Pakistan Flood Relief 2010; A Naval Officer’s Seamless Transition from MOC to JOC

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In late July 2010, the monsoon season in Pakistan was more severe than usual, and caused historic floods of the Indus River which led to the deaths of thousands of people and the massive destruction of homes and property throughout the country. At the time, Commander 5th Fleet (C5F)/U.S. Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) was the U.S. Central Command’s (CENTCOM) designated commander for all Foreign Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (FHA/DR) in the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility (AOR). Immediately after the floods started the NAVCENT MOC formed a Crisis Response Planning Team (CRPT) which began the planning process to assist in relief efforts. While the CRPT consisted of approximately 15 regular members it became readily apparent that individuals with other subject matter expertise (SME) from across the staff would be required to formulate a successful plan. Based on my experience during this high visibility planning effort the MOC organizational structure provided the flexibility to rapidly plan and execute a FHA/DR mission half way around the world. This article briefly recounts how the 5F MOC supported the Joint Operations Center (JOC) in Pakistan, and responded to historic flooding and in so doing offers some insights into the benefits of the MOC as an organizational structure.

The MOC Allows for Versatility, Flexibility, and Agility

Pursuant to doctrine, a core Operational Planning Team (the CRPT) consisting of 15 members was formed to produce options for the commander. This core OPT was augmented with additional subject matter experts (SMEs) as required. These SMEs included: staff planners from Expeditionary Strike Group 5 (ESG-5), “Seabees” to assist with the washed out bridges that impacted on Lines of Communication (LOCs) used to supply U.S. forces in Afghanistan, aviators with helicopter expertise, and a Meteorological and Oceanography (METOC) Officer who forecasted additional weather problems and how the flooding might progress throughout the Indus River basin as the monsoon season carried on. Medical Planning officers were also involved to assist with planning to combat waterborne diseases that could affect the population, provide medical relief supplies, and to determine which immunizations and medication U.S. forces would need prior to deploying to Pakistan. Supply Corps officers identified potential sites to base logistic operations out of and discussed what contracts would need to be put in place to support our forces in Pakistan. The Public Affairs Officer was instrumental in releasing current and relevant information regarding this world-wide news event, and Intelligence officers analyzed the effect of the flood and potential terrorist activity and coalition operations along the Pakistan and Afghanistan border. The ability of the OPT to coordinate with these
SMEs provided huge value added to the planning effort and was a manifestation of the notion that cross functional teams with the “right” expertise could be developed from within the MOC at a moment’s notice.

Balancing Time, Space, and Force

Despite the fact that the CRPT initiated the Navy Planning Process (NPP) almost immediately after the floods began, for a period of time NAVCENT lacked official orders to execute an HA/DR mission because Pakistan had yet to officially request assistance from the United States. However, in an attempt to be proactive in the face of ambiguity, the C5F commander nonetheless issued execute orders (EXORD) to move the amphibus ships attached to ESG-5 from the Gulf of Aden to the waters off the coast of Pakistan in the North Arabian Sea, and also issued a warning order (WARNORD) to the 15th MEU to be prepared to conduct FHA/DR operations in Pakistan. Eventually the government of Pakistan officially requested U.S. assistance, and in turn the Department of State (DoS) requested assistance from the Department of Defense (DoD).

Although C5F was the designated commander for FHA/DR operations in the CENTCOM AOR, the Office of Defense Representative Pakistan (ODRP), led by a Navy Vice Admiral, had existing working relationships with the Pakistan Military (Pak Mil) and a more intimate knowledge of the delicate U.S. political and military environment in Pakistan. As such, ODRP was designated as the “supported commander” for all flood relief operations.

Two task forces were created. One was Task Force North, led by an Army Brigadier General (who was also the ODRP deputy commander), located in northern Pakistan at Ghazi Air Base approximately 60 miles northwest of Islamabad. TF North was comprised mostly of the 16th Combat Aviation Brigade (16th CAB), an Army Reserve unit from Alaska. Task Force South was initially formed around the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (15th MEU) off the USS Peleliu (LHA-5), and later replaced by the 26th MEU off of the USS Kearsarge (LHD-3). TF South was led by the ESG-5 commander and was headquartered at the Pano Aqil Airport, approximately 315 miles north of Karachi. While Ghazi Air Base in the north was a fully functioning military airport, Pano Aqil in the south possessed neither runway lights nor fueling capabilities so Marines were forced to clear brush from the runway.

Of note, the Marines performed as a truly expeditionary force as they landed a C-130 on a short runway at night using night vision goggles, brought in their own fuel bag with pumps, and set up all the communications necessary to conduct relief operations. Marine C-130s brought relief supplies to the northern city of Gilgit, about 315 miles north of Islamabad. With its high elevation and a short runway surrounded by very tall mountains (the peak of K2, the second tallest mountain on earth, is visible on approach), Gilgit provided one example of the incredible operational reach of US forces as they planned and executed critical FHA/DR operations even in the most difficult terrain half way around the world.

Working Toward Unity of Effort

Some U.S. military personnel seemed to have difficulty accepting the fact that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was identified as the lead agency for humanitarian assistance as was thus “in charge.” However, USAID, which had an existing presence in Pakistan since 2005 when earthquakes struck the northern region of the country, did an excellent job of coordinating relief operations conducted by dozens of countries, NGOs and IGOs. The World Food Program (WFP) was also a major contributor to not only the donation of food, but also the coordination of how to distribute it among the affected areas. However, as important as USAID and WFP were, all relief operations were conducted “by, with, and through” the Pakistan government and military, everybody else was there to support.
The U.S. military role was primarily to provide for the transportation and security of relief supplies and food, as well as conduct limited evacuation operations. The total number of military members in Pakistan swelled from approximately 85 ODRP personnel prior to the flood, to over 700 once CENTCOM issued a Request for Forces (RFF). This rapid increase in U.S. forces did not come easily. The Pakistani government and military were very cautious and did not want a large U.S. military presence in country. Personnel requiring a visa to enter the country sometimes had to wait weeks for approval, and flight clearances into Pakistan were often delayed or denied. Providing lodging and meals for U.S. forces was a major concern during the initial planning and execution phases. The forward operating bases in the north and south both were in close proximity to unused Pak Mil barracks. Army contracting officers were able to establish contracts with local food vendors for two meals a day, while Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) were used as supplements as required. Army veterinarians inspected all food and approved the menu, from which lamb had to be removed due to potential health hazards despite the fact it was a common food source in Pakistan.

From MOC to JOC

The U.S. Embassy in Islamabad was used as the headquarters for ODRP and was the location of the Joint Operations Center (JOC). Staff augmentees such as me stayed in Container Living Units at the embassy. A battle rhythm was established with three Commanders Update Briefs (CUBs) throughout the day, and a Joint Air Coordination Cell was established that met every night with the Pak Mil and various U.S. and other IGOs and NGOs to prioritize relief activities for the next day. While the JOC remained focused on current operations and at times appeared very reactionary, the CRPT at CSF provided reach back support for planning potential sustained relief efforts. For example, the CRPT examined the possibility of bringing in relief supplies via cargo ships and setting up a transportation and distribution network in Pakistan. CSF (through CTF-53) also coordinated weekly flights from Bahrain to bring repair parts, equipment, and supplies to support U.S. forces in Pakistan. If the ODRP JOC did not have an organic capability typically the CSF MOC was the first entity called on to provide assistance. The ability of the 5F MOC to plan and execute along multiple lines of operation became readily apparent to me as I was forward deployed and further bolstered my sense that our MOC was viewed as a critical and very capable player in the joint environment.

It was apparent which members in the JOC had Operational Level of War (OLW) experience, and who did not. Despite having less than six months experience in the CSF MOC, I was the only officer selected to augment the JOC. Because I attended the Naval War College Maritime Staff Officers Course (MSOC), I was very familiar with joint terms and processes and thus was able to make a seamless transition from the MOC to the JOC. As a young officer, I believe the ability of naval officers to plug-and-play into a joint staff environment will only get stronger as the MOC concept continues to evolve and more Navy personnel filter through our MOCs and the Naval War College courses designed to enhance the Navy’s ability to plan and execute at the OLW.

Final Thoughts

The U.S. military cannot save the world when disaster strikes; we can only offer our capabilities and support whatever requests for assistance we receive. In a truly joint FHA/DR operation, from August 5 to November 30, 2010, over 26 million pounds of relief supplies were delivered to civilians devastated by historic floods in Pakistan.1 40,243 displaced people were airlifted and taken to safety, and nearly 500,000 meals were provided to over 100,000 people.1 Through FHA/DR operations, the United States military assisted hundreds of thousands of people in their time of need and helped strengthen political and social ties with a key strategic ally.
Lieutenant Smallwood served as a Logistics Planner at C5F MOC from April 2010 to April 2011 and deployed to Pakistan from Aug 2010 through October 2010 as an augment to the JOC. He is currently in the Navy Reserve as a member of the C3F Logistics Readiness Center in San Diego, CA.

Reference:

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