guard call-up; it also announced that the 101st would pull out. That, however, raised a question: what should be the enduring US commitment to Liberia? The White House wanted to demonstrate to Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the international community that the US remained engaged.

Few in Washington knew much about a Marine-led, five-year program in Liberia called Operation Onward Liberty (OOL), created in 2010 to mentor the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). Under a long-planned transition, the Marines in December 2014 had handed off responsibility for OOL to a small contingent of soldiers from the Michigan National Guard (MING), led by Colonel Stephen Potter.

But as members of the National Security Council (NSC) learned more about OOL, they liked the program. After high-level deliberations, the NSC in early February 2015 anointed an expanded OOL as half of the longer-term US presence in Liberia. A unit of Michigan National Guard engineers plus several specialists would triple the size of the original OOL group. An Army chemical warfare brigade, charged with closing out Operation United Assistance, would constitute the other half. Within weeks of arrival, therefore, the role of the Michigan group changed dramatically.

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Meanwhile, OOL was working with AFL on a domestic emergency response exercise for mid-April. In an attempt to repair relations between the army and police damaged during a riot in the West Point slum the previous summer, AFL planned to hold the exercise jointly with the national police. So Potter and his deputy, Lieutenant Colonel Ravindra Wagh, were taken aback when on February 25 they were notified that the Army would not send Michigan National Guard engineers as requested, but instead an infantry platoon. Infantry knew how to shoot, not how to build. Moreover, they were likely to distract AFL from the police-army exercise. Potter knew he could not get the order reversed. Instead, as the officer in charge of OOL, he would have to come up with a creative way of making good use of the infantry while promoting the emergency response exercise and the wider goals of OUA.

Ebola Outbreak

Ebola emerged in Liberia in late March 2014. It had started in neighboring Guinea, spread to Liberia, and then to Sierra Leone. The contagious disease, transmitted through bodily fluids, caused fever, vomiting, diarrhea, hemorrhaging and, in about half the cases, death. In mid-June 2014, the global non-governmental organization (NGO) *Médicins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders) urgently warned that Ebola in West Africa was “out of control.”¹

Ebola caught the World Health Organization (WHO)—charged with coordinating a global response to infectious diseases—off guard. By its own admission, the WHO was slow to recognize the extent of the outbreak and the threat it posed.² Ebola had never before been seen in densely populated urban areas of West Africa, where it spread widely and rapidly. Only on August 8 did the WHO declare the outbreak “a public health emergency of international concern,” its top level of threat. By then, 800 in the three affected countries had died, including many health workers. Other nations imposed travel and trade restrictions, making it difficult to get aid workers and supplies to the region.

Liberia struggled to cope with the emergency. Its public health infrastructure, already fragile, was overwhelmed. Patients besieged overcrowded hospitals and clinics; many of those turned away died outside the doors. As the rainy season set in, rough roads to rural areas became impassable. Hazmat suits and protective equipment were in short supply even for health workers, much less for private individuals nursing family members at home. Ordinary Liberians knew little about Ebola or why so many were dying. It took time for the government to educate the public that Ebola could spread just from touching patients. It warned that corpses should be cremated, not buried as traditionally done.

West Point. On July 30, 2014, in an attempt to contain transmission, the Liberian government closed schools and placed most government workers on leave. On Saturday, August 15, violence erupted in Liberia’s capital, Monrovia. Protesters in its West Point slum, suspicious that a newly established isolation ward posed a threat to

¹ Medecins Sans Frontieres, “Ebola in West Africa: ‘The Epidemic is Out of Control,’” June 23, 2014, available at <http://www.msf.ca/en/article/ebola-west-africa-epidemic-out-control> [accessed August 25, 2017].

² See “WHO leadership statement on the Ebola response and WHO reforms,” April 16, 2015, <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola/joint-statement-ebola/en/>.

local residents, attacked the facility. President Johnson Sirleaf responded with a quarantine of West Point and a curfew in parts of the capital. As she explained: “We have been unable to control the spread due to continued denials, cultural burying practices, disregard for the advice of health workers and disrespect for the warnings by the Government.”³ The president sent an AFL detachment to West Point to erect barriers and ordered the soldiers to enforce the quarantine. On August 20, rioters attempted to break through the military line, and soldiers fired on the crowd, killing a 16-year old boy.

In response to public outrage, President Johnson Sirleaf lifted the quarantine after 10 days. But the shooting attracted international coverage. It also fostered distrust of the military, not only among ordinary citizens but within the National Police, who blamed the army for overreacting and letting matters spiral out of control.

The disease marched on. On September 3, senior United Nations leaders observed that even a comprehensive global response could hope to halt the outbreak only in six to nine months, and would cost an estimated \$600 million.⁴ Keiji Fukuda, WHO assistant director-general for global health security, said on return from a trip to West Africa that “we don’t have enough health workers, doctors, nurses, drivers, and contact tracers.”⁵ Meanwhile, Ebola had spread to Nigeria, Senegal and the Congo. On September 7, the WHO reported 4,366 confirmed and suspected cases, with 2,218 deaths. Liberia alone had 2,081 cases, and 1,137 fatalities; the number of Ebola cases in Liberia had increased 68 percent in just three weeks.⁶

On September 23, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warned that the number of Ebola cases in West Africa could reach 1.4 million by January 2015—only four months away.⁷ On September 30, a Liberian recently arrived in Dallas was diagnosed with Ebola; he died on October 8—the first individual to die of Ebola on US soil. By then, the US government was well advanced in its response to Ebola, both domestically and in West Africa.

Obama Sends US Military

The US had a special relationship with Liberia, settled in the mid-1800s by freed US slaves. Washington had started in early August to mobilize an Ebola response. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) and

³ “Liberia: Sirleaf Imposes Curfew Following Attack on Ebola Center,” AllAfrica, August 18, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201408191576.html>. Liberians traditionally buried their dead; the government had mandated cremation, but the change was slow to take hold.

⁴ WHO press release, “UN senior leaders outline needs for global Ebola response,” September 3, 2014, www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/ebola-response-needs/en/.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cheryl Pellerin, “Obama to Announce Africom Joint Force Command HQ in Liberia,” *DoD News*, September 16, 2014, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=123171>. Also Helene Cooper, “Liberian President Pleads with Obama for Assistance in Combating Ebola,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/13/world/africa/liberian-president-pleads-with-obama-for-assistance-in-combating-ebola.html>.

⁷ Denise Grady, “Ebola Cases Could Reach 1.4 million in 4 months,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/24/health/ebola-cases-could-reach-14-million-in-4-months-cdc-estimates.html?_r=0.

the CDC were first on the ground, dispatching a disaster response team and medical experts.⁸ Separately, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel on August 5 created an internal task force on Ebola. The US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (AMRIID) already had a few personnel in Liberia, who quickly set up an Ebola diagnostic lab.⁹ On August 17, CDC staff helped *Médicins Sans Frontières* open the first Ebola Treatment Unit (ETU) in Liberia.¹⁰ An ETU served two crucial purposes: it segregated patients from the general population, and provided specialized care.

On September 7, President Barack Obama declared Ebola a US national security priority, and said Washington must lead an international effort to contain it.¹¹ He announced that the US military would set up a 25-bed facility in the capital, Monrovia, to treat infected health workers. But Liberia hoped for more. On September 9, President Johnson Sirleaf wrote a letter to Obama asking for help: “I am being honest with you when I say that at this rate, we will never break the transmission chain and the virus will overwhelm us.”¹² She asked for a 100-bed Ebola hospital in Monrovia, plus 1,500 additional beds across the country. The WHO and the United Nations also appealed to the US to step up.

CDC visit. President Obama responded on September 16 during a visit to the CDC: he would send troops to Liberia to support the ongoing USAID-led response. “If the outbreak is not stopped now, we could be looking at hundreds of thousands of people infected, with profound political and economic and security implications for all of us,” he said. “The reality is that this epidemic is going to get worse before it gets better.”¹³ The soldiers would deliver and distribute construction equipment and medical supplies, build Ebola treatment centers, and train health workers.

Just three days later, on September 19, the United Nations created the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), the first-ever UN public health mission.¹⁴ It echoed Obama’s words when, on September 25, it adopted Resolution 2177 declaring Ebola a threat to international peace and security. Several nations combined

⁸ Eventually, the US effort would include additional elements from the State Department, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Defense, as well as other agencies such as the US Forest Service. International partners besides the WHO were the World Food Program, and UNICEF, while NGOs International Medical Corps and Global Communities also sent teams.

⁹ Claudette Roulo, “DOD establishes Ebola task force,” *DoD News*, August 5, 2014, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=122851>.

¹⁰ Cheryl Pellerin, “Obama to Announce Africom Joint Force Command HQ in Liberia.”

¹¹ “Meet the Press” transcript, NBC News, September 7, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meet-press-transcript-september-7-2014-n197866>.

¹² Helene Cooper, “Liberian President Pleads with Obama for Assistance in Combating Ebola,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/13/world/africa/liberian-president-pleads-with-obama-for-assistance-in-combating-ebola.html?_r=0.

¹³ Angela Greiling Keane and Alex Wayne, “Obama Calls Ebola Outbreak Global Security Threat,” *Bloomberg*, September 16, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-09-16/obama-dispatching-military-medical-aid-for-ebola-fight>.

¹⁴ For more information, see <http://ebolaresponse.un.org/un-mission-ebola-emergency-response-unmeer>.

to pledge upwards of \$1 billion to the response. Britain took the lead in its former colony of Sierra Leone, while France took charge in Guinea.

Responsibility for the US military effort fell to US Africa Command (AFRICOM)—the geographic combatant command responsible for Africa and headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany—and to US Army Africa (USARAF) based in Vicenza, Italy.¹⁵ As Obama spoke at the CDC, USARAF chief Major General Darryl A. Williams landed in Monrovia with a 60-person advance team to assess the situation and set up a Joint Operations Area (JOA). US soldiers, the Department of Defense (DoD) hastened to assure the public, would be in minimal danger as they would be nowhere near Ebola patients. As DoD spokesman Navy Rear Admiral John Kirby explained: “They’re not doctors, they’re not nurses. They’re not trained for that and not equipped for that. That’s not part of the mission. They will be kept in locations where they can do their jobs without coming into contact with patients.”¹⁶

USARAF led the military response until October 25, when Major General Gary Volesky, commander of the Army’s 101st Airborne Division, took over what by then was dubbed Operation United Assistance. Plans were to send up to 4,000 soldiers from the 101st and deploy them in six-month rotations for at least 18 months, or however long it took to bring Ebola under control.

By mid-November, 2014, the 101st had completed its first ETU in Tubmanburg, and the promised 25-bed hospital for healthcare workers opened near the airport in Monrovia. Soldiers had airlifted thousands of protective suits and other supplies to remote areas. They had set up nine mobile laboratories to test blood samples for Ebola.¹⁷ Training for local health workers had started. USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah called it “the largest US response to a global health crisis in history.”¹⁸

Guard will go. Yet the need remained great—by November 12, some 12,000 people worldwide had been infected and 5,000 had died.¹⁹ In Guinea, cases were doubling every 40 days. So on November 18, Secretary of Defense Hagel signed an order authorizing the involuntary mobilization of 1,200 members of the Army National

¹⁵ The Pentagon divided the world into regions. For example, CENTCOM had charge of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt and the horn of Africa. NORTHCOM was the United States. Each geographic combatant command had service component commands (Army, Navy, Marines etc.) to provide fighting forces as needed.

¹⁶ Cheryl Pellerin, “Military Response Begins as Troops, Equipment Reach Liberia,” DoD News, September 19, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/603284/military-response-begins-as-troops-equipment-reach-liberia>. While US soldiers did not interact with Ebola patients, Australia refused to dispatch even doctors or nurses to the region for fear of contagion. Michael Safi, “Ebola crisis: Australia won’t send doctors into harm’s way, says Abbott,” *The Guardian*, October 12, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/12/ebola-crisis-australia-wont-send-doctors-into-harms-way-abbott>.

¹⁷ Cheryl Pellerin and David Vergun, “Volesky: Fewer Soldiers will deploy to West Africa than planned,” *Army News Service*, November 14, 2014, https://www.army.mil/article/138272/Volesky_Fewer_Soldiers_will_deploy_to_West_Africa_than_planned

¹⁸ Cheryl Pellerin and David Vergun, “Volesky: Fewer Soldiers will deploy to West Africa than planned.”

¹⁹ Deputy Secretary of State Heather Higginbottom, testimony to US Senate Appropriations Committee, November 12, 2014, <http://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/hearings/Deputy%20Secretary%20Higginbottom%20statement%20FINAL.pdf>.

Guard from Minnesota, Ohio, California, Texas, Iowa and Kansas.²⁰ In spring 2015, the Guard would replace some of the 2,200 101st soldiers already in Liberia. Members of the Kentucky National Guard were already in Senegal, where since early October they had built a forward staging base and cargo-processing hub for military aircraft too large to land in Liberia.

But by December, the number of new Ebola cases in Liberia was falling rapidly. From a peak of 300 a week, it was down to 30.²¹ The military announced a reduction in the number of ETUs it would build from 17 to 10.²² The Pentagon began to consider withdrawing the 101st. General Volesky had already announced in mid-November that the troops would be capped at 3,000, instead of the original 4,000.²³ Some had begun to question whether it was any longer necessary for the National Guard to rotate in. If, however, the 101st withdrew and the Guard stood down, a dilemma arose: what force should the US leave in place in Liberia to affirm its ongoing commitment to fight Ebola? The answer emerged slowly and from an unlikely quarter: the Michigan National Guard.

Michigan National Guard & Liberia

Michigan became a state in 1837, but its militia had served the country as early as the War of 1812, and in every major US conflict since, including World Wars I and II. From 1933, the term National Guard meant reserve soldiers who served both state and country: their home state during emergencies, and the nation in military deployments. The National Guard network spanned 54 states and jurisdictions; most of its soldiers served part-time on weekends and in summer, while working a full-time civilian job. The Michigan National Guard (MING) was headed by its adjutant general, who reported to the governor.

State Partnership Program. MING had a history of international involvement. In 1993, the DoD and the State Department jointly created a National Guard State Partnership Program (SPP), intended to pair a state's Guard with the armed forces of a partner country to support defense security and build military, political and economic relationships. Michigan signed up that first year to partner with Latvia, newly independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In 2009, Michigan also adopted Liberia, still recovering from a 14-year civil war that had decimated the population and institutions like the army. Under former Liberian President Charles Taylor, who was deposed as part of the 2003 peace settlement (and later convicted of war crimes), warlords had filled the vacuum left when

²⁰ "Guard, Reserve Soldiers to Mobilize for Ebola Relief," *Army News*, November 18, 2014. President Obama had authorized the call-up in mid-October. Some 850 members of the Army Reserve were also put on notice.

²¹ Kevin Sieff, "US-built Ebola treatment centers in Liberia are nearly empty as outbreak fades," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/us-built-ebola-treatment-centers-in-liberia-are-nearly-empty-as-disease-fades/2015/01/18/9acc3e2c-9b52-11e4-86a3-1b56f64925f6_story.html.

²² White House, "FACT SHEET: Update on the Ebola Response," December 2, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/02/fact-sheet-update-ebola-response>. In the end, the Army built seven ETUs.

²³ Cheryl Pellerin and David Vergun, "Volesky: Fewer Soldiers will deploy to West Africa than planned."

the army disintegrated. “Any criminal could put on a pair of camis and rape, rob and pillage. We were trying to break that cycle,” said a US Marine officer who worked in Liberia.²⁴

SPP paid for the Michigan National Guard to place a bilateral affairs officer (BAO) at the US Embassy in Monrovia. The BAO deployed for a year at a time, reported to the embassy’s defense attaché and was part of the embassy Office of Security Cooperation. The BAO handled arrangements for small SPP teams from Michigan to run training sessions for the AFL on subjects such as rule of law, engineering and civil defense.

In May 2014, Major David Huber arrived as BAO. “My main job was to coordinate the sharing of information from the state of Michigan with the Armed Forces of Liberia,” clarified Huber.²⁵ It could be challenging to coordinate the goals of the two SPP sponsors, the State Department and DoD. For example, Liberia ranked #5 worldwide on the State Department’s priority list, but was not even in the top 50 for DoD. “We had two separate programs that had to be combined: still meeting the AFRICOM country campaign plans, along with the integrated campaign plan from the State Department,” he noted.

Then Ebola hit. The effect on SPP was swift. “With Ebola, it all stopped,” said Huber. “We had no State Partnership events in Liberia after June. Everything else was cancelled.” Instead, Huber did his best to assist in the Ebola response. When US Army Africa first arrived in September, Huber offered advice; for example, don’t bring heavy vehicles to Liberia. “You’re going to get stuck, and there’s not a road that can handle that,” said Huber. But with the arrival of the 101st in October, SPP as well as the Office of Security Cooperation were sidelined. “They didn’t want our help, they didn’t need our help,” recalled Huber.

Operation Onward Liberty. Separately, as part of the 2003 peace agreement, the US had agreed to help Liberia disband what remained of its existing army and create a new one. From 2005-2009, State Department contractors recruited and vetted a fresh force of 2,000. Once the Armed Forces of Liberia was formed, the departments of Defense and State in 2010 created a joint initiative, Operation Onward Liberty (OOL), to mentor and advise AFL on building a professional army that would be “responsible, operationally capable, respectful of civilian authority and the rule of law, and ... a force for good among the Liberian people.”²⁶

OOL was scheduled to run for five rotations (2010-2014), with smaller contingents each year. Although funded by State, AFRICOM oversaw OOL and the US Marine Corps Forces, Africa (MARFORAF) ran it. The initial OOL force numbered 150. As a joint command, it drew from all branches of the armed forces. The Army contingent from OOL’s inception included the Michigan National Guard, which contributed as many as 20 soldiers a year.

²⁴ From author’s telephone interview with Marine Colonel David Bunn on June 14, 2016. All further quotes from Bunn, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

²⁵ Author’s interview with Major David Huber on June 1, 2016 in Lansing, MI. All further quotes from Huber, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

²⁶ For a pdf describing Operation Onward Liberty, go to: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKewiphY6I7JHOAhXJ6x4KHeH0B3UQFgghMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.africom.mil%2FDoc%2F10032&usg=AFQjCNHqQKqC7JG41FSb2wE6iBmCVGNGA&sig2=c3G8K74TtVfaON_2gDhkg.

In 2013, the Marines began preparations to close OOL as scheduled in 2014. But Liberian President Johnson Sirleaf liked the program and asked that it continue. As she said in late 2012: “We are so thankful for all the sacrifices our Operation Onward Liberty mentors have made to help build our AFL capacity.”²⁷ The US embassy agreed. So the DoD looked for another service to operate OOL.

OOL to MING. General Gregory Vagnais, as Michigan’s adjutant general, was chief of its National Guard. General Vagnais volunteered MING to take over OOL. He argued that MING was ideally situated, thanks to its ongoing contribution to OOL and the existing SPP relationship with Liberia. The Pentagon agreed, and a handoff from the Marines to MING was scheduled for December 2014.

Over the years, OOL numbers had decreased as planned. For the first two years, there were some 60 military personnel. By 2013, they were 45 (including five Michigan National Guard members), and in 2014 they numbered 28. Originally, General Vagnais wanted to send some 50 National Guardsmen, but was persuaded that was too many.²⁸ AFRICOM approved 15. So in mid-June 2014, MING sent out a notice asking for 15 volunteers for the first, year-long, Guard-led OOL mission. One of those who received the call was Colonel Stephen Potter, commander of the 3,000 troops of the 177th Military Police brigade in southeast Michigan.

“Voluntold”

As the summer progressed, Colonel Potter was dismayed by the very low response to the OOL volunteer request. Ebola only complicated the situation. “One, nobody wants to go to Africa and live for a year, and nobody wants to go in the middle of Ebola,” he said.²⁹ In civilian life, Potter ran a business training a wide array of organizations in emergency management; one of his specialties was bioterrorism. He was intrigued by the Liberian OOL opportunity, “the disaster response, public health preparedness component of this... where the military was supporting public health.”

So in late July, he suggested to his boss, Brigadier General Michael White, that White task the 177th with the mission. With such a mandate, Potter could ask or, if necessary, order soldiers in his command to serve. He envisioned six-month rotations for all, including himself. For weeks, Potter heard nothing but, on September 11, 2014, Michigan Adjutant General Vagnais called him: “You are going to Liberia. You are the colonel.” Potter had scarcely three months to assemble, train and deploy a team.

Within days, Potter noticed that his deputy, Lieutenant Colonel Wagh, was also working on OOL, and apparently considered himself part of the mission. “So I guess you’re on it?” Potter questioned. “Yes, sir,” responded Wagh. Potter deeply appreciated Wagh’s commitment. Both men knew what they were getting

²⁷ Major Bryon McGarry, “Liberian President celebrates military members, families,” Defense Video Imagery Distribution System, December 27, 2012, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/99903/liberian-president-celebrates-military-members-families>.

²⁸ From author’s telephone interview with Marine Colonel David Bunn on June 14, 2016. Vagnais visited Liberia in early 2014 to meet US Ambassador Deborah Malac and see for himself what was needed.

²⁹ Author’s interview with Colonel Stephen Potter on June 1, 2016, in Lansing, MI. All further quotes from Potter, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

themselves into; they had served in the Middle East, and understood the burden a lengthy deployment posed, especially to families.

During September and October, the two painstakingly assembled the members of OOL-15, as it was called. Among the skills they wanted: engineering, logistics, tactical training, and medical. A few requirements had changed. First, General Vadnais wanted the members drawn from across the state. Second, he had conferred with the senior US military officer assigned to the Monrovia embassy, Colonel Timothy Mitchell. The two concluded that a six-month tour was too short; by the time troops arrived and learned the job, it would be time to leave. So all would have to commit to a full year's service.

Some individuals volunteered; others were "voluntold," as Potter puts it. The extension to a year had an immediate personal consequence: he could not hold on to his position as brigade commander. Instead, after a formal change of command he became officer in charge of Operation Onward Liberty. By early November, the team of 15 was complete. Only six came from the 177th. A 15th member, a medical doctor, was pulled in from the Mississippi National Guard.³⁰ There were no females because only one volunteered. "My policy was if we had one [female], then we would have to have two," observed Potter. "I had no problem taking females, but I don't want one that is alone, that doesn't have a buddy." In the end, he was pleased with the team composition: "The chemistry was pretty good."

Each team member first had to pass a medical screening. Then from December 1-5, they gathered at the 177th headquarters in Taylor, MI, for a mission orientation run by members of the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group who had served in Liberia or were knowledgeable about OOL. The session was "on the mission, safety, the country, and the culture. It just told us about everything to expect," recalled Potter.

Briefings and Prep

Meanwhile, Potter educated himself about the situation in Liberia via multiple conference calls with the Marines and the US embassy in Monrovia. Among others, he discussed the assignment with Colonel Mitchell, who was Senior US Defense Official/Defense Attaché (SDO/DATT) at the embassy and coordinated security cooperation with the AFL. The SDO/DATT was assigned by the secretary of defense to represent US military interests in-country. His primary responsibilities were to provide information on the host country's military capabilities and intentions, and to oversee the security cooperation relationship and activities with Liberia, including OOL. "I did not have direct, formal control over OOL, but I directed their overall operations and provided guidance to them on what they should and should not do," said Mitchell.³¹

Mitchell had seen up close how challenging it could be for OOL personnel to fulfill their mission. They had to integrate with the SDO/DATT and work within an embassy environment—not common for the military. They also had to develop a mentoring relationship with the AFL leadership, and distinguish the difference between

³⁰ The doctor stayed three months; his replacement came from North Carolina; while a third physician rotated in from New York and stayed until the end of the mission.

³¹ Author's telephone interview with Colonel Timothy Mitchell on June 9, 2016. All further quotes from Mitchell, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

mentoring and training. Mitchell had three assistants, one from the Michigan National Guard. In 2014, that was Bilateral Affairs Officer Huber; Colonel Potter spoke with him often. “He became our conduit to everything that was happening on the ground,” recalled Potter. Wagh and Huber had served together in Iraq, and had a good personal relationship.

Potter also conferred with Marine Colonel David Bunn, the OOL-14 commander, who would formally hand over the operation to MING. Potter learned that with Ebola, the OOL mission focus had shifted from mentoring AFL officers to “advising on how best to integrate with the 101st and support the civil authorities.” Added Potter: “How do you integrate with the police for security patrols and checkpoints? ... How do you plan, execute, and resource the support that’s required for the response?”

OOL-14 had done what it could to contribute during the early days of the Liberian response to Ebola. For example, in August 2014 President Johnson Sirleaf closed borders and put AFL in charge of checkpoints. “OOL was very involved in helping [AFL] with logistics, communications, planning, coordinating for that,” recalled SDO/DATT Mitchell. “We essentially were helping advise the Liberian military on activities that they could do in support of their government, in support of the Ebola response.” Colonel Bunn had also encouraged AFL engineers to design and build the first Liberian ETU as part of the longer-term strategy of rebuilding trust in the military. “We wanted them in the lead,” recalled Bunn. “When they got out of the trucks, they didn’t start robbing people. They started doing stuff right.”

When USARAF and the 101st arrived, Bunn urged the AFL to develop relationships with the American newcomers. “The AFL needs to learn how to relate to another military force,” he told his team. “So we left them alone to interact.” The relationship proved fruitful: among other things, the US Army copied the AFL’s ETU design.

Bunn was impressed by how much the AFL improved during the Ebola crisis. “Ebola was a terrible disease, but from an operational standpoint, it really accelerated the development of the AFL,” he said. “Ebola gave them a chance to really put into effect what they had learned over the last five years.” Among other accomplishments, the AFL successfully deployed six task forces to remote sections of the country to set up checkpoints, monitor the movement of infected individuals, and deliver supplies. “That sounds easy to us,” noted Bunn. “But remember the rainy season was kicking in. That shuts everything down.”

Final prep. In the first week of December 2014, Potter and Wagh flew to Stuttgart to meet with staff from the Marine Corps Forces, Africa. A liaison officer gave them “the who, what, when, where, why of how to be successful,” recalled Wagh.³² In Stuttgart, they took part in a video conference with the OOL-14 team in Liberia, and then traveled on to Vicenza and USARAF to consult with the chief of staff and meet members of the Security Cooperation Division that would oversee their mission. They returned home for a couple of days with family before reporting for the mission.

Mobilization Day was December 12. All 15 team members traveled to Fort Bliss, Texas, for six days of orientation. They were given Tier Two training, designed for those not dealing with Ebola patients directly. Much

³² Author’s telephone interview with Lieutenant Colonel Ravindra Wagh on June 14, 2016. All further quotes from Wagh, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

of it was online. They learned about the Ebola threat, how to guard against the disease (take temperature twice daily, wash hands etc.), and how to use personal protective equipment such as masks, suits and gloves. All were inoculated against yellow fever and issued malaria pills.

By December 19, the team was ready to go. However, as a very small group it did not qualify for military air transport, and commercial flights to Liberia were difficult to obtain because all but one airline had suspended service. Only Potter, Wagh, and four others were able to secure tickets before Christmas; they arrived in Monrovia on Tuesday, December 23, 2014.

Into the Fire

The rest of the Michigan National Guard members arrived on Friday, January 2. That meant the handover from the Marines to MING happened in two stages. “It was not ideal,” noted Potter. Still, the first group was able to debrief with the Marines during the very quiet week between Christmas and New Year’s, when Liberia essentially shut down. Marine Colonel Bunn, recalled Wagh, assured the new arrivals that “we’re not leaving until you guys are 100 percent comfortable that you can assume this mission, you understand the operating environment and the things that Ebola has brought, and our role with the Armed Forces of Liberia.”

OOL-15 was housed at EBK Barracks, the main base for AFL soldiers and their families. A section reserved for US mentors had its own water system, power and so forth. EBK was close to the airport; a second base was Barclay Training Center (BTC) in downtown Monrovia—which the 101st Airborne command used as headquarters. As the newcomers quickly discovered, “the big threat in Liberia at the time quite frankly was just traffic, terrible driving conditions,” remembered Wagh, who commuted between the two bases. The second largest threat was malaria; the local version was aggressive and often fatal if not detected and treated immediately. Wagh put in place a routine: every morning each OOL member signed off after taking a malaria pill.

In the first days, each OOL-15 member met with the AFL officers he would be mentoring. “My initial guidance to the team was that you have nothing to do in the first month but meet your person and gain their trust, learn about their job, their family, their life and really understand their environment,” said Potter. Wagh concurred: “It’s going to take you 90 days just to get enough rapport and trust built up where the person feels like sharing things with you, and you can start getting some positive momentum.”

The last of the Marines left Liberia on January 15; OOL was officially in Michigan National Guard hands. Even with the complication of Ebola, recalled Potter, the mission seemed fairly straightforward: “coach the [Liberian] army in working with civil authorities in a disaster scenario.” US Embassy Defense Attaché Mitchell added, “We needed to do more training with the Liberian military as opposed to mentorship... The Michigan National Guard’s role was never Ebola. It was always training the host nation military. Now, the host nation military was focused on Ebola, so we transitioned as much as we could.”

But as Potter soon learned, the OOL-15 mission would be anything but straightforward.

What US Presence Next?

While the Michigan National Guard and the Marines worked on the transfer of OOL responsibilities, the US government in December 2014 had concluded that it was time to withdraw the 101st Airborne. The force had accomplished its mission of turning the tide against Ebola; there seemed little more that soldiers could do. As Defense Attaché Mitchell recalled: “On the ground at the embassy, it became very clear that we had way more people than we needed.” But if the 101st withdrew, what about the scheduled springtime deployment of the National Guard? The Pentagon argued that the Guard was no longer necessary. On Sunday, January 4, the National Security Council (NSC) agreed that “assistance [to Liberia] had reached its intended milestones and that a full redeployment... would be unnecessary.”³³

But the Pentagon, State Department and NSC disagreed on what the US should leave behind once the 101st departed. Ambassador Steven Browning in December took over the job of State Department Ebola coordinator. As he recalled: “There was concern by the folks in Washington [NSC] that the Liberians would be devastated if the Americans pulled out. The State Department folks and our embassy in Monrovia were saying no, they don’t care.”³⁴ The NSC, however, concluded that the US had to leave in place a credible presence to reassure both the international community and Liberia of America’s continued commitment. An email from the Office of the Secretary of Defense summarized the NSC consensus at the January 4 meeting:

Principals emphasize that public and diplomatic messaging will be key to ensure that OUA transition does not cause loss of confidence among international actors in the NGO community, and that the DoD transition does not foster the misimpression that the work of the Liberian government and people to end Ebola outbreak is finished.³⁵

So the Pentagon and its partner agencies, both in Washington and Liberia, looked at the options. In Monrovia, a series of conversations included US Ambassador Deborah Malac, Defense Attaché Mitchell, 101st Operations Officer Colonel Brandon Robbins, AFRICOM Director of Operations Major General Bryan Watson—and, somewhat to his surprise, Colonel Potter from OOL-15.³⁶ “We had only been in-country three weeks when we started working these courses of action for what was to remain,” recalled Potter. The question, recalled Lieutenant Colonel Wagh, was “what does the post-101st Joint Forces Command footprint look like? Is it another 101st package, is it a smaller package, or does it all go away?”

³³ From an Office of the Secretary of Defense email sent to US military representatives in Monrovia; the text of the email was read to the case author. The DoD on January 23 made public the decision to cancel the Guard. “The decision has now been made that the ongoing work of Operation United Assistance does not require several National Guard units that were initially considered for deployment,” said a military spokesman. “We are confident that we can meet the continuing needs of this mission without activating these reserves.” (Cheryl Pellerin, “DoD Decides Against Sending Four National Guard Units to West Africa,” *DoD News*, January 23, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/603971/dod-decides-against-sending-four-national-guard-units-to-west-africa>.)

³⁴ Author’s telephone interview with Ambassador Steven Browning on June 30, 2016. All further quotes from Browning, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

³⁵ From an OSD email sent to the US military representatives in Monrovia.

³⁶ Happily, Potter and Robbins had served together years earlier in the US. It made for an easy rapport.

The 101st leadership advised that from a tactical standpoint, the US could shut down the operation entirely, or leave in place a token group of 20 or so. But the NSC considered that inadequate. “They said that’s not going to work,” recalled Potter, and that “it would seem politically too abrupt.” Wagh added that the message from Washington was withdrawal “would be a very, very bad optic for Liberia, for the rest of the world. And you know: Joe Citizen in the US doesn’t want to see the United States just pull out and leave this country, which is experiencing a pandemic, just leave it high and dry.”

OOL option. The challenge became to find a solution that would be both politically acceptable and militarily viable. From the discussions so far, Potter had realized that while AFRICOM knew about OOL, “our mission was not well known within the broader national security apparatus.” So he set out to advertise OOL and its capabilities.

Lieutenant Colonel Wagh remembered that MING, under the State Partnership Program, had long had a plan to bring an engineering platoon from Michigan to Liberia for two weeks at a stretch as part of a Security Cooperation Opportunity Unit Training (SCOUT) program. Wagh offered a suggestion: why not augment OOL-15 by activating the SCOUT program? That could mean an extra 30-plus US troops, Michigan engineers who would work alongside AFL forces to build needed roads or structures. In addition, Michigan could send another 5-10 mentors in areas where there were gaps, such as logistics or infrastructure planning. This enhanced OOL could become the approved replacement for the 101st.

Wagh’s idea caught fire. “We were all talking at once,” recalled Colonel Robbins of the 101st.³⁷ He thought the idea made sense, as did Ambassador Malac and the embassy’s Office of Security Cooperation. Colonel Robbins prepared a discussion paper for a teleconference on January 19 that included AFRICOM, and Operation United Assistance commander General Volesky. Among the options listed: leave a military presence in Liberia, enhance capacity-building with the AFL—and increase the OOL footprint.

AFRICOM was similarly intrigued, recalled Robbins, asking “what could they attach to OOL of short duration, bringing in other specialists that could not only be advisers to the defense forces but also have the capacity to facilitate communications, information sharing, etc. between the State Department and AFRICOM?” They, too, endorsed the concept, and General Volesky in turn briefed the idea to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, who forwarded it to the NSC.

The plan by then had grown more detailed: assign an OOL colonel to head a command team with intelligence, engineering, communications and sustainability responsibilities. A 30-person MING engineering platoon would be augmented by six specialists: a personnel officer, three logistics officers, a military police officer and an infrastructure expert. Essentially, said Potter, “we offered to become the long-term, enduring commitment of the Department of Defense to Liberia.”

Michigan Adjutant General Vadnais also lent the scheme his full support, and tried to expand it even further. On January 22, he approached USARAF commander General Williams to propose that MING manage the entire transition. He suggested that the transitional force could include not only the OOL force, but some of the Latvian

³⁷ Author’s telephone interview with Colonel Brandon Robbins on June 15, 2016. All further quotes from Robbins, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

troops MING had trained under the State Partnership Program, making it a groundbreaking three-state initiative (Michigan/Latvia/Liberia).

But that suggestion did not fly. Instead, recalled Potter, the concept of an OOL “surge,” as they were calling it, “started to gain legs with AFRICOM, and there started to become real interest in our mission from the Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the secretary of defense, and even the national security advisor, Susan Rice.” “We started seeing traffic from Susan Rice,” added Wagh. “These are not people that I’m typically dealing with at my level. POTUS [President Obama] was being briefed on this group of guys in Liberia who could pick up something after the 101st left. So that gave us all some perspective on the importance of what we did.”

However, while the NSC had no objection to expanding OOL, it also wanted an active-duty military presence. On January 29, National Security Adviser Rice asked the 101st to consider bringing in a modular, residual unit for 90-120 days to formally wrap up OUA. The 101st had already been in talks about such an option with the 48th Chemical Brigade of the 20th Chemical, Nuclear, Biological, Radiological and Explosives (CNBRE) command, based in Fort Hood, Texas.

The White House was pressing for a solution, not least because President Johnson Sirleaf was scheduled to meet on February 27 in Washington with both President Obama and the new secretary of defense, Ashton Carter. The agenda would include what the US planned for Liberia after the 101st left.

By February 5, a final plan was close. The existing OOL team of 15 would be augmented by 30 National Guard engineers from Michigan, plus six extra advisors. In addition, some 40 members of the 48th Chemical Brigade would wind up the military mission: close out contracts, hand over certain equipment to Liberia and arrange for transport of other items back to the US. The 101st deputy commander would remain behind to lead the transition. Combined, nearly 100 US troops would stay in Liberia.

OUA concludes. On February 11, 2015, President Obama announced that the 101st Airborne was coming home as part of a transition from military to civilian leadership in the global anti-Ebola fight. US troops, he reminded the world, had built ETUs and trained hundreds of healthcare workers. The incidence of new Ebola cases had shrunk by 80 percent since the fall. The soldiers were returning, he emphasized, “not because the job is done, but because they were so effective in setting up the infrastructure that we are now equipped to deal with the job that needs to be done in West Africa, not only with a broader, international coalition, but also with folks who have been trained who are from the countries that were most at risk.”³⁸

Obama added that the US would leave in place 100 troops to “support the ongoing response.” Half would come from the Michigan National Guard and OOL. Noted Potter: “We went from being some little mentor team to, basically, the National Security Council’s mission to Liberia.” It was a heady development. “It’s rare that you get to work at the strategic level here in the state of Michigan. You’re just not exposed to it,” he commented.

³⁸ Remarks by the President on America's Leadership in the Ebola Fight, February 11, 2015. See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/remarks-president-americas-leadership-ebola-fight>.

Surprise Announcement

As OOL-15 adjusted to its new role, it continued its work with the AFL. After the major annual celebration on February 11 of Armed Forces Day, the army was ready to resume regular training. OOL and AFL discussed a range of goals: create a 2015 training plan, better integrate with the Liberian National Police, and implement a host of emergency response and disaster preparedness steps.

Joint exercise. In mid-February, AFL Brigade Commander Prince Johnson told Colonel Potter he wanted to hold a domestic response training exercise to include the police, a step that might help repair relations damaged by the West Point disturbances the previous August. Potter was enthusiastic, and on February 17 arranged for Johnson to brief a US police training team (contracted to the State Department and based at the embassy).

The US trainers were initially skeptical, but Commander Johnson proved persuasive and the embassy lent its support to a joint AFL-police training exercise, tentatively scheduled for April 10-15. The emphasis would be on developing common protocols. The problems at West Point, believed Potter, stemmed from lack of understanding. He elaborated: "They didn't understand each other's capabilities. They didn't have good rules for how to use the army with the police. They didn't have strong command and control of synchronized systems."

Meanwhile, Potter was awaiting word on the arrival of the SCOUT engineer platoon from Michigan to start work with the AFL on needed infrastructure projects such as sanitation facilities, equipment storage sheds and military base upgrades.

RAF troops. But on February 25, 2015 he heard via email that USARAF had intervened. Instead of sending Michigan National Guard troops to augment OOL, USARAF was sending 30 members of the 4th Brigade of the 1st Armored Division, Infantry. The 4th Brigade, based in Texas, was part of a Regionally Aligned Force (RAF), troops expected to have basic familiarity with the culture and language of their geographic specialty area—in this case, Africa. The announcement came as a surprise to Potter. "Engineers build things, infantrymen kill people," he observed tersely. A major at the US embassy told Potter that the infantry would most likely conduct live-fire exercises with their AFL counterparts.

Potter was taken aback. The arrival of an infantry platoon would be nearly impossible to align with the envisioned collaborative AFL-police training program. The AFL would have its hands full preparing for the joint exercise. Now Potter would have to introduce the prospect of additional training on such unrelated skills as jungle fighting, enemy contact, ambushes and raids, and how to fire mortars.

Colonel Potter knew the deployment decision was firm. How to handle it was up to him. How might he be able to reconcile the presence of the infantry platoon with wider OOL goals? As SDO/DATT Mitchell put it: "How [are you] to conduct your training mission when you are given personnel based on political, not tactical, considerations?" How could Potter prepare the AFL to work with the 4th Brigade to the benefit of both? Was there a way to integrate the infantry into the AFL's larger 2015 training plan? Potter would have to adjust his expectations yet again.