

Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief as a Core Military
Competency

EWS Contemporary Issues Paper

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I. Introduction

Military forces in recent times have been called upon to perform a multitude of operations, from preserving peace and sovereignty to fighting in a full conflict war. These operations are expected to be performed by an organized military with sound planning, reliable efficiency, and watertight effectiveness. The current operating environment (COE) in Iraq and Afghanistan also call upon an armed force to perform operations between both ends of the spectrum (see Fig 1) such as Peace Enforcement, Counter Insurgency (COIN) and Counter Terrorism.

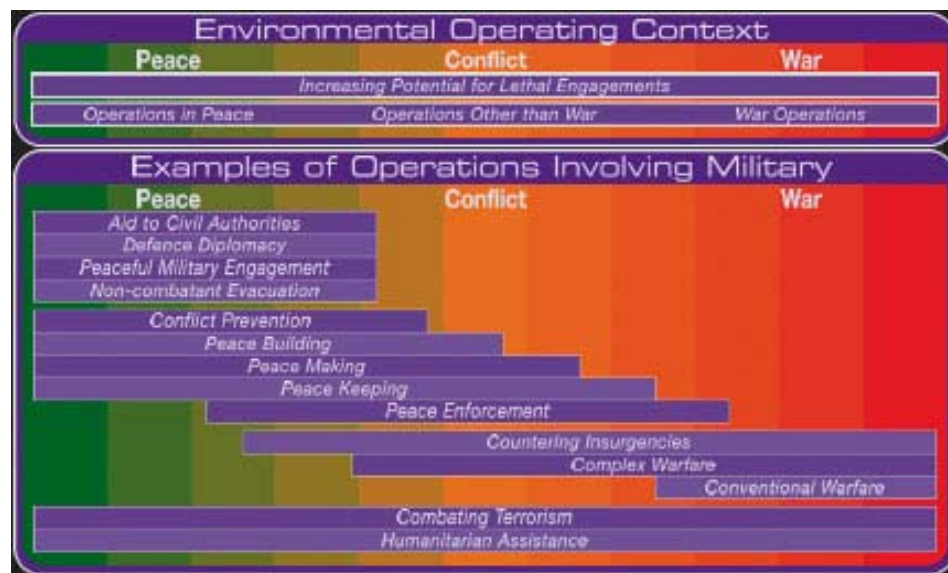


Figure 1 Spectrum of conflict diagram¹

The military have also been increasingly tasked as the first “on-scene” responder during a natural calamity, such as

¹ NZ Army, *Future Direction*, (Dec 2006),
<<http://www.army.mil.nz/at-a-glance/strategic-plan/future-direction.htm>>, 16 Feb 2008.

Operation SEA ANGEL (5th MEB), Operation UNIFIED ASSISTANCE (15th MEU), and Hurricane Katrina Relief (1/4 MAR). The reason for this is because a military force, especially one that is highly mobile and responsive, can provide the much needed first level Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief (HADR), especially if it involves massive destruction to infrastructure and lines of communications.

Yet, there is a lack of emphasis in HADR operations at all levels of military because the armed forces have traditionally viewed HADR operations as “someone else’s job” and that a it’s responsibility resides solely in winning a war and not winning the peace².

Given its mobility in an austere environment, and its ability to respond swiftly, the military should consider HADR as one of its core competencies and expand its HADR capabilities. By honing this skill set will ensure that an operation that is difficult to plan, execute, and train for, can be conducted with ease, expertise and proficiency.

II. Complexities with Planning for HADR Operations

HADR Operations are fundamentally similar with all other military operations: They are all complex evolutions involving

² Lawrence A Yates, *The US Military’s Experience in Stability Operations, 1789 – 2005*, (2006), < <http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/download/csipubs/yates.pdf>>, 28 Nov 2007.

many dynamics, and often with unforeseeable ramifications. However, two characteristics inherent to a natural calamity have a significant impact on the success of a well executed HADR Operation.

A. Characteristics of HADR Operations

In a full conflict campaign, one can expect a period of unrest, political instability and peace negotiations prior to the declaration of war. Natural disasters, however, can occur without warning. The Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004 happened in an instant and took many by surprise. It claimed over 180,000 lives from 11 countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, India, and Sri Lanka³. As speed is the "key to saving lives and reducing suffering in the early stages"⁴ during a natural disaster, military leaders often have to plan and coordinate relief operations within a very short time frame. From activation to execution, time is at a premium in the planning domain.

Adding to that, the lack of information due to the destruction of existing communications and infrastructure in a HADR situation, also requires military leaders to make

³ Wikipedia®, *Humanitarian Response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake*, 01 Dec 2007, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanitarian_response_to_the_2004_Indian_Ocean_earthquake>, 07 Dec 2007

⁴ Department of Navy, Navy Warfare Development Command, TACMEMO 3-07.6-06, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief Operations Planning*, May 2006, <<http://www.cds31.navy.mil/images/Foreign%20Humanitarian.pdf>>, pg 1-1, 08 Dec 2007

astute assumptions - a "skill" which can only be acquired from experience and training. In addition, the extent of devastation in which a natural disaster can inflict cannot be accurately predicted. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, no one could have imagined New Orleans Police Department officers to have *"deserted the city in the days before the storm, many of them escaping in their department-owned patrol cars"*⁵.

Such unpredictable characteristic of natural disasters compounds the already dysfunctional environment⁶ that military planners conducting HADR operations often face: The inability to quantify absolute and tangible endstate, until the damage has been ascertained, and all these being planned in a time compressed environment.

B. Host Nation Relationship

The political sensitivity and relationship with the host nation can boost or degrade the humanitarian efforts exponentially. This fact is especially true if the host nation does not have a cordial working relationship with the foreign country providing assistance.

⁵ Wikipedia ®, *Effect of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans*, 15 Feb 2008, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effect_of_Hurricane_Katrina_on_New_Orleans#_note-Katrina_Report>, 17 Feb 2008

⁶ Joint Warfare Publication 3-52, *Humanitarian/Disaster Relief Operations*, (Joint Doctrine and Concept Centre, UK, Oct 02), pg 1-3

15th MEU(SOC) found the initial stages of Operation UNIFIED ASSISTANCE tough and frustrating due to the political sensitivity and relationship with Indonesia. Prior to Operation UNIFIED ASSISTANCE, only 15% of Indonesians have positive opinion about America while majority of its citizens harbors an "anti-Americanism" feeling⁷.

To avoid reinforcing the perceived "American's arrogance and ulterior motives"⁸, 15th MEU(SOC) *"took a very deliberate, gradually escalating approach... with every action carefully calibrated and socialized with the Indonesians by LtCol Hatton and his team prior to execution"*⁹.

15th MEU(SOC) also enlisted the help of the Singapore Armed Forces, who understood the culture of Indonesia, and was able to bridge the language barrier with the Indonesians.

In addition, the presence of a foreign military force will inevitably raise tensions in a chaotic, disaster stricken country. The challenge is for the soldiers on the

⁷ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *No Global Warming Alarm in U.S., China – America's Image Slips, but Allies Share U.S. Concerns over Iran, Hamas*, June 2006, <<http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/252.pdf>>, pg 1, 27 Dec 2007

⁸ 15 MEU(SOC) Staff, "Anytime, Any place: 15 MEU(SOC) Operations in Support of Operation UNIFIED ASSISTANCE, 4 to 19 January 2005", *Marine Corps Gazette*, Oct 2005, pg 17-18.

⁹ 15 MEU(SOC), pg 17

ground to stay clear and remain politically neutral while continuously providing humanitarian aid.

III Executing HADR Operations with Non-governmental Organizations (NGO)

The international community responds rapidly when a natural disaster strikes. For example, within 3 weeks of the Boxing Day Tsunami, approximately 228 NGOs were operating in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand¹⁰. Dealing with NGOs, however, presents another set of problems.

In an ideal world, all NGOs share a common goal - to facilitate the rapid return to normalcy. However, each NGO has a different set of criteria to fulfill. For instance, NGOs rely on the public to maintain their goals and funding. Hence, NGOs might be concerned with being highly visible to the media while providing humanitarian assistance to the displaced personnel.

NGOs also vary in size and have no fixed structural organization for different disaster responses. As a consequence, planners often face difficulties in establishing an efficient coordination and integration between all different bodies.

NGOs have a set expectation of the military in a HADR situation, from establishing a Civil Military Operations Center for integration activities, providing security to NGOs, to

¹⁰ Department of Navy, Navy Warfare Development Command, TACMEMO, pg 4-3

employing military transportation assets for the delivering of aid. Certain factions of NGOs would prefer the military to “get-out-of-the-way” while others may be willing to operate in tandem with the military.

A. Benefits of operating with Non-governmental Organization (NGO)

The presence of NGOs is advantageous to the military. Resources such as medical, logistics, or manpower can be provided by some NGO bodies, thus alleviating certain burdens from the military HADR unit. One way to facilitate working with NGOs is to embed military representatives in major NGO bodies, such as the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) or the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). This arrangement, however, might be an insurmountable task due to the number of NGOs in the world.

Instead, a specialized military liaison team or unit could be established to deal in particular with NGOs and HADR operations. This unit, when not performing HADR operations, can invite representatives from different NGO groups for integration training or seminars. This will foster closer relationship and breed familiarity towards their mission and their *modus operandi*.

IV. Training for HADR Operations

Military training has traditionally been geared towards a major theatre war. As the current operating environment develops into an asymmetrical warfare scenario, it continues to place demand on military troops. This focus limits a combat unit the opportunity for training and resources to be honed in HADR operations between the frequent deployments.

Hence, modern military training is centered on fighting the current fight. As a consequence, units tasked with HADR operations have to re-learn and re-invent¹¹ the requirements of a successful HADR operation, even though previous units have the tried and tested formulas.

At the operational and tactical level, the lack of training creates a few intrinsic problems:

(1) Military medical personnel sent to a disaster area are more accustomed to treating healthy combat soldiers. These soldiers do not suffer from malaria or malnutrition - health issues that are common in an underdeveloped third world country¹². In addition, military medical units and apparatus are designed to deal with combat casualties of fit, young soldiers and not infants or pregnant woman.

¹¹ Lt. Col. Brent Bankus, "Training the Military For Peace Operations: A Past, Present, & Future View" In *Training for Humanitarian Relief Operations, Advancing Best Practice*, Chapter 5, (April 2002), < <http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks43.pdf>>, 1st Dec 2007, pg 34

¹² Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, Robert L. Mott, pg 817

(2) The lack of cultural awareness of other countries may also complicate the speedy provision of medical care to the host nation. For example, rendering medical assistance or examining a female patient by a male medical professional is forbidden in certain cultures.

The above highlights the need for methodical planning and organization of a specifically trained HADR unit. Such difficulties cannot be overcome when a military unit performing HADR is tasked organized only when the need arises.

Adding to this, it must also be recognized that employing current military assets and equipment with the current knowledge for HADR operations may not be the most cost effective and efficient manner. For example, using the reverse osmosis water purification unit (ROWPU) to produce potable water may cost more and is less effective than pouring chlorine at a water collection point¹³.

Such limitations cannot be resolved at the tactical level and have to be dealt with at a strategic and/or operational level force-building and procurement.

V. Purpose of a military

Many would argue that the primary function of an armed force is to preserve the sovereignty of a country, and if

¹³ Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, Robert L. Mott, pg 817

necessary, wage a full conflict war: a confrontation where organized armies lock horns in sustained combat operation with the ultimate aim of annihilating the adversary. Military institutions and war fighting doctrines have traditionally emphasis and reinforce this biasness, that "real" war is primarily a conventional one¹⁴.

Other factions would lobby against associating a military force with humanitarian assistance because *humanitarian assistance negatively impact the true military mission - fighting and winning the nation's war*¹⁵.

Hence, will espousing HADR capabilities dilute the purpose of a military force?

War, as defined by the U.S. Army, is "a phenomenon that takes on many forms, including large and small, total and limited, global and regional, conventional and unconventional"¹⁶. HADR operations falls under the realm of Stability Operations, and in essence, is classified as an unconventional form of war¹⁷.

Military have the moral duty to assist people in need and few organizations outside a military force have the capability, expertise, and organizational structure to conduct massive humanitarian operations. In addition, HADR operations are highly visible to the world public. A similar poll conducted post

¹⁴ Lawrence A Yates, pg 1

¹⁵ Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, Robert L. Mott, pg 808

¹⁶ Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 2001), pg 1-3

¹⁷ Lawrence Yates, pg 2

Boxing Day Tsunami revealed that the “Anti-Americanism” feeling has decreased from 85% to 62%¹⁸. Hence, it goes to show that if war is to serve policy¹⁹, a highly visible HADR operation can go a long way in satisfying certain policies of a country thereby satisfying the purpose of the military force.

A. Remaining Competent in other Operations

From the linear battlefields in World War I involving state players to the current asymmetrical battlefield of COIN with non-state actors, one can conclude that while the nature of war has remain, the face of warfare has changed. One thing is certain amidst these evolutions: natural disasters will continue to occur due to the changing Global environment²⁰, and the requirement to conduct HADR Operations is here to stay²¹, no matter how the face of warfare changes.

By regarding HADR as one of the core competencies of a military force and by focusing on HADR operational capabilities, one does not imply curtailing current

¹⁸ Pew Global Attitudes Project, pg 2, 27 Dec 2007

¹⁹ US Marine Corps MCDP 1, *Warfighting*, (U.S. Government Printing Office, June 1997) , pg 23

²⁰ Joint Warfare Publication 3-52, *Humanitarian/Disaster Relief Operations*, (Joint Doctrine and Concept Centre, UK, Oct 02), pg 1-1

²¹ Col Richard H. Witherspoon, *Foreword to Two Perspectives on Interventions of Human Operations*, by Ambassador Robert B Oakley, David Tucker , 1st Jul 1997, <<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=320>>, 15th Feb 2007

military competencies in the COE, but to strongly suggest the following:

(1) A separate sub branch with equal expeditionary capabilities be established or to equip the current expeditionary forces with HADR operational capabilities.

(2) A formalized military institution to train military officers with HADR planning, similar to the US Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute (PKSOI).

(3) To provide proper training programs to train and equip soldiers from the rifleman in a line company to the corpsman in the medical battalion.

V. Conclusion

While the war on terror and the fight against insurgencies continue unabated, the true purpose of a credible military cannot be forgotten. It is noteworthy to point out that an armed force is not established specifically for HADR operations, it is, however, important to add HADR operations as a core competency in the repertoire of an armed force.

Only by espousing on HADR capabilities, one can then safely say that the military force is truly a full spectrum force.

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(1989 words)

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