MOC Updates from MOC Directors - U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. Fourth Fleet; Are you really ready to fly the COOP?

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On 6 October, 2016, Naval Station Mayport, the home of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command (USNAVSO), the Navy Component to U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), and U.S. Fourth Fleet (C4F), was evacuated due to Hurricane Matthew heading nearly straight for the base with at least Category I winds. By the time the all clear was passed, and we were able to return to our buildings we had suffered severe damage to one of our largest, housing nearly a quarter of the staff, as well as minor damage to all of them. Our parking lots were inundated and as of this writing, repairs are still being made to our buildings. As quickly as a storm can hit, the damage will last much longer.

As the Naval Component Commander to USSOUTHCOM we are responsible for among other things the Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief needs of 31 nations in our area of operations, spanning the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Only two of these nations are land-locked. This is a maritime AOR. In addition to our component and fleet responsibilities, we are also the SOPA and Hurricane Sortie Commander for all ships located in Mayport.

Hurricane Matthew didn’t just affect Mayport and the southeastern portion of the United States. As many know, the hurricane crashed into the small island nation of Haiti with devastating winds and rains. A nation which has suffered seemingly endless tragedy was once again the subject of international headlines, and a global response to help the affected people. Thousands of Haitians in and around Port au Prince, and what is referred to as the “southern claw” of the island, many of whom were still in temporary structures following the 2010 earthquake were literally washed out of their homes. Major roads were washed away, as were critical bridges needed to deliver much needed relief supplies.
Having been Future Ops on the staff of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. Fifth Fleet I participated in several continuity of operations exercises (COOPEX). We routinely conducted a COOPEX on each aircraft carrier as they came into our AOR. The time on that staff convinced me of the importance of knowing which coop to fly to when you need to continue operations. USNAVSO does not typically have a CVN or big deck amphibious ship in our AOR, so our COOP requires some creative thinking.

Well before this storm developed as a tropical wave coming off Africa we had planned a small COOPEX to the Navy training facility in Orlando, FL, one of our three possible COOP locations. As Matthew was bearing down on Haiti our small advance team, led by my JICO with IT support and a couple Battle Watch Captains, was setting up shop in Orlando on 4 October. Although very hospitable we found the site was not ideal for our needs. By the 5th that team was both preparing to pack it up and come home, or receive the admiral and a small tier of our JTF deployable staff. On the 6th, they were driving in vans back to Mayport, and then diverted to NAS Jacksonville to set up shop in a facility there as the decision had been made to evacuate from our base to that base to help coordinate our SOPA duties with Region Southeast’s responsibilities. Based on evacuation concerns we decided to take a small Tier of people to NAS Jax. We divided our JTF team into three tiers, with plans to recall tiers as the storm moved, and as our operational needs matured. Due to the storm intensity and track, we ended up with only the Tier 1 team available at NAS Jacksonville.

In addition to evacuating our own staff, COOPing to NAS Jacksonville, and our responsibilities as the Sortie Commander, we were also coordinating the naval component portion of the relief effort being sent to Haiti. U.S. Fleet Forces had already designated USS GEORGE WASHINGTON, USS IWO JIMA, and USS MESA VERDE as possible relief effort ships, plus some embarked aircraft and disaster relief packages. The pieces were coming together, but Hurricane Matthew’s track meant they would be delayed for a few days until the seas subsided enough to steam to the JTF MATTHEW Joint Operating Area (JOA). Our Liaison Officers (one each active duty and reserve Navy Captains with command experience) at USSOUTHCOM played a large part in
relaying information and keeping our situational awareness throughout. They were essential to our success for the relief response.

The Naval War College provides several outstanding courses designed to baseline fleet and component staff personnel. They beat the drum on the need to have a plan, and a regular process to ensure the operations of the Fleet continue. What happens though when the well-planned event is thrown out the window with an unexpected evacuation order? Do you have the luxury of telling your Combatant Commander you can’t coordinate the naval forces relief efforts to an impoverished nation? Can you tell the east coast sortie commander, a four star admiral you don’t have the band-width to execute your duties as SOPA and the regional sortie commander? Can you tell your own staff members and their families, who are leaving in droves to race ahead of a hurricane that their problem is not yours? The obvious answers are no.

So how do you prepare for the impossible, given the daily grind often barely leaves enough time to think about the mildly probable? We were able to accomplish all of our tasking, but it relied on an ability to divert from previous plans without having perfect information, a JTF/COOP watch bill closely monitored by both the MOC and the Maritime Headquarters (MHQ), empowered leaders at all levels, and close personal relationships with key players. I am not implying we did everything perfectly. There is always room for improvement. We took a lot of lessons learned. We are preparing for our MOC certification in April 2017, and many of the steps we take for that tie in to our overall level of preparedness. As much as we don’t want to admit it, luck plays a part. Hurricane Matthew’s closest point of approach to Mayport was 34nm to the east. We ended up on the less dangerous semi-circle side of the storm. Had the storm been just two eye-widths further west the outcome would have been much different for both the base, and the ships which for a variety of reasons had to remain in the basin.

Just this past week my boss, RADM Sean Buck asked us pointedly if we were ready to execute our JTF Commander duties, away from our command buildings, within 12 hours’ notice. We briefed ADM Tidd, CDRUSSOUTHCOM we can do exactly that, and after our experiences with Hurricane Matthew and JTF Matthew relief efforts I am confident we can. Three months ago I would have told you to not even worry about
such a confluence of improbable events. Our job as Fleets and Naval Components is to be ready for the impossible, without ever knowing exactly what it is. When you plan your next COOP, make sure you include some improbable events in it. Here are some of the questions we think about:

Is your COOP/JTF watch bill 100% executable, in far less than 72 hours?

Do you have at least one primary and alternate geographically separated COOP location?

Is your and your family’s “go bag” really ready to go?

How long can you COOP if your HQ is damaged or unusable?

How much of your deployable JTF staff do you really need?

Are you sure you have the right LNOs in key locations, empowered to speak on your command’s behalf?

Is your MOC focused on the “Operations” part of the title, or just the easy?

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