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Lessons From a Military Humanitarian in Port-au-Prince, Haiti

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On January 12, 2010, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake devastated the island nation of Haiti, resulting in a disaster of epic proportions. The catastrophe resulted in an estimated 212,000 deaths, with millions more affected. As the Army's contribution to the Global Response Force, the 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 82nd Airborne Division deployed within hours to support humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations. While Operation UNIFIED RESPONSE is still on-going, below are some unfiltered lessons we've learned from the BCT's participation to date.¹

Foreign Disaster Relief (FDR) is Counterinsurgency (COIN), only no one is shooting at you (yet) – The similarities between COIN and FDR operations are innumerable. The basic skills associated with successful counterinsurgency campaigns (addressing the needs of the people; coordinating simultaneous actions across multiple lines of effort; working by, with, and through diverse partners to win the trust and confidence of the population) proved readily transferable to disaster relief operations. Making the mental switch from the former to the later did not require a major paradigm shift. However, important safeguards must be enacted to avoid potential mission creep. Not unlike Mogadishu, Somalia, several Port-au-Prince communities were well-known for their nefarious actors. Despite this potential threat, US forces consciously avoided declaring any locals as hostile, leaving the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) and the local police to address gang and criminal activity. This decision allowed the BCT to remain neutral throughout its operations and fully focus its energy upon supporting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts.

Go unclassified early - The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are fought on classified information systems. While an operational necessity for these conflicts, most disaster relief partners, to include a majority of the US Embassy staff, can neither see nor access classified material. During the initial days of the relief operation, the ability to pass timely and accurate information

¹An invaluable resource the BCT received several weeks into the operation was an article written by Colonel (Ret.) Gary Anderson published in the *Small Wars Journal* entitled *Some Advice for Military Humanitarians*. While we did not adhere to all of Colonel Anderson's guidelines (i.e., air dropping over 60,000 pounds of water and rations a day was both a humanitarian necessity and an incredibly successful information operation), his words served us well. It is no small coincidence that the structure and context of this article resemble his and I would be remiss not to give credit where credit is due.

was arguably as important as the availability of food and water. In the initial weeks of Operation UNIFIED RESPONSE, Blackberry text messages became the primary means of communication, chiefly because they were the simplest and most reliable means of corresponding with the host of US Government agencies, United Nations offices, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) coordinating the relief efforts. Going “unclassified” required several unique hardware solutions; among which was purchasing unclassified hard drives for most of the BCT’s computer systems. While a costly investment, the decision allowed the BCT to share information with all government agencies and humanitarian organizations working in Port-au-Prince.

Strive to build strong partnerships with NGOs – While non-alignment policies typically prevent NGOs from working directly with military forces, such barriers are easily overcome during disaster relief operations. Despite the fact that most members of NGOs are more likely to join the Salvation Army than the US Army, their determination, devotion, and commitment are not unlike that displayed by our men and women in uniform. Adversity makes for strange bedfellows and Operation UNIFIED RESPONSE was no exception. Faced with a humanitarian crisis of historic proportions, differences and longstanding misperceptions quickly faded into the background. Overtime, several of the NGOs became the BCT’s closest relief partners. Most actually preferred working directly with the military due to our penchant for efficiency and effectiveness; two things they rarely experienced when dealing with the bureaucratic UN system. However, excessive bilateral action risked creating an undue dependency on military support as well as violating international recognized guidelines for the use of military forces in disaster relief operations². In the end, the BCT had to balance its actions. While alleviating human suffering was our mandate, the sooner the international community assumed the bulk of the HA/DR efforts, the sooner long-term, sustainable recovery would be achieved.

Use a simple assessment to help drives operations – Elaborate measures of effectiveness and performance (MOEs/MOPs) are often cumbersome and seldom helpful. Such methods struggle to keep pace with the rapidly developing nature of disaster relief operations. In an effort to understand the environment and track the operation’s progress, the BCT adopted a simple assessment methodology focused on six critical areas – Security, Subsistence (food, water, and shelter), Sanitation, Medical, Mobility (principally roads and bridges), and Leadership (both governmental and community leaders). This “S³M²L” framework drove the BCT’s information requirements and became the foundation for its daily rhythm of working groups and meetings. In tandem with this effort, the BCT developed a pre-disaster assessment for each of these critical areas. This baseline of the pre-existing conditions in Port-au-Prince allowed the BCT monitor the city’s return to relative normalcy, while limiting the potential for mission creep.

Develop the “eBay Effect” – US government agencies, the international community, and NGOs bring both broad authorities and vast resources to foreign disaster relief efforts. Yet despite all their capacity, they often struggle to discern where the greatest humanitarian needs lie. Routinely, the BCT found itself the principal conduit for matching humanitarian “supply” with Haitian “demand.” This phenomenon became known as the “eBay Effect,” coined after the

² The *Use of Foreign Military of Defense Assets in Disaster Relief* or “Oslo Guidelines” establish very specific principles governing the role of military forces in support of disaster relief efforts. Of particular note are paragraphs 32.iv, 32.v, 99, and 106 (<http://ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docId=1100688>).

popular internet auction and shopping website. Capable NGOs often needed nothing more than to be pointed in the right direction. What enabled the BCT to make these connections was the humanitarian assistance common operational picture (HA COP) it had developed. The HA COP was a Microsoft Excel-based spreadsheet containing over 1500 data points on everything from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps to medical facilities to ration distribution sites. Utilizing this simple, near-universal format allowed the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to display the information on a Google Earth based website where anyone with internet access could access the information.³

While much still remains to be done in Port-au-Prince, the mission to date has been a resounding success. It is safe to say that Operation UNIFIED RESPONSE has proven to be both a rewarding and noble endeavor for every Paratrooper within the BCT. It is our sincere hope that our efforts as humanitarians might resonate beyond the shores of this tiny Caribbean nation; and help, in some small way, to dispel the widely-held misperceptions of both our military and our nation.

Below is a list of useful organizations and websites for military personnel assigned to support foreign disaster relief operations:

- *World Health Organization (WHO) at <http://www.who.int>*
- *Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) at <http://www.paho.org>*
- *Transparency International at <http://www.transparency.org>*
- *CIA World Fact Book at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>*
- *US Department of State at <http://travel.state.gov/travel>*
- *Facts on International Relations and Security Trends (FIRST) at <http://first.sipri.org>*
- *One Response at <http://oneresponse.info/Pages/default.aspx>*
- *United States Agency for International Development (USAID) at <http://www.usaid.gov>*
- *Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at <http://ochaonline.un.org>*
- *Haiti One Response website at <http://oneresponse.info>*

In addition to the afore mentioned reference by Colonel (Ret.) Gary Anderson, the BCT obtained a “bootleg” copy of *Murphy’s Rules for Overseas Disaster Response* by Dr. Hasteh Shoadam, ed. This paper was another concise, but insightful resource utilized by both the BCT and senior JTF-Haiti leaders.

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³ OCHA’s one response website can be viewed at <http://oneresponse.info>. The BCT was able to populate over 1,500 separate data points (each of which contained 8 to 15 information fields) into the OCHA’s web-based application. Prior to this effort, the site contained only a few hundred entries. The hope is that this resource will endure long beyond the BCT’s presence in Haiti. Additionally, there have been high-level interagency discussions about creating a similar global system for use in the event of future disasters.

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