

GOING FOR GOLD - COBRA GOLD 2009

Gordon Arthur / Thailand

A Marine of India Company, 3/5 Marines, 31st MEU, gets more closely acquainted with a deadly cobra during jungle survival training. Credit Gordon Arthur

The Kingdom of Thailand hosted the latest iteration of Cobra Gold from 4-17 February 2009. Cobra Gold, an annual joint exercise in its 28th year, primarily features Thai and U.S. military personnel. This annual war game, the largest military exercise in Southeast Asia, takes its name from the venomous snakes that inhabit Thailand's countryside, as well as the precious metal once mined there. Thailand is a longstanding ally of the USA in Southeast Asia, and various bilateral defence agreements have existed since 1950.

EXERCISE PARTICIPANTS

American participation in the 2007 exercise was much reduced in scope after Thailand's military coup on 19 September 2006, and last year's training was disrupted by the havoc wrought in Myanmar by Cyclone Nargis. Fortunately, Cobra Gold roared fully back to life this year with a busy schedule of multilateral and bilateral training. Cobra Gold is designed to promote regional peace and stability by allowing troops to work side by side, with this year's event involving 11,637 personnel. This total included 4,034 Thais and 7,271 Americans drawn from installations as far afield as Japan, Hawaii, and Washington and New York states.

This combined-arms exercise incorporating army, navy, air force and marine corps units comprises three key elements – a computer-simulated command post exercise (CPX), a series of field training exercises (FTX), and humanitarian/civic action projects. Each year a different Royal Thai Army (RTA) HQ is responsible for hosting Cobra Gold, and this time it was the turn of the Third Army in the northern quadrant of the country. This meant much of the exercise centred on the cities of Chiang Mai and Sukhothai in the north of Thailand. The USA footed USD13 million of the bill, with Thailand

expending just USD1.1 million. One unusual feature of this year's Cobra Gold was the fact it took place in the month of February instead of the usual May timeframe. Apparently this was because of a scheduling clash later in the year, possibly related to the holding of Exercise Talisman Saber in Australia mid-year.

While Thai and American troops are the most numerous in Cobra Gold, servicemen from Singapore, Japan and Indonesia also took part. Indonesia and Japan contributed 113 and 75 soldiers respectively, while Singapore contributed more than 100 command and medical personnel. What began in 1982 as bilateral war games between the USA and Thailand has increasingly incorporated neighbouring countries. While Thailand is a reliable, long-time ally of the USA in Southeast Asia, the USA is keen to pursue greater stability and cooperation in the region.

Since 2000, the orientation moved more to Operations Other Than War (OOTW), with greater emphasis on UN-style missions such as non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO), humanitarian assistance and peace support missions. Reflecting the trend towards multilateralism, a record total of 15 other nations attended in an observer capacity – Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, South Korea, United Kingdom and Vietnam.