



HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF NAVAL OPERATIONS

In Briefing Note #3 we talked about the roles that navies undertake. The roles are often divided into three categories – warfighting, diplomatic and constabulary. Humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) operations would usually be classified as diplomatic roles. That may seem odd, but if the navy performs a role that helps another country recover, or build capacity, that’s considered naval diplomacy – it promotes closer relations, and plays a diplomatic role by making friends and helping friends.

The Canadian Navy has been involved in disaster relief a number of times in the past 20 years – assistance to the US Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and support to the Bahamas and Florida after hurricanes swept that area in the autumn of 1992.

A perfect example of the utility of navies in HADR operations is Operation *Hestia* which was the Canadian response to the 7.3 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010, causing severe and extensive damage, and killing thousands.

The Canadian government wanted to respond – as did other states. And the first response was to send naval ships. This illustrated some of the useful characteristics of maritime forces – i.e., their readiness, flexibility, sustainability, mobility, capacity and interoperability. A naval task group comprising HMCS *Athabaskan*, with a helicopter air detachment, and HMCS *Halifax* – with approximately 500 sailors, soldiers, and airmen/women in total – was sent very quickly out of Halifax. Both ships were rapidly readied for deployment, with hundreds of tons of humanitarian/disaster relief stores and equipment. The naval task group sailed from Halifax within 48 hours of the earthquake and less than 27 hours after receipt of the Warning Order. (This is not unusual because the RCN keeps a number of ships at high readiness so that they can respond quickly if needed.) It should be noted that the US Navy was even quicker on the scene, given the shorter distance to travel. The American aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson* immediately set sail from Norfolk, loaded with helicopters, personnel and support equipment, and arrived in Port-au-Prince less than 72 hours after the earthquake.

This quick response meant that disaster relief was on the way, even as the government and the military made plans of what to do when the ships arrived. For the five days it took the Canadian naval ships to arrive in Haiti, the ships’ teams organized and prepared the variety of traditional and non-traditional skills that they anticipated would be required. Once the ships arrived, and as the operation unfolded into a larger operation, the naval ships provided: command and control of naval humanitarian assistance teams; executing and/or enabling humanitarian assistance and disaster relief through light engineering work, general labour, force protection, technical support, etc.; providing medical assistance; producing and distributing water; delivering and distributing or enabling delivery/distribution of humanitarian and disaster relief supplies; and lodging, transporting and supporting Canadian Forces/government personnel in-theatre.¹

¹ For an illustration of the work the Canadian Navy did in Haiti, see the children’s book produced by the Naval Association of Canada called *Mom’s in the Navy*, which tells the story of the operation.

The naval response may be slower than a response via airlift or air operations. But the capacity of a naval ship is much greater than even larger airplanes. A ship can carry tons of material. As well, one of the things that makes naval HADR assistance so useful is that it is not constrained if there is airport damage or congestion. In the case of Haiti, much of the international assistance to the country was delayed by congestion at the Port-au-Prince airport. The airport did not have the capacity for the increased number of flights of big planes carrying material assistance, and damages to the airport reduced capacity even more. This wasn't a problem for naval forces which had helicopters and small boats that could be launched from the ships. Even if port facilities are damaged or are unavailable warships can send their boats ashore, or use a helicopter.

In Haiti, the ships sent teams ashore to engage in whatever needed to be done. They ended up doing such things as: road clearance; security; medical triage and medical orderly services; provision of drinking water; organization and distribution of food; construction of sanitation facilities and infrastructure (eg., shelters); and assisted in repair of critical equipment (both military and civilian).²

Personnel from *Athabaskan* and *Halifax* – with the assistance and direction of the Canadian Forces' Disaster Assistance Relief Team (DART) and in cooperation with non-government organizations – helped deliver significant assistance. The DART personnel and equipment can be readily installed on or supported by a ship.

In addition to avoiding the congestion at airports or in the face of destroyed airport infrastructure, the great thing about ships is that they do not require resources on the site of the disaster. They are self-sufficient. They make their own water, they feed and house their own people, and they have boats and helicopters to provide transportation for workers and evacuation for injured. This is an important capability as it means that naval relief workers do not make demands on already-strained or damaged infrastructure.

In the past, the RCN had two large replenishment ships (AORs) that participated in HADR operations. For example, HMCS *Preserver* participated in *Operation Deliverance* in 1992 in Somalia, and HMCS *Protecteur* deployed to East Timor in 1999. Both these ships were recently retired, leaving a hole in the RCN's forces. This hole has been filled on an interim basis by the replenishment ship NRU *Asterix* which can transport tons of cargo and disaster relief material. The RCN is waiting for two Joint Support Ships to be built as part of the National Shipbuilding Strategy, and once they are operational this will increase the navy's capability to respond to disasters.

Canada does not have hospital ships, but the US Navy does – US Naval Ships (USNS) *Comfort* and *Mercy*. One is maintained on both the East and West Coast, and they are available for deployment at five days' notice. When fully operational each ship has up to 12 operating rooms and can handle up to 1,000 patients. As more evidence of how HADR operations fit into naval diplomacy, the USN hospital ships regularly deploy on humanitarian missions, usually to places with minimal/non-existent medical and dental facilities and provide usually free health services.

One more point should be made about a naval response to humanitarian or disaster situations and this is the capability of ships to evacuate personnel from areas where a disaster has occurred or where a humanitarian emergency or conflict occurs. Thousands of Canadians live and work

² See Captain (N) Art McDonald, "Earthquake in Haiti Triggers Tsunami of Canadian Relief, *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 4-9.

abroad, and in emergencies a navy ship could evacuate them.

At a time when Haiti most needed disaster relief, Canadian naval forces, as well as the naval forces from other countries, delivered it from the sea – arriving and at work seven days after the earthquake. The Canadian navy maintains ships at high readiness, so it is well prepared to deploy rapidly, and to conduct and to lead humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations. With the adoption of NRU *Asterix* into service, capacity to carry humanitarian or disaster relief supplies has increased (see Briefing Note #11 for more information on *Asterix*). And once the Joint Support Ships are built and available, Canada will have even more capability to respond to humanitarian or disaster events.