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Commentary

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COMMENTARY

FOREIGN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER-RELIEF OPERATIONS LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

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Foreign humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief (FHA/DR) operations are some of the most complicated operations conducted by the military. These missions constitute a core Navy mission; their planning and execution differ from those of a kinetic military campaign, but addressing the key principles early will enable the successful execution. The following lessons learned are based on my experiences over the past two years conducting five FHA/DR operations in the western Pacific.¹ Other situations may be different, but these suggestions may make the next operation more productive and rewarding.

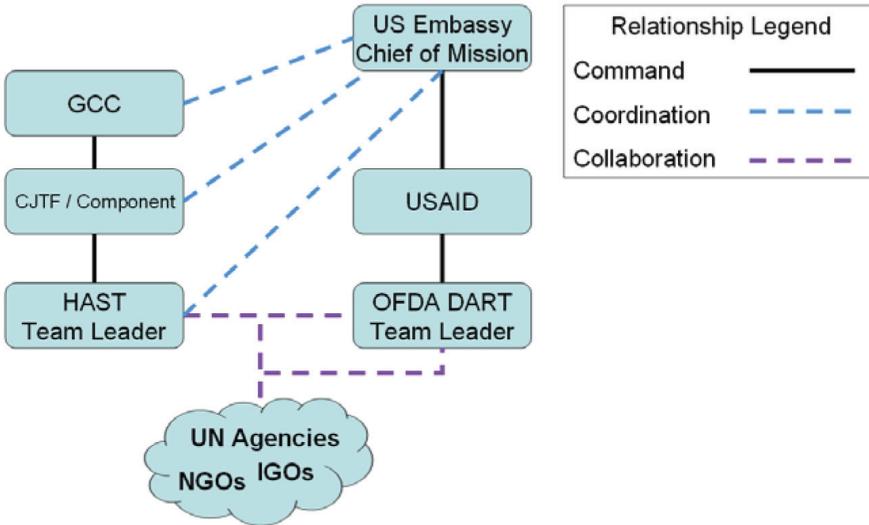
It is helpful to provide the crew and embarked staffs with an overview of current U.S. government FHA/DR guidance. The overarching principle is to remember one's place in an operation. The ambassador sets policy and directs the U.S. government team, while the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) coordinate and manage the U.S. response. The Department of Defense (DoD) plays a supporting role.

In other words, the DoD is part of a comprehensive U.S. approach led by the Department of State (DOS). The DOS's lead for FHA/DR is USAID, which delegates FHA/DR to USAID/OFDA. The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance may send an individual or a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to coordinate the U.S. government response.

After DoD directs a geographic component commander (GCC) to provide support, either a component or a joint task force (JTF) will be tasked. Based on

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Commander, Task Force 76’s (CTF 76’s) experience, a military Humanitarian Assistance Survey Team (HAST) must arrive quickly in order to link up with the American embassy staff and the DART, as depicted in the figure.²

Most of these relationships involve coordination and collaboration, so the first lesson to learn is the importance of exchanging liaison officers (LNOs) early to establish a trusting relationship, ensure clear communication, and enhance coordination.

Just as important as inviting the host nation and USAID/DOS personnel to provide liaison officers on the command ship is sending sailors to the disaster site. They will speak on the commander’s behalf as to what capabilities the ships will bring when they get there, so choose wisely when forming a HAST. The team must embody the personality and skill to coordinate across the different departments and organizations, as well as interact with nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

The size of the HAST will depend on the size and scale of the damage. Once the HAST has assessed the situation and, in coordination with USAID, has identified where DoD can best support the relief efforts, a forward command element (FCE) may be needed to take over command, control, and liaison duties, to free up the HAST for work in the field along with USAID.

This essay focuses on natural disasters, where the U.S. Agency for International Development plays a major role in the military’s operational planning and activities.³ As NGOs and international governmental organizations (IGOs) arrive in the disaster zone, they are organized via the United Nations “cluster” system, which designates an NGO as the lead of each functional group. HAST

members should attend cluster meetings with the USAID representatives and advise them about military support capabilities.

The second lesson—and the hardest to learn, as observed during every FHA/DR—is to do only what DoD can and then turn over to the host nation and NGOs as soon as possible. During FHA/DR operations, the host nation, NGOs, and IGOs generate thousands of requests for assistance. It is not the Department of Defense's mission to fill them all. The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, along with the U.S. government country team, validates all requests for assistance and prioritizes and lists them in an electronic spreadsheet called the Mission Tasking Matrix (MITAM). HAST/FCE then reviews them for supportability and once more prioritizes them and tasks each entry to the appropriate force.

The third lesson flows from the second: Start with an idea of how the event will end and then determine an exit strategy and what milestones can serve as ceremonies. Think from the end.

Almost as relief begins to flow to those in need, the Department of Defense can begin planning its own departure. When the unique capabilities provided by the military are no longer in high demand or have been replaced by civilian capacity, when all affected areas are in the recovery stage, and when the host nation says so, it is time to go. The mission will not be complete, and there will still be suffering, but it is important to hold a ceremony to mark an end point for U.S. military assistance.

Given these three key lessons, the following reviews three operations in which CTF 76 was involved over the past two years. By examining small, medium, and large-scale FHA/DRs, one can see how these key lessons were followed. There are some additional take-aways as well.

TYPHOON MORAKOT: TAIWAN (SMALL-SCALE FHA/DR, LED BY CAPTAIN), AUGUST 2009

The USS *Essex* (LHD 2) Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) was returning from its second deployment of 2009 to off-load 31 Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) in Okinawa when Typhoon Morakot hit Taiwan 7–8 August with eighty-knot winds, a storm surge in excess of ten feet, and extensive flooding and landslides.

When Taiwan requested heavy-lift assistance from the U.S. government, the secretary of defense directed the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) to oversee military relief efforts. The Seventh Fleet assigned the task to CTF 76. Given the limited scope of Taiwan's support request, Task Force 76 redeployed Commander, Amphibious Squadron 11 (CPR11), along with elements of the commodore's staff, and 31 MEU aboard USS *Denver* (LPD 9), with four helicopters (two MH-53Es and two MH-60Ss) and an LCAC hovercraft. USS *Essex* and USS

Tortuga (LSD 46), the other two ships of the ARG, completed their off-load and returned to Sasebo.

Arriving off the coast of Taiwan, CPR 11's commodore assembled a HAST and flew ashore. He met with USAID, the American Institute in Taiwan, the Taiwan government, and military personnel to review the status of relief operations. After discussing the host nation's priorities with USAID representatives, the commodore decided he could best assist the Taiwan government by using the helicopters to lift construction vehicles and equipment to outlying areas. This would enable crews in isolated villages that were cut off from surface transport by flooding and landslides to perform search, rescue, and recovery operations.

The commodore deployed forty-five sailors and Marines to provide a tactical air control team, a helicopter rigging team, a helicopter logistics and maintenance team, and a public affairs team at Tainan Air Force Base, where they worked hand in hand with their Taiwanese counterparts. In light of the political sensitivities the commodore minimized his "footprint" ashore, flying the detachments in each morning and returning them to sea each night. Additionally, he directed his public affairs officer to ensure that the Taiwan military was the focus of media coverage.

The MH-60S provided aerial damage surveys and verification of helicopter landing zones. This freed the MH-53E to focus on lift missions. In six days the team flew fifty-five sorties, lifting twenty construction vehicles and twenty boxes of relief supplies, for a total of 255,800 pounds. As the demand signal waned, the commodore hosted a series of dignitaries ashore and marked a successful mission with the Taiwanese government, military, and relief personnel before redeploying to Sasebo.

So, to review: first and foremost, the commodore and his forces acted in support of the host nation and USAID. Second, the commodore put his liaison officers side by side with their Taiwanese counterparts and ensured that it was a Taiwanese face that was seen in the media—an important strategic message. Third, he used only the assets needed to meet the role that he and USAID identified. Finally, he held a ceremony to mark the host nation's decision that U.S. military support was no longer required, then left the scene.

ACT 2: EARTHQUAKE (INDONESIA: MEDIUM-SCALE FHA/DR, LED BY REAR ADMIRAL), SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2009

A month later, on 26 September, Typhoon Ketsana struck the Philippines with 140-knot winds and a half meter of rain on ground already saturated from three storms the previous month. Four days later, three earthquakes struck near Padang, Indonesia, on the western coast of the island of Sumatra. The Philippine

and Indonesian governments requested assistance from the U.S. government, and the secretary of defense directed PACOM to oversee military relief efforts.

Given the geographic separation, and in light of cultural sensitivities, the Seventh Fleet and III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) agreed to split the ARG/MEU, with the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade (3rd MEB) leading the Philippines FHA/DR mission and CTF 76 leading the Indonesian FHA/DR. CPR 11 and 31 MEU, already deployed to the Philippine coast for the bilateral exercise PHIBLEX, entered Subic Bay and reconfigured forces.

On 3 October, USS *Denver*, with a command element from CPR 11, elements of 31 MEU, and Tactical Air Control Squadron 12 (TACRON 12), sortied to Indonesia with three CH-53E helicopters and a helicopter rigging team. Leveraging the Taiwan FHA/DR lessons learned, Seventh Fleet sent USS *McC Campbell* (DDG 85) and USNS *Richard E. Byrd* (T-AKE 4) with their helicopters to provide aerial surveys of the damage.

On 4 October, CTF 76 and a ten-member HAST/FCE flew to Padang. The FCE established a command post in Jakarta, met with the ambassador and his staff, coordinated with USAID and the TNI (Indonesian army), and participated in Department of State teleconferences at the embassy.

The HAST pushed forward to Padang and conducted surveys with USAID and personnel of the consul general's office. They also attended cluster meetings to educate NGOs on maritime capabilities, while USAID supported the NGOs in drafting MITAM requests.

In order to coordinate air operations and relief distribution, secondary command and control elements were formed at Tabing Military Air Base, Halim, and Padang airports, as well as in downtown Padang. An air-operations coordination cell was formed at Padang airport through an informal liaison with elements of the 353rd Special Operations Group, which was completing a bilateral exercise with the Indonesians. These sailors and airmen, with their TNI allies, opened the damaged airport for relief operations.

The HAST verified reports of damage to all four hospitals in Padang, and once typhoon conditions cleared in Guam, PACOM deployed the portable field hospital of the Air Force's Humanitarian Assistance Rapid Response Team (HARRT) via C-17s. The HARRT arrived 5 October and, through an informal liaison, fell under CTF 76 command and control.

By 7 October, the HARRT was treating patients, and by 9 October *Denver*, *McC Campbell*, and *Richard E. Byrd* had begun supporting operations. The CPR 11 staff used *McC Campbell's* and *Richard E. Byrd's* helicopters to assist USAID in conducting airborne surveys of roads, bridges, and potential landing zones in isolated areas, while the longer-range CH53E helicopters lifted food, water, and shelter supplies to isolated communities.

As operations unfolded, the FCE participated in Office of the Secretary of Defense public affairs roundtables and updated the status of operations via Twitter and Facebook. The staff in White Beach, Okinawa, supported the FCE and HAST by managing information collation for situation reports and video teleconferences and reporting requirements. This enabled the relatively small staff forward to remain focused on mission execution.

By 13 October, the demand for lift decreased as roads were cleared, and the HARRT was treating nonemergency patients. With concurrence from the Indonesian government, TNI, USAID, the U.S. embassy, and Seventh Fleet, a formal handover ceremony to USAID and the NGOs was held to coincide with the ambassador's visit to Padang. By 17 October all U.S. forces had departed. Within thirteen days the FHA/DR force had provided 150 sorties, lifted 640,000 pounds of supplies, and ferried 1,117 passengers, while providing medical treatment to 1,945 people. It accomplished this with only 165 personnel permanently ashore.

In retrospect, this was a more complicated FHA/DR than the first we looked at, with a requirement to provide an FCE to coordinate with the embassy in Jakarta and a HAST to work with the consul general and USAID in Padang. Also, the command and control of multiple service components was done informally. It worked because of the people involved, but a JTF would have provided clear-cut command-and-control relationships.

That said, the admiral and his staff were clearly acting in support of the embassy, the host nation, and USAID. Second, LNOs were placed at all the key areas—Jakarta, Padang, and the airfields and air bases used to distribute aid. Third, only USAID-approved MITAMs were executed, which kept the FCE out of the business of validating NGO requests. Finally, when the demand signal for helicopter lift and emergency room treatment reached a tipping point, the admiral hosted the ambassador and local dignitaries in Padang to celebrate the successful completion of the mission. All forces then departed.

SENDAI EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI AND FUKUSHIMA DAIICHI NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS: JAPAN (LARGE-SCALE FHA/DR, LED BY ADMIRAL), MARCH–APRIL 2011

On 11 March 2011, a 9.0-magnitude earthquake off the northeast coast of Japan triggered a tsunami with waves that reached one hundred feet and traveled up to six miles inland. Over twenty-six thousand people were killed or reported missing, and the World Bank estimated damages in excess of \$120 billion.

PACOM designated U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) as the commander of Operation TOMODACHI and assigned Seventh Fleet, Fifth Air Force, U.S. Army Forces Japan (USARJ), and Marine Forces Japan (MARFORJ) as supporting commanders. On 19 March elements of JTF-519, headquartered in Pearl Harbor,

augmented the staff of USFJ to form a joint support force (JSF). Rather than discuss how USFJ and JTF-519 conducted humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, consequence management, and the voluntary, assisted departure of dependents, I will focus on the role of the CTF 76 staff within the JSF.

On 12 March CTF 76 and fourteen staff deployed as Seventh Fleet's maritime response cell (MRC) to USFJ. The MRC was the representative of the joint force maritime component commander (JFMCC) and of the coordination cell within the headquarters. The MRC also received up to twelve additional officers from JFMCC subordinate commands as tasking peaked.

After establishing maritime surface and air watch teams in the Bilateral Joint Operations Command Center (BJOCC), CTF 76 inserted assistant chiefs of staff into USFJ directorates in order to augment their capabilities and assist in FHA/DR planning and execution. This gave the MRC ties within the USFJ staff, and later the JTF-519 led JSF to communicate successfully the JFMCC's priorities. The maritime response cell also participated in daily video teleconferences with the embassy staff, component commanders, and the Pacific Command, as well as boards, briefings, and meetings on behalf of the Joint Forces Maritime Command. This included the daily Joint Effects Coordination Board, where USAID, JSF, and component representatives reviewed validated MITAMs and then tasked them to the appropriate component.

Between 11 March and 7 April JFMCC pursued several lines of operation:

- Damage surveys by P-3C and helicopters
- Search and rescue (afloat and ashore) by ships and helicopters
- Lift support to the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) from a dock landing ship (LSD)
- Relief supply delivery from carriers, amphibious assault ships (LHDs), destroyers, cruisers, and LSDs to shore by helicopters
- Airspace deconfliction and communications relay by E-2C
- Harbor mapping and obstacle clearance by divers from a salvage ship (T-ARS) and LSD
- Port-clearance operations by the U.S. Marine Corps from LHDs and LSDs
- Lift support to Japanese electrical utility workers from a utility landing craft.

In each line of operation, liaison officers were exchanged, and the close working relationships between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and the Forward Deployed Naval Forces made integration a rapid process. In one case, USN-JMSDF integrated relief operations were moving so fast that the

Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF), the JTFC, and the CJTF To-Hoku called for an operational pause in order to “re-baseline” the staffs and components.

By 7 April the main airport at Sendai had been reopened to civilian aircraft, the major ports had open channels, and isolated people had received aid. The Japanese defense minister visited USS *Ronald Reagan* (CVN 76) to thank the U.S. military for its support and requested CJTF To-Hoku, the JSF leadership, and component commanders to join him. Then the U.S. forces were released from FHA/DR tasking.

So even in a complicated FHA/DR operation, the basic rules did not change. The JSF followed the DOS lead, and LNOs were exchanged—in some cases making history, embarking JGSDF officers on U.S. Navy ships. In addition, JSF worked with USAID and JSDF counterparts to identify requirements from the Japanese government and then tasked them to the components. Finally, JSF supported the Japanese until they thought the work was done, and then JSF and the Japanese leadership held a ceremony, after which the U.S. FHA/DR forces departed.

Lessons Learned

To reiterate, the overarching concept and the three key lessons are:

- The ambassador sets policy and directs the U.S. government team. The U.S. Agency for International Development and the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance coordinate and manage the U.S. government response. The Department of Defense supports.
- Exchange liaison officers to establish a trusting relationship, ensure clear communication, and enhance coordination.
- Do only what the Department of Defense can and then turn over to the host nation and NGOs, as soon as possible.
- Start with an idea of how the event will end; then determine an exit strategy and what milestones can serve as ceremonies.

Additional lessons from CTF 76's five FHA/DR operations of the past two years:

- If more than one component participates assign a joint task force and establish clear command-and-control relationships.
- Display all forces and internally displaced personnel on a “common operational picture.” Add lines of communication and government and military boundaries to show where additional coordination may be useful.
- Establish and maintain information management and knowledge-management rules to streamline data flow between components.

- Aggressively use social media and web pages, accessible to the public in multiple languages, to disseminate empirical data and combat fear and confusion.
- Use all sources to sense the environment. On a daily basis the commander must know what is needed. How are our actions impacting those most affected? Are we postured in the best way to assist the host nation?
- Work closely with the host nation to establish communication objectives, share information, and coordinate media events and interviews.

NOTES

1. Taiwan, Typhoon Morakot, 2009; Republic of the Philippines, Typhoon Ketsana, 2009; Indonesian earthquakes, 2009; Republic of the Philippines, Typhoon Megi, 2010; and the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, 2011.
2. U.S. Defense Dept., *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, Joint Publication 3-29 (Washington, D.C.: 17 March 2009).
3. U.S. Agency for International Development, *Field Operations Guide for Disaster Assessment and Response*, September 2005, available at www.usaid.gov/.