

Warship Developments: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

Doug Thomas

A topic not often discussed in the media is the capability of naval forces to provide aid, either in cases of disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes and hurricanes, or pre-planned assistance to peoples and states who desperately need whatever help the developed world can provide.

The Canadian Navy has been involved in disaster relief a number of times over the past 20 years and there have been articles in *CNR* describing assistance to the US Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and support to Haiti after the calamitous earthquake of 12 January 2010. Earlier examples include both of our current Combat Support Ships, HMC Ships *Preserver* and *Protecteur*, which transported and delivered vital building materials and equipment to the Bahamas and Florida after two particularly damaging hurricanes swept that area in the autumn of 1992. The great thing about ship-borne assistance is that the talented ships' companies, and additional personnel with specific repair and building skills, are able to put the embarked supplies to good use to repair roofs, rebuild schools and hospitals, and work alongside local people to help them be self-sufficient again.

Another great thing about ships is that they don't require airfields or barracks or mess halls – they are self-sufficient within themselves. They make their own water, they anchor offshore if ports have been devastated, and they have embarked boats and helicopters to provide transportation for relief workers and to evacuate those requiring medical assistance. A recent example was the earthquake in Haiti, with naval and coast guard ships arriving in the following days and weeks. The American aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson's* speed, flexibility and sustainability made it an ideal platform to carry out relief operations. After being tasked to support the relief effort, the ship immediately set sail from Norfolk to Mayport, Florida, at speeds in excess of 30 knots, loaded 19 helicopters, personnel and support equipment from five different naval air squadrons in less than eight hours, and then proceeded to Port-au-Prince, arriving less than 72 hours after the earthquake. Over the next several weeks, *Carl Vinson* and its 19 helicopters flew more than 2,200 sorties, delivering more than 166 tons of food, 89,000 gallons of water and 38,700 pounds of medical supplies to earthquake victims. Additionally,



Photo: Corporal Johanie Mahieu,
Formation Imaging Services, MARLANT

HMCS Athabaskan's Master Corporal J.P. Somerset (left) and Able Seaman P.J. MacKenzie provide medical assistance to earthquake casualties in Leogane, Haiti, 19 January 2010. *is photo, Helping Hands, won first place in the 42nd DND photography contest.*

its helicopters conducted 476 medical evacuations and the ship's medical personnel treated 60 patients in its medical ward.

Hospital Ships (Writ Very Large)

The US Military Sealift Command (MSC) operates two huge hospital ships, US Naval Ships (USNS) *Comfort* and *Mercy*. One is maintained on each coast with a small civilian crew and an embarked core naval medical team, and they are available for deployment at five days' notice. The ships are 894 feet long with a beam of 106 feet, displacing 70,000 tonnes and when fully operational have 63 civilians, 956 naval hospital staff, 258 naval support staff and can handle up to 1,000 patients. *Comfort* and its crew had previously distinguished themselves in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and on the day following the Haitian earthquake *Comfort* was ordered to make ready to sail, embarked many additional personnel and supplies, and departed its home port of Baltimore, Maryland, on 16 January. It arrived in Port-au-Prince on the 20th and began providing medical treatment the same day. In fact the activity rate was such that the ship reached



A young Haitian boy is comforted by medical personnel onboard the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) following life-saving surgery, 23 January 2010.

full operational capacity for the first time since it was delivered to the navy in 1987, utilizing all 12 operating rooms and all 1,000 beds. Although the ship was less capable than a traditional hospital on land, *Comfort* offered the most advanced medical care available in Haiti following the earthquake.

Both *Comfort* and *Mercy* have also conducted planned humanitarian missions, particularly in areas of the world where medical facilities are minimal or non-existent. For example, in 2007 *Comfort* visited 12 Central American, South American and Caribbean states where its embarked medical crew provided free health care services to communities in need. The objective of the mission was to offer valuable training to military personnel while promoting goodwill in the region. In all, the civilian and military medical team treated more than 98,000 patients, provided 386,000 patient encounters and performed 1,100 surgeries. That embarked medical crew was made up of more than 500 doctors, nurses and health care professionals from military (including other states, such as Canada) and non-governmental organizations, with the aim of supporting medical humanitarian assistance efforts ashore. *Comfort's* dental staff treated 25,000 patients and about 1,000 pieces of medical equipment were repaired at local health facilities.

A Medium-Power Response

Yes, you may say, a superpower can provide this type of capability, but what about medium-power countries such as Canada?

Canada did send ships to the Gulf Coast after Katrina and also to Haiti after the earthquake. Unfortunately, as the East Coast AOR HMCS *Preserver* was unavailable for deployment due to refit or maintenance issues, the only naval vessels available were destroyers and frigates with limited capacity to carry supplies. In 2005 a Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker with large cargo holds full of building materials accompanied the task group but no such large vessel was available in January 2010. Nevertheless, the ships' companies consisted of about 500 well-trained

and highly motivated sailors who made themselves very useful, as was reported in Captain (N) Art MacDonald's article in the Summer 2010 issue of *CNR*.

If Canada is to contribute, in a smaller but still significant way, it could accomplish this with a ship like the Joint Support Ship if two conditions are met. First, it could make a contribution *if* that vessel has significantly greater capacity to perform these roles than the AORs *Provider*, *Protecteur* and *Preserver* (all of which were/have been in commission for over 40 years) which they will eventually replace. And, second, Canada could make a contribution *if* a third ship is built so that the navy has spare capacity to re-role one or more vessels for disaster relief or a planned humanitarian assistance mission which could perhaps be conducted on an annual basis.

With a large-capacity (1,500 lane-metres) general purpose cargo deck, which initially had been planned for these ships, I believe the equivalent of a field hospital – manned by the Canadian Forces' Disaster Assistance Response



Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) anchored off the coast of Port-au-Prince, 5 September 2007 during a four-month humanitarian deployment to Latin America and the Caribbean providing medical treatment to patients in a dozen countries.

Team (DART) or a multinational and non-governmental medical team – could be readily installed to meet these important missions. One has only to look at the private donations of hundreds of millions of dollars made by Canadians after the Indonesian tsunami and the Haitian earthquake to see that this type of aid has huge support across the country. Why couldn't some of the federal government's matching funds go to establish this capability in the Joint Support Ships which then could be put to good use in responding to a number of such incidents over their long service lives – some of them perhaps in our own coastal waters? 🇨🇦