

Corps' Aviation: The "Nine-One-One" US Military Unit and its Humanitarian Relief Operations (HRO)

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Marine Corps aviation, (the "Nine-One-One" unit of the United States military) due to its rapid deployment capability, has a long tradition of conducting humanitarian relief operations both at home and abroad.¹ There are numerous examples of Marine Corps involvement in humanitarian and disaster relief operations. Among there are the 1989 San Francisco Earthquake, Hurricane Hugo (1989), Southern California Wildfires, the Tibet and Haiti Earthquakes (2008 & 2010 respectively), as well as many other similar situations occurring in both peacetime and wartime.

The acronym HRO -- for Humanitarian Relief Operations -- is synonymous with "Heroes" because of the uncommon valor and expeditionary nature associated with Corps aviation. Vertical envelopment – a tactical maneuver in which troops are either air dropped or air landed, attack the rear and flanks of an opponent force, thereby cutting off or encircling a force – is crucial to fulfillment of HRO. For a humanitarian mission, vertical envelopment enables Marine aviation units to bypass difficult terrain or conditions to deliver assistance and aid to remote, distressed areas. In many situations, this is exemplified by the vertical or short takeoff and landing (VSTOL) capability of its helicopters.²

In this article, we briefly recount three such examples where these characteristics came fully into play on the global stage: *Operation Provide Comfort* (Northern Iraq, 1991), *Operation Sea Angel II* (Bangladesh, 2007) and *Operation Sahayogi Haat* (Charikot, Nepal, 2015).

Operation Provide Comfort (Northern Iraq – April 7 to July 15 1991)

In *Operation Provide Comfort*, US Marines served as "Good Samaritans." They were among the first to arrive and among the last to leave, as over 750,000 starving Kurdish people were fed, nursed back to health and safely returned to their homeland filled with hope.

Operating more than 500 miles from their sea base, the Marines involved in this HRO referred to themselves as "Devil Dogs." The appreciative Kurds called them "Food Soldiers." The movement, positioning and distribution of relief-aid supplies required both the expeditionary and special operations capabilities of Marine Corps aviation in order to sustain the ongoing viability of such a massive humanitarian mission.³ Harsh conditions

¹ Field research notes for Chapter 5 (Game Theory) in *HIGH FLIGHT*. By George Haloulakos. UC San Diego Bookstore Publishing Company, 2014.

² Definition of "vertical envelopment" (US Dept of Defense) – www.militaryfactory.com

³ *Humanitarian Operations in Northern Iraq, 1991 – With Marines In Operation Provide Comfort*. Pages iii, 30-32 and 94. By Lt Col Ronald J. Brown – USMC Reserve. History and Museums Division Headquarters. USMC, Washington DC (published 1995).

necessitated expeditionary capability, while complexity of distribution (command element, helicopter and engineer support teams, civil affairs representatives and communications section) required special operations. Vertical envelopment (typically associated with helicopters) enabled the Corps to bypass the mountains and desert to deliver humanitarian aid in a timely and efficient manner.

Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron HMM-264 (*Black Knights*) -- assigned to the 24th MEU (Marine Expeditionary Unit) – executed critical humanitarian service support in movement of supplies as well as relief aid that included, but not limited to emergency airdrop to refugee camps as well as sustainment of relief operations once food, water and blankets had been delivered via initial sorties by six C-130 *Hercules* cargo transport aircraft.

HMM-264 -- with its motto “Checkmate” -- provided ongoing heavy-lifting cargo operations to not only dispense relief aid but service support to nurse starving people back to health. The varied but complementary capabilities of the helicopters making up the squadron truly reflect both the “chess” nickname and motto because the “knight” is the only chess piece capable of leaping over other pieces and able to land on every square of the board!

The CH-46E *Sea Knight* helicopters, providing medium lift transport, were the mainstay of HMM-264 in its vertical replenishment operations. The squadron’s CH-53E *Super Stallion* helicopters provided heavy-lift cargo transport. The HMM-264’s light rotary craft contingent – UH-1N *Iroquois* (“Huey”) and AH-1T *Sea Cobra* – provided protection and utility support for the *Sea Knights* and *Super Stallions*.⁴

In sum, Marine Corps Aviation not only executed the role of being “Good Samaritans” but of also being “Knights in Shining Armor” for *Operation Provide Comfort*.

Sea Angel II (Bangladesh, November - December 2007)

In mid-November 2007, Tropical Cyclone Sidr devastated Bangladesh with massive flooding and infrastructure damage. Considered one of the worst natural disasters in Bangladesh’s history, Cyclone Sidr was the worst storm since Cyclone Marian in 1991.

The United States dispatched elements of the US military to conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as part of *Operation Sea Angel II*, led by Joint Task Force Sea Angel II. [This was in reference to the relief mission codenamed *Operation Sea Angel* dispatched following Cyclone Marian]. In support of the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Office of Foreign Disaster Relief, US Pacific Command (PACOM) provided transportation assistance that included heavy lift helicopter support. Specifically, Navy and Marine Corps helicopters from the *USS Kearsarge* (LHD-3) and the *USS Tarawa* (LHA-1) assisted with transportation of relief supplies, equipment and personnel.⁵

⁴ Brown. 1995. Pages 6, 15, and 17-21.

⁵ Operation Sea Angel II – GlobalSecurity.org

As with other humanitarian operations in harsh and remote areas, the VSTOL and expeditionary capabilities of Marine Corps aviation were an integral part of successfully completing this mission. The *USS Kearsarge* and the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) Special Operations Capable (SOC) used a CH-53 *Super Stallion* helicopter, a CH-46 *Sea Knight* helicopter, and an SH-60 *Seahawk* helicopter to transport supplies. Along with an LCAC (Landing Craft Air Cushion), *Kearsarge* and the 22nd MEU (SOC) delivered over 12,000 gallons of fresh water and 73,000 pounds of the aid material in just seven days (November 23 – 30) to the areas requiring immediate assistance.

On December 3 the *USS Tarawa* and the 11th MEU (SOC) arrived to further support ongoing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations as part of *Operation Sea Angel II*. *Tarawa* and her crew of sailors and Marines relieved the *Kearsarge* and the 22nd MEU (SOC).⁶

Operation Sahayogi Haat (“Helping Hands”) - (Charikot, Nepal, 2015)

In April and May 2015, Nepal suffered a series of devastating earthquakes. Once again, the United States was among the first countries to step forward and offer critical help to people of Nepal. In *Operation Sahayogi Haat*, US military relief operations delivered humanitarian assistance to those who suffered significant (in many cases, total) losses due to the earthquakes.

During *Operation Sahayogi Haat*, the US Marine Corps deployed over 110 tons of relief supplies, including shelter kits with blankets, medical supplies, emergency supplemental food supplies including fresh water. Transportation of about 533 individual rescues and approximately 69 medical evacuations were also carried out.⁷ During *Operation Sahayogi Haat*, Marine Corps aviation committed three UH-1Y *Huey* helicopters, four MV-22B *Osprey* tiltrotor aircraft and four KC-130J *Hercules* aircraft to the relief effort.⁸ Concurrent with this US military relief operation were *Operation Sankat Mochan* (Nepal Army earthquake relief operation) and *Operation Maitri* (Indian Armed Forces relief operation), which Marine aviation units directly supported. Because the earthquake victims were facing a coming monsoon season, the necessity for rapid deployment and distribution of relief supplies had been made all the more urgent. As such, the Marines had the added incentive to carry forth humanitarian assistance in the most timely manner possible. In facing very difficult circumstances, US Marine Corps aviation responded well beyond the expectation of Nepalese Army command.⁹

Unfortunately, the Marine Corps endured a tragic loss while supporting *Operation Maitri*. On May 12, 2015, six Marines from Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron HMLA-469 (*Vengeance*) gave their last measure of full devotion when their UH-1Y *Huey* helicopter crashed north of Charikot, Nepal.¹⁰ Despite harsh unfamiliar terrain and deteriorating weather conditions, the Marines fearlessly pushed on to execute their

⁶ Operation Sea Angel II – GlobalSecurity.org

⁷ “Nepal Earthquake Task Force Deactivates.” *DoD News*. U.S. Department of Defense. May 26, 2015.

⁸ “JTF deactivates after Operation Sahayogi Haat.” *Marines*. U.S. Marine Corps. May 26, 2015.

⁹ <https://www.marines.mil/News/News-Display/Article/588290/joint-personnel-us-marines-fly-critical-supplies-to-nepal-earthquake-survivors/>

¹⁰ <https://www.helis.com/database/accidents/>

humanitarian mission to reach those people requiring urgent care. Ultimately, the Marines gave their lives to help ease the suffering of countless Nepalese earthquake victims.

The six Marines of HMLA-469 (based at MCAS Camp Pendleton, CA) gave their lives in service to their fellow man. The Flying Leathernecks honor the legacy of service and sacrifice of Captain Dustin R. Lukasiewicz, Captain Christopher L. Norgen, Sergeant Ward M. Johnson IV, Sergeant Eric M. Seaman, Corporal Sara A. Medina and Lance Corporal Jacob A. Hug.¹¹ The commitment these Marines had to their duty shows the true resilience of humanity in the face of incredible suffering.

Closing Thoughts – Marines are trained to improvise, adapt and overcome all obstacles in whatever situation they are needed. The examples cited in this article demonstrate that “the kinds of battles Marines fight range from traditional warfare to humanitarian and disaster relief missions (HADR).”¹² Humanitarian missions truly reflect honor, courage and commitment – the core values of the Marines.

¹¹ <https://www.3rdmaw.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/590667/hmla-469-hosts-memorial-ceremony-for-marines-killed-in-nepal/>

¹² <https://www.marines.com/who-we-are/our-purpose.html>