

From Cuba To The Cape Fear; Colonel Finds A Home In Carolina

BY ERIC CARLSON

His name appears on thousands of long, technical (some would say boring) documents about channel dredging, flood plain management, stream bank erosion and cost/benefit analysis.

He is the local district manager for an agency of the U.S. Government known for its careful, methodical (some would say glacial) planning, permitting and construction of public works projects.

So most folks probably assume that the new Wilmington District Engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is some nondescript, pencil-pushing bureaucrat who spent his career behind dozens of tidy little desks in dozens of drab little offices.

And they would be wrong. Because Col. George Cajigal (pronounced Ka-HEE-gal) has been around. And he has some great stories to tell.

Like about the time his engineering battalion parachuted with tons of equipment and materials into a remote corner of Honduras where the only roads led across the border into hostile Nicaragua. There was only one way for Cajigal and his men to get out: By building an airstrip where planes could land and evacuate them.

"It was a big motivator," Cajigal said with the soft-spoken modesty of a man who seems confident that his record speaks for itself.

He saw Cuba torn apart by revolution. He was in Germany during the Cold War. He did a tour in Vietnam. He was among a handful of U.S. Army officers stationed in Peru when its military still relied on Soviet advisers. It was a tense atmosphere, where Maoist guerrillas regularly set off bombs in the capitol of Lima.

When our national attention turned to Central America, Army units under Cajigal's command were sent on "training missions" aimed at discouraging the Marxist Sandinistas from expanding their influence beyond Nicaragua. After the ouster of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, Cajigal joined the Army's engineering staff on the Panama Canal Commission.

Nowadays, as commander of its Wilmington District Engineers, Cajigal oversees the Army's civil works activities throughout a massive watershed extending from Brunswick County to Roanoke, Va., and from Cape Hatteras to Asheville. It's an assignment he requested, because it brought him back to the state he considers home.

Which might seem unusual, since Cajigal was born in Havana, Cuba. That was in 1946, when the Caribbean's largest island nation offered a friendly investment climate for U.S. industries and an exciting vacation atmosphere for American tourists. All that changed while Cajigal was a child in military school. He remembers tensions increasing as the newspapers filled with accounts of rebel forces fighting in the mountains.

In the uneasy days after Fidel Castro won control of his country, Cajigal was part of a youth honor guard that welcomed United States representatives to Havana for negotiations that would decide the fate of Cuba's relationship with its powerful neighbor.

"I have vivid memories of the day the talks broke down and the Americans left," he said. "Everything changed after that."

Cajigal's father was an American-educated mechanical engineer for a U.S. textile firm. When his company was nationalized by the Castro regime, George, age 14, and his 10-year-old brother were put on a plane to Florida. They left Cuba as "tourists" and were given political asylum in the U.S.

With only "about 75 cents between us," Cajigal remembers staying in a church with his brother and grandmother while his mother arranged for the family to move in with an uncle in Hialeah. There they waited until his father was able to slip out of Cuba and join them.

Cajigal's father took a job with a textile firm in Sylacauga, Alabama, where George began the transition from Cuban refugee to American teenager.

"It was one of the greatest experiences of my life," he said. "I went from a highly-charged atmosphere of bombing attacks and revolution—where my classmates were being killed or disappearing—to a place where the top priorities were high school football and meeting girls. "I fell right into it!" he said.

After a couple years, Cajigal's father went to work with the Enka Corporation in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. George graduated from Enka High School and later earned a political science degree at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee.

Drafted into the Army infantry in 1968, Cajigal as-



COL. GEORGE CAJIGAL is the new commander of the U.S. Corps of Engineers, Wilmington District, which includes nearly all of North Carolina and south central Virginia. The alpaca fur rug on his office wall is a memento of his days as an adviser to the Peruvian Army. STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

sumed he was destined for a combat unit in the jungles of Vietnam.

"I thought my tombstone would look better with 'lieutenant' in front of my name, so I applied for OCS (officer candidate school)," he said.

Cajigal was accepted into the program and was pleasantly surprised to find that the Army needed civil engineers more than college-educated infantrymen. So he was assigned to the Corps of Engineers.

After graduating from OCS, Cajigal served as a platoon leader in the 502nd Engineer Company at Karlsruhe, Germany. There, in the constant military maneuvering to "protect us against the Russian hordes," Cajigal's unit installed floating bridges to carry NATO troops and equipment across the rivers of Europe.

As a logistics officer with the Da Nang Support Command, Cajigal spent from 1971 to 1972 supervising the pullout of tanks, transport vehicles and mountains of equipment during the Army's initial withdrawal from Vietnam.

His combat tour completed, Cajigal wanted to get back to the East Coast, so he asked for an assignment in Washington. The request was approved. But they sent him to the wrong Washington. He was assigned to the 864th Engineering Battalion at Fort Lewis, on the Puget Sound near Seattle.

Cajigal finally made it back East and began what he calls "a love affair with Fort Bragg." In the first of several assignments there, he learned to jump from airplanes and commanded a company in an airborne combat engineering battalion. The Army sent him to N.C. State University for a master's degree, then assigned him to an Army Engineering School, where he taught other officers how to build roads and airfields.

The early 1980s brought a shift in the Soviet/

American power struggle in South America. After 12 years under a Communist-leaning dictatorship, the government of Peru was returned to a democratically-elected president who wanted to improve relations with the United States.

Cajigal, with his fluency in Spanish and his experience in military engineering, was one of four American exchange officers sent to Lima as instructors to the Peruvian Army, which still relied on Soviet equipment and the logistical support of about 250 Soviet military advisers.

"Professionally, it was a very challenging assignment," Cajigal said. "And at times very exciting."

Adding to the intrigue were the well-armed bands of "Shining Path" guerrillas that fought to drive both superpowers out of Peru and were blamed for more than 13,000 deaths in the 1980s. As a precaution against terrorist attacks, Cajigal was advised to wear civilian clothing and to carry a pistol whenever he ventured onto the streets of Lima.

The American advisers found themselves even more alienated from their Peruvian hosts when the two countries chose opposite sides in the war between England and Argentina over the Falkland Islands.

"I was in their ministry of war building—the equivalent of our Pentagon—when (U.S. Secretary of State) A. Haig came on television and announced our support for Great Britain," Cajigal said. "I was escorted out of the

building and told not to come back unless invited. Those were tough times."

Returning to Fort Bragg in 1984, Cajigal took command of the 27th Airborne Combat Engineering Battalion. Twice his unit was deployed to Honduras for "military exercises." On one of those occasions, his was the only American combat unit the country when stepped-up Nicaraguan insurgencies led U.S. intelligence agencies to fear that the Sandinistas were preparing to invade.

His experience in Central American affairs earned Cajigal admission to the Inter-American Defense College in Washington, D.C., which took him on official visits to every country in the region (except Nicaragua). He was later chosen as a military adviser to the Panama Canal Commission for public works.

Before returning to North Carolina in July, Cajigal spent two years as civil works adviser to the Assistant Secretary of the Army at the Pentagon.

Cajigal said he welcomes the Wilmington assignment and the challenge of supervising Army Corps activities in such a diverse district, where projects range from the dredging of coastal inlets to the installation of flood-control dams on mountain streams. He said this may be his last assignment with the Army and hinted that he might consider retiring to the area.

"It's like they say. I like calling North Carolina home."

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