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Operation Provide Comfort I and II

SGM Ronald W. Dvorsky

Precursor to Operation Provide Comfort, Germany/Turkey/Iraq

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67T3F, Section Sergeant/Crewchief, S Troop, 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment

  
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## Abstract

As a young Soldier and newlywed, leaving the only home I had known for five years, Fort Bragg for Fulda, Germany. I soon learned that I had far more to learn about the military and myself, than I thought possible. The military overseas is designed to test even the most seasoned Soldier, whether it is training or field exercises. I went from jumping out of aircrafts to the hardest 10 days of my professional carrer, skimming down a rope underneath an aircraft, Air Assault! I never knew how much I wanted to graduate, until I was standing in front of my peers.

Everything we do in our lives, prepares us for the future, and preparing loads to be carried by UH-60s to people, certainly came in handy. Just as peace prevailed through the downfall of the Berlin Wall, and the Cold War was over, trouble was brewing elsewhere. The Persian Gulf War erupted a few years later, and I would be front and center for the after effects of war, on the children and grandparents, and the Soldiers sent to save them.

Following Desert Storm, the entire Kurdish population of Iraq attempted to flee the country to the north out of fear that Saddam Hussein would attempt to exterminate their entire population. Because of political concerns, Turkish officials refused to allow desperate people permission to cross the border into Turkey. The result was that hundreds of thousands of Kurds were essentially trapped on barren and rocky hillsides, vulnerable to not only Hussein's forces, but to the harsh elements as well. Without basic necessities to include access to water, food and medical supplies, hundreds of Kurds were dying each week. In April of 1991, President George Bush made the decision to provide relief and protection for these beleaguered people.

Knowing the possible repercussions of further actions by Iraq, more than one million refugees headed toward the mountains of Iran and Turkey. Conditions deteriorated rapidly as crowds grew by the hour. There was no food, shelter, or water. It was still winter in the mountains, with temperatures plunging far below freezing each night. Press reports indicated as many as 3 million people fleeing, with the Iraqi Army still in pursuit. By April 2<sup>nd</sup> over 2 million Kurds had fled Iraq (approx. 800,000 Kurds in Iran, 300,000 in southeastern Turkey and another 100,000 along the Turkish/Iraqi border. By the first week of April 800 to 1000 people, mostly the very young and very old were dying each day.

In 1988 as a SGT E-5 and newly married assigned to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Combat Aviation Brigade as a UH-60 Crewchief received PCS orders to the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment, Fulda, Germany. While I was clearing the unit the division was preparing to go into Honduras. I begged my First Sergeant and Commander to take me with them because this is what I trained for and my soldiers. Well, the gods that be had denied our request and I was told to continue to

clear and PCS as scheduled. As any young soldier at that time dreamed of deploying to combat and wearing a Combat Patch. Knowing a little about history and the famous Fulda Gap I knew for the next three years I would not see any real world deployments or the coveted combat patch. How wrong I was.

We arrived to Fulda, Germany of Down Barracks on 1 August 1988 with my wife Margy. The airfield was about 2 miles from Down Barracks and that is where the 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron of the 11<sup>th</sup> ACR was located and where all the aviation support for the regiment was located. The squadron was comprised of three attack troops of AH-1 Cobras and OH-58 Helicopters; one general support troop of 15 UH-60s and 4 EH-60 Helicopters; one aviation maintenance troop; and Headquarters Troop for vehicle maintenance, Stinger platoon, Fuel Platoon, and soldier support. Seven days after arrival to the unit living in the BAQ with my wife with housing available in approximately 30 days. That wait time was for both on the economy and for government quarters. I received a knock at my door late in the evening on Friday from my First Sergeant and he told me to mount up, pack my crap and I would be going to REFORGER on Monday. At that time REFORGER is a 6 weeks long field exercise that all leaders look forward to, like the main event for the year. I began to explain to him about housing, not finished in processing and no car for Margy. He explained to Margy that if housing calls, that she contact the SDO with the date and time to sign for quarters and he assured her I would be sent back for that day only.

Six weeks went by pretty quick with a one day break in the middle to sign for quarters off post with a German Land Lord. They were very friendly and whenever there was a local fest they would drag us along like family. Due to my exceptional performance in the field my First Sergeant selected me to go to Air Assault School. Black Horse Air Assault School was

supported and operated by hand selected personnel of the 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 11<sup>th</sup> ACR Squadron Commander which was also the Commandant. The school is under a charter given to the squadron and our Regiment by the 7<sup>th</sup> Army Training Center. That charter was to furnish battle focused, relevant training to soldiers all across Europe and in the theater. This training results in the permanent award of the Air Assault Badge. The Air Assault proponent, The US Army Infantry Center at Fort Benning, GA., accredits the school. Instructors, Cadre, and Support Personnel were Pilots, Crewchiefs, Mechanics, Troop Commanders, and Troop First Sergeants. All soldiers from all over Europe would come to Fulda to attend the organic Air Assault School and Rappel Master School. The living conditions were in a field environment, GP Mediums, Cots, heaters and the DFAC was marching distance for 80 students. The cost to attend Black Horse Air Assault School for 10 days was \$20.00 for the MRE's for lunch and the field exercise. The school would only operated 4 classes a year. I soon realized that my First Sergeant was the Air Assault School First Sergeant and I had no choice but to go. I always wanted to attend the school because this would make me the subject matter expert when it came to my primary duties as a Black Hawk Crewchief.

I can sum up the 10 days to be hell. It seemed as I was singled out by all the Instructors, Cadre and yes, even my First Sergeant. I received five on one attention in the motivation pit, grass drills during break time, only time to eat half of my meals and woken up early for more attention than the rest of the class. As I remember my First Sergeant telling me that my selection for the course was because of my superb performance in the field, I definitely doubted it. On the tenth day was the 12 mile road march than graduation. The road march was the easiest event of the 10 days. At the end of the pinning ceremony the announcer called out my name to post myself out in front to the Commandant. All I remember the announcer explaining to the

audience, was that there is a stringent and rigorous selection to be an elite cadre member of the Air Assault School. The Squadron Commander popped open this black baseball cap, removed my soft cap and placed the black hat on my head. The announcer says “please welcome the newest cadre member to the team.” Now, I understood the individual affection I was getting. Being the Sling Load Committee NCOIC, my team’s duties and responsibilities during off season was to train new units on sling load operations throughout Europe.

A couple years have passed to include a promotion. One early morning, I received a call for a muster alert. We pre flighted our aircraft and waited for further instructions. Who would believe that the East German Wall was coming down? We could not believe our eyes as the vehicles and people came swarming to cross the border. With the aviation support for security, supplies and VIPs were flown to the Observation Points, the airfield never slept. Now that there is no border to support, I remember a butcher board in the quad saying “we are at peace and we do not know what to do”.

Well it took no time to get busy again. The 11<sup>th</sup> ACR received orders to Kuwait for Operation Desert Storm. The aviation package required only three UH-60s and four EH-60 Helicopters. That’s it, no attack assets; our Squadron was not going to the fight except a few select crews. A couple months have passed and we had an early squadron formation on the flight line. Our squadron Commander explained to the troops that America has called on us to save thousands of people that are dying on top of a mountain. We had a week to get our aircraft Fully Mission Capable (FMC), with External Fuel Stores installed, CHAFF and Missile Warning System operational and the UH-60s had priority for the hanger and support. Wow, priority, we never ever had priority for any maintenance since I had been there. The Cobra’s and 58s always had the priority because of the combat power they possessed. The airfield again was full of life

with 24 hour operations in support of the Black Hawks and our self deployment to Northern Iraq. We were short of door gunners, because at the time we were only authorized one Crewchief per aircraft. The Squadron Commander authorized the Enlisted Aerial Observers to fly left side as Door Gunners.

A day before departure 2 UH-60s arrived from 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division to travel with us that made 12 Black Hawk helicopters total for deployment. Aircrafts were loaded with supplies and equipment to sustain us for 10 days. My aircraft was so loaded we have to do a rolling take-off and cleared the airfield perimeter fence by a foot off my tail wheel. Our first destination and overnight stop was Italy. We had an Italian spaghetti meal in the officer's mess and slept in officer quarters. Next morning we departed for Greece. We landed on the U.S. Airforce side with waiting Security Police to guard our aircraft and weapons and buses to transport us to a large hotel. We had to unpack the required civilian cloths and put them on before we departed. The force protection was high and briefed of targets down town on American Soldiers. On day three our next and second to last stop is US Airbase Incerlik, Turkey. All aircraft arrived during this three day deployment with no incidents.

The plan was to get the aircraft healthy for the deployment to northern turkey, receive all the required country briefs and depart. Three days later we received our brief of the air route and departed to a Turkish Airbase named Diyarbakir. I did not realize how big of an operation this was going to be. We landed east of the airfield to a large open field. Within a day cargo airplanes were arriving unloading vehicles, supplies and equipment from countries other than the U.S. Operation Provide Comfort involved aviation assets of the US Marines, US Airforce, Britain, Holland and the Dutch. The ground forces are already in position doing what they can to put a band aid per se and that was the US Special Operation Forces. Within hours of our arrival

my Squadron Commander informed me of a problem when aircraft with sling loads of water and food for the Kurdish Refugees are landing their loads the refugees are climbing on the cargo nets or rushing to the helicopters when retrieving the equipment. With my sling load experience can I devise a deposable sling system that would allow us to drop and go supplies? With the supplies we had were pallets, hemp rope, nails and a hammer we were able to mass produce disposable sling systems to carry pallets of water and MRSs until the Special Operations teams were able to secure landing areas to better provide support to the Kurdish people. Once we rigged the load, which was light and unstable under the aircraft at high speeds, so we had to reduce air speed which took close to 30 minutes to get the loads to the people. Once the loads arrived, within seconds of the load contacting the ground, the load was released.

When we first arrived on station, the mountain looked like grandmas blanket of patchwork. The Kurds used what ever was available to them, like blankets, sheets, plastic tarps to protect their families from the elements. It looked like a huge beach party with out the beach. There was a large landing area on the mountain that was protected with razor wire and Special Forces Soldiers. The dry landing area was super smooth and could fit two UH-60 Helicopters. We shut down to drop off the Commander of the Special Forces Group to get a personal update on the current situation. As we were waiting the Kurdish children were amazed and happy that we were there to help. One of the children put their hand out to shake my door gunners hand and placed a safeties hand grenade into his hands and said “thank you”. The Special Forces Sergeant said “these people who have nothing and are giving, so some thing is better than nothing”.

We returned back to the Airbase and the Navy CH-53's were coming back after dropping water and MRE at a hover to selected areas of the mountain. The pilot called on the radio and said, “a mother on the ground threw her bundled baby on the ramp of the aircraft and the baby is

fine” They flew back to base and the Marine hospital took control of the child. I never knew if they were ever reunited. The mother made a decision to do what needed to be done to save her child. About a month has gone by and flown over 100 flight hours, the crew and myself had to be evaluated by the flight doc to evaluate our condition to either be grounded for a couple of days or Fit for Duty (FFD). The Flight Surgeon ordered us one day of rest and then get back into the fight. I did not know how bad I needed that one day of rest.

The food was great. Everyday we had a different countries food for dinner. We started knowing that our soldiers were complaining about diarrhea and vomiting. It was not effecting everyone but when you got it you could not shake it off. The Flight Surgeon could not pin it down. We were given anti diarrhea medication and all it did was plug you up, than the fever would take over. The affected crewmembers rotated a week to Zachoo which was located 10 miles from the border of Iraq. After a couple of days eating Marine Corps food they were better. This definitely stumped our Flight Surgeon and we all received an extra dose of inoculations in our butt. About a week later and an on the ball Mess Sergeant was doing inventory of supplies. He realized that he should not have so much bottled water in his inventory. As a good NCO would do it was to find out why. Well, we had Turkish nationals that worked for the mess hall. The Mess Sergeant found out that they were filling up the Kool-Aid bullets with the ground water from a hose attached to the rear of the building. We were located approximately 1 mile from a sewage plant. Some soldiers did not get sick because they did not care to drink the too sweet Kool-Aid but had bottled water instead.

Four months have gone by and finally the Turkish government is going to allow the Kurdish refugees to temporarily stake some land until Iraq is once safe to move back to. 24 July 1991 Operation Provide Comfort was now known as Operation Provide Comfort II because we

now have a change of mission. We are to assist in the relocation and the security for the refugees from the republican guard. We received orders to send six of the 12 of our UH-60 back home. I was tasked with the duty and responsibility to prepare the aircraft for a C-5 flight from Incirlik Air Force Base to home. We had the aircraft washed, folded and ready for loading within 12 hours of arrival. The C-5 was due to arrive early morning. We received word from forward that the Commander for Operation Provide Comfort II wanted a list of parts from the soon departing aircraft to maintain stock for the follow-on unit. This was no easy task seeing they wanted Engines, Blades certain electrical components. Higher headquarters was not going to delay the arrival or departure of the cargo airplane. We knew that when we arrived at the Air Base back in Germany these air craft would not be flyable for some time. We need not worry about it, but to focus on the mission at hand. The maintenance team swept into action and made the time line with minutes to spare with little or no sleep. By mid-July 91, the task force pulled out of Iraq but left a residual force in southwest Turkey to keep the Iraqis in check. A military coordination center remained in Iraq to liaise between the armed forces and civilian relief workers. The UN had assumed responsibility for the refugee camps. A month later the rest of the unit returned back to Fulda, Germany and received a well deserved Shoulder Sleeve Insignia (Combat Patch). Up until that point the task force airdropped 6,154 short tons of supplies, flown in another 6,251 by helicopter, and delivered a further 4,416 tons by truck.