



# HOW SOCSOUTH ENABLERS LIVE BY THE 5<sup>TH</sup> SOF TRUTH

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Five truths govern everything that Special Operations Forces do every day around the world. To the critical support personnel behind the scenes handling personnel actions, sustainment and distribution, communications systems and financial management, none is more important than the capstone truth... "Most Special Operations require non-Special Operations Force assistance." This is true no matter the mission or environment and was especially evident during the response to the multiple catastrophic hurricanes that carved a path of death and destruction across the Caribbean and South Eastern United States in the fall of 2017. Though the face of the Special Operations Command South response was the common visage of Army Special Forces and Navy SEALs, they had a formidable force of logisticians, communicators, medics and other enablers backing them up.

The 400 personnel of SOCSOUTH proved to be the linchpin around which humanitarian assistance and disaster relief response pivoted. SOCSOUTH is the Theater Special Operations Command assigned to United States Southern Command, tasked with the primary mission of Countering Threat Networks seeking to exploit the southern approaches to the United States. One specific SOUTHCOM line of effort in this region, and the subject of this case study, is enabling rapid response through prompt crisis response.

As Hurricane Irma left a swath of destruction across the Caribbean basin and zeroed in on southern Florida, SOUTHCOM and SOCSOUTH found themselves evacuating the crisis zone while trying to prepare for expected response actions. SOCSOUTH activated its contingency plan and began preparations to posture personnel and equipment necessary to maintain continuity of operations during the anticipated storm. In Homestead, Florida, SOCSOUTH personnel diligently prepared houses and readied the command headquarters for an expected onslaught. The 112th Signal Detachment's senior non-commissioned officer led preparation efforts for service members and their families in conjunction with the unit's AMBER Cycle Team, securing communications equipment, generators, vehicles and facilities for hurricane impact at home station. The GREEN Cycle Team maintained current signal support operations and prepared remaining detachment personnel for evacuation. The detachment's ability to posture for the hurricane in less than 24 hours was vital in enabling its ability to handle the contingencies to come.

As many prepared to evacuate the impending storm's path, a small team planned to remain in south Florida and endured vicious winds, torrential rains and sweltering temperatures as the storm made landfall. This Ride-Out Team took precise measures to keep server rooms as cool as possible by powering down nonessential equipment to ensure the survivability of SOCSOUTH's essential communications systems. The J6 team sustained SOCSOUTH HQ's Special Operations Information Environment network to maintain real-time communication and situational awareness between home station and the Alternate Command Post located in Northwest Florida. They



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maintained a 24-hour video teleconferencing bridge that was connected to a camera facing the outside of the HQ to help leaders obtain real-time and post crisis assessment of the weather and damage. Logisticians worked tirelessly to ensure those remaining behind in the building had food and water in anticipation of flooding that could prevent anyone from leaving the building until the waters subsided.

Soon, word came from higher headquarters to deploy the SOUTHCOM Situational Assessment Team to Puerto Rico and begin assessments on the situation in Saint Martin and the British Virgin Islands in advance of forthcoming U.S. Agency for International Development, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and Joint Task Force relief missions. SOCSOUTH J3 Operations, J4 Logistics, medics and 112th communicators who had made preparations immediately moved to the disaster zone while recalling personnel from their safe havens to backfill those heading towards the storm.

Immediately upon landing in Puerto Rico, SOCSOUTH J4 personnel engaged the Puerto Rico Army and



Air National Guard units for support. These formations were already alerted and on heightened readiness levels due to impact on the island created by Hurricane Irma. In fact, the island was already conducting full recovery operations for their inland suburbs, which were lacking electricity and water. The SSATs were given an operational space at Muniz Air National Guard Base where they establish their temporary C2 node. SOCSOUTH, Joint Special Operations Air Component and 7th Special Forces Group personnel worked around the clock from their small office to plan movements, coordinate assessments and up channel information from Saint Martin and the British Virgin Islands, back to SOUTHCOM. While establishing SSAT operations in Puerto Rico, SOUTHCOM was mobilizing the full weight of capability to move Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force, now designated as JTF-Leeward Islands from Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras to Puerto Rico. SOCSOUTH logisticians set the stage for reception, staging, onward movement and integration of the JTF and assisted with the communications

between base personnel and helped to set the conditions for the establishment of the JTF.

*"The Puerto Rico National Guard received us with open arms, but they were not aware of the massive response force that is coming behind us in a matter of hours. JTF-LI ADVON will be here within hours and we don't have a location to stage their equipment or house them."*

## SOCSOUTH J4

Despite the miscommunications and the adverse conditions caused by the hurricane, SOCSOUTH J4 personnel were able to push the assessment team to Saint Martin and the British Virgin Islands to join supporting actions with the French, Dutch and local authorities. Their ground truth assessment pushed back to JTF-LI and SOUTHCOM leadership allowed rapid movement of required relief supplies and equipment to these devastated locales and mitigated human suffering in short order.

01 Service members evacuated from the U.S. Virgin Islands in anticipation of Hurricane Maria are processed onto the USS Kearsarge. The amphibious assault ship also assisted with relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma. U.S. ARMY PHOTOBY MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 3RD CLASS RYRE ARCIAGA

While the SSAT was executing in the islands, SOCSOUTH was retrograding back to Homestead to reoccupy its headquarters and assume full operations for SOF efforts throughout the SOUTHCOM AOR and continued HA/DR SSAT taskings post-Hurricane Irma. However, that was easier said than done. South Florida escaped the widespread devastation that rendered the islands nearby uninhabitable, but there was still plenty of damage which made roads impassable, power intermittent and supplies scarce. Additionally, SOCSOUTH personnel were spread all over the United States and had to slowly make their way back amidst long lines of traffic and congested highways. As personnel slowly trickled back into home station, Hurricane Maria developed from a worrying blip to a behemoth storm that threatened massive destruction on a scale that would soon dwarf Irma. As Maria aimed toward Puerto Rico, SOCSOUTH readied for another round and proactively postured for additional tasks. Utilizing Air Force Special Operations Command aircraft assets, additional personnel moved to Puerto Rico the day before the second storm landed.



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The changing mission and multiple geographically separated SOF elements necessitated a change in construct. USAID/OFDA and JTF-LI (possessed mass) in the region and a myriad of assessment capabilities at hand. Multiple efforts were now converging on the new locations at once. The SSAT, originally deployed for Irma missions in Saint Martin and the British Virgin Islands, was transformed into a SOF Liaison Element and tasked to move a team to Dominica and Martinique as soon as transportation allowed. AFSOC rapidly deployed two MC-130s to Barbados to provide key lift assets to Dominica and Guadeloupe with assistance from SOCSOUTH logisticians arranging bed-down support while the aircraft were already in the air.

On the ground in Dominica, the team found themselves in conditions that were as non permissive as could be found outside of an active combat zone. Due to heavy rains, landslides and high winds, infrastructure was inaccessible, degraded or nonexistent. Roads were inaccessible and there was little to no access to fuel on the island. Yet, they pushed on by rotary wing to Ross University to lead the evacuation of students and American citizens back to the airfield for fixed-wing movement to the U.S. in addition to providing much needed support to evacuees at State Department processing centers and newly established USAID coordinating cells. Through it all, communications again proved to be the lifeline. With power nonexistent and no generator assets on hand, traditional 112th Signal Unit solutions were rendered all but useless. Instead, the expert communicators utilized man-portable tracking beacons to pass text messages back to home station to keep leadership apprised and up channel requests for critical logistics support.



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Once on the ground, they sheltered in place with the remaining SSAT personnel. SSAT leadership and a small element had already moved to Curacao with JTF-LI leadership elements to maintain command and control during the expected loss of communications and power once Maria stormed ashore. Communicators of the 112th Signal Detachment are an example of SOF enabler ingenuity and skill, shot a tactical satellite signal through the eye of the hurricane enabling communication with SOCSOUTH in real time during the storm's passing.

Emerging after the storm had passed, they gazed on massive devastation that would be recounted in excruciating detail in the 24-hour news cycle for weeks to follow. Even though the destruction was almost total, the response would have to be handled by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and United States Northern Command. SOCSOUTH was needed elsewhere.



## 2017 HURRICANE SEASON SOC SOUTH QUICK FACTS

**300 DEPLOYED PERSONNEL**

**10 HELICOPTERS**

**4 C-130'S**

**1 AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT SHIP**

**1 FAST TRANSPORT SHIP**

**340,000 POUNDS OF  
RELIEF SUPPLIES**

**83,000 GALLONS OF WATER**

**2,200 PEOPLE EVACUATED**

One of the SOCSOUTH logisticians fortuitously had her Government Purchase Card on hand and was authorized by SOUTHCOM to become the de facto purchasing agent for JTF-LI, then on Martinique, which had been spared a direct impact from Maria. She performed a yeoman's duties in procuring critical rescue equipment, fuel stocks and supplies as well as coordinating resupply movement of food and water that JTF-LI required to fulfil the mission.

While the teams forward were rapidly evacuating people off the islands, USAID/OFDA reached out to SOCSOUTH J4 back at home station requesting assistance with high priority shipment of relief supplies to Dominica. With the words "we can't help you" not in their vocabulary, J4 members quickly coordinated between OFDA, SOUTHCOM and the 612 Air Operations Center to prepare cargo for air shipment from OFDA's Miami warehouse to Dominica. Pulling together all available bodies, SOCSOUTH logisticians, contracting officer and J3 Air personnel spent a sweltering day building aircraft pallets to get first responder equipment and enough plastic sheeting to protect 2,500 Dominican homes ready for a C-130 mission departing in short order.

The 2017 hurricane season was unprecedented in the destruction wrought on the islands of the Caribbean, continental United States, and the lives impacted throughout the region. From the approach of Hurricane Irma through post Hurricane Maria, SOCSOUTH personnel were always moving towards the storms...not away. When everyone finally came home, exhausted and ready for a hard-earned rest, the final tally was awe inspiring. JTF-LI and its supporting elements deployed more than 300 personnel along with 10 helicopters, four C-130s, an amphibious assault ship and a

fast transport ship. Collectively the force moved more than 340,000 pounds of relief supplies, desalinated 83,000 gallons of water and evacuated 2,200 people left stranded by the combination of storms across the Caribbean basin.

SOF was the first out the door when these hurricanes laid waste to the islands, but the operators by themselves could not do it alone. The communicators, logisticians, medics and other enablers from SOCSOUTH moved mountains to bring the full weight of the command to bear. In doing so, they rewrote the book on what SOF can provide in support to conventional forces in an HA/DR environment. Then-SOCSOUTH Commander, Rear Admiral Colin Green summed it up best when saying, "As a mutually supportive interoperable partner, SOF brings unique capabilities to our partners in need, and the joint task force. We have the right people with the necessary skills and equipment always ready to deploy." 

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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01 Service members load a container of supplies onto an aircraft in Honduras for delivery to areas in the eastern Caribbean Sea affected by Hurricane Irma. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY CPL. MELANIE KILCLINE

02 A St. Maarten resort during Hurricane Irma. COURTESY PHOTO