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Some Advice for Military Humanitarians

Gary Anderson

For military personnel assigned to conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations (HA/DR) in Haiti who might be looking to the *Small Wars Journal* for some help, I'll offer some thoughts from someone who has done a few of these things and studied them extensively.

Let the Assessment Drive the Operation. HA/DR should be a "recon pull" operation; it is maneuver warfare. If you get the assessment wrong, you will end up clogging scarce airport ramps and offloading piers with unneeded supplies while the things you really need will wait in line. And remember that assessment is continuous. You will find yourself in different stages of the operations in different places. Don't be afraid to use non-traditional sources such as reporters, NGOs, and missionaries in the ongoing assessment. That angry reporter or Non Governmental Organization (NGO) worker, who wants to know why nothing has been done for village X, has just given you a piece of your assessment puzzle.

Remember the Little Things. As soon as possible, get permission to fly non Department of Defense personnel in military aircraft. This should be SOP, but somehow it always gets overlooked until some overly officious Air Force Master Sergeant won't let a desperately needed civilian doctor on an airplane.

Sea Base the Operation as Much as Possible. Every American who spends the night on shore is one less Haitian that will get food or water that day. Ruthlessly weed out uniformed "tourists" who don't have a real function.

Wherever Possible, Use Local Security Forces to Secure Distribution Sites. The last thing you need to have on CNN is American troops clubbing desperate villagers like baby seals at a relief distribution site. If needed, put Haitian police on the first helicopter into a relief landing zone; then bring in the relief supplies.

The Best Thing the American Military can Supply is Transportation and Communications. The NGOs and International Organizations (IOs) are pros at this. However, their normal means of transportation and communications will be down initially. They will get supplies to the major cities and will have some supplies in warehouses - but they will need help with retail distribution. Your helicopters, air cushioned landing craft, and radios are what you can really bring to the fight. Whatever you do, don't do air drops - you are likely to kill more people than you help by crushing them with pallets or by starting riots.

Keep Your Relations with NGOs and IOs Professional. Most of these people are more likely to join the Peace Corps than the Marine Corps, but they are professionals in their own fields and will be as results oriented as you are in their own way. Some have never dealt with the military before and may have an attitude when you first meet them. The best way to confront that is head on. Tell them, “We are both here to get a job done. Let’s leave our personal feelings at the door, you may even find that I’m not a war criminal.”

Don’t Get Involved With the Disposal of Human Remains. Think how you’d feel watching your grandmother shoved into a ditch by a Russian bulldozer. CARE and some of the other major NGOs are funded and know how to stand up ad hoc mortuary companies to bury people in ways acceptable to the local culture. This will also get some needed money pumped into the economy. They are also smart enough to keep an eye on the local entrepreneurs. At some point in the operation, they will start to run short of bodies. Gruesome as it sounds, some of these people in past disasters have dug up bodies to get paid for burying them multiple times. You would never have thought of that; leave that sort of thing to the pros. While we are on the subject, the NGOs and IOs are pretty good at deciding when it is time to stop delivering prepackaged emergency rations and start providing things like raw rice and cooking oil.

Avoid Going High Tech. Mobile surgical field hospitals and reverse water treatment purification units (ROWPUs) are wonderful things, but you stand the risk of raising local expectations so high that they won’t want to part with them, and they wouldn’t be able to maintain them, even if you could leave them. Simple tube wells, where the water table allows, run by a small generator and a simple pump is something that they can keep and probably maintain. The same holds true with chlorine tablets. From a medical perspective, trauma units will not be much in demand. Sadly, those who will die from immediate injuries sustained in the earthquake will likely have done so by the time you get there. What will really be needed are internists with qualified interpreters who can treat the invariable gastrointestinal diseases that will follow from drinking bad water.

Beware of Mission Creep. Your job is to try to get Haiti back to something approaching the way it was seconds before the quake struck. If the President wants you to do nation-building, he’ll let you know. Identify the things that only you as the American military can do and for how long you will need to do them. When the roads are open, they will not need helicopters anymore; stop flying helicopters. If you need to run a hospital until **Doctors Without Borders** get there, you should stop running it when they arrive. Your best people are the ones who will get you into mission creep situations the fastest. Doctors and engineers always want to make things better, and in these kinds of operations, better is the enemy of good enough.

Americans excel at these types of ad hoc operations. We are poor strategists, but excellent tacticians. Successfully completing this operation (and you **will** succeed) will be one of the best memories that you will have of your military career.

Colonel Gary Anderson is a retired Marine Corps officer. He was the J-3 (Operations Officer) for operation SEA ANGEL in Bangladesh and has done several published studies on HA/DR.

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