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A TEAM EFFORT

Rapid Response and Proactive Theater Response
in the Caribbean.

BY COLONEL RAFAEL RODRIGUEZ

The MC-130J pilots calculated we would land one hour before sunrise. Hurricane Irma struck Puerto Rico on Sept. 6, five days later the recovery was still ongoing. Even at night, however, the damage was visible from the air. Most of the special operators flying on Air Force Special Operations Command Expeditionary Special Operations Group, or ESOG, aircraft managed to steal sleep between cargo pallets, under vehicles or slumped over in their seats. It's the kind of sleep that doesn't leave you feeling rested, yet you know it's necessary. One astute operator set up a hammock that he anchored to the aircraft's frame. He was the envy of the chalk. The uncomfortable sleep was familiar to the special operators arriving at Puerto Rico's San Juan International Airport to stage for operations 230 miles away on the island of Saint Martin.

Two weeks prior to arrival in Puerto Rico, members of the SOCSOUTH staff gave little thought to the tropical wave forming over western Africa. As this tropical wave moved west and weather conditions fell in its favor, Hurricane Irma was born. The SOCSOUTH staff started keeping a close watch. On the morning of Sept. 6, 2017, Hurricane Irma made landfall in Saint Martin at peak strength. The aftermath was catastrophic as trees were ripped from the ground, vehicles washed away, buildings collapsed, island-wide power outage occurred and critical water infrastructure was damaged. Saint Martin was devastated. Shortly afterward, the French government made an official request to the United States for support. U.S. Southern Command began planning for a humanitarian assistance/disaster relief mission but was missing a critical ingredient — boots on the ground to provide situational awareness on Saint Martin.

Around this same time, SOCSOUTH issued an evacuation order to its service members and their families. Hurricane Irma's projected path was directly over Miami-Dade County and safety became paramount as families departed southern Florida. Rear Admiral



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 Disaster Assistance Response Team, Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force and Situational Awareness Team members meet with Brig. Gen Peter De Vin, commander of Netherlands forces in the Caribbean in response to Hurricane Irma.

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 U.S. Southern Command Service Members prepare U.S. citizens for evacuation from Dominica in the aftermath of hurricanes Irma and Maria.

U.S. MARINE CORPS PHOTOS BY SGT. IAN LEONES

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Collin Green, SOCSOUTH Commander, directed the activation of its alternate command post to maintain command and control. While in the process of evacuation, a small cross-functional command and control element sent their families to safety and then began working from the alternate command post. Battle tracking in combat is no easy task. Battle tracking more than 300 families who have the freedom to choose where to go anywhere in the world is even harder. Some families chose to stay, some drove to other parts of Florida, others drove or flew across the country, some joined together with other families and others split into smaller groups. Their movements were constant. As Hurricane Irma's trajectory changed, over-packed minivans traveled opposite of Irma's projected path. It was a J33's battle tracking nightmare. What drives special operators, however, is not just the work they achieve, but also the work of achieving it. Over the next few days the SOCSOUTH Continuity of Operations Plan staff mapped every address, accounted for every family, and maintained constant communications with all members of the command.

Just as information management was getting under control, on the after-

noon of Sept. 10, USSOUTHCOM notified SOCSOUTH to assemble and deploy a SOUTHCOM Situational Assessment Team to Saint Martin. The Geographical Combatant Commander needed boots on the ground. Our COOP site seemed fortunate at the time, but our luck was a residue of design. The infrastructure and support afforded SOCSOUTH by its host was COOP heaven, and we knew it. Everything the SSAT needed, and almost everything the SSAT wanted, was on site and available for employment. The SSAT grew by one ODA and proceeded forward to provide situational awareness support for key decision-makers on the ground. In sequence, AFSOC's ESOG landed under the command of U.S. Air Force Colonel Mike Jackson at Hurlburt Airfield with three MC-130Js later that evening. This was an impressive demonstration of capability on less than 10 hours notice. Shortly after, we were en route to Puerto Rico.

The SSAT personnel and its equipment landed in Puerto Rico in the early morning hours and immediately began preparation for their flight onto Saint Martin. A small command and control element would stay on Puerto Rico to maintain communication with USSOUTHCOM and SOCSOUTH. The SSAT and Joint Special Operations Air

Detachment-South decided to collocate in a small office entrusted to Col. Jackson, courtesy of a professional relationship with the Puerto Rico Air National Guard. The office was small; however, it had a view of the airfield. During daylight hours on the morning of Sept. 11, 2017, less than 24 hours after notification, SSAT personnel landed at Princess Juliana International Airport on the Dutch side of Saint Martin. Irma spared little on the island. The first special operators on Saint Martin were careful observers of human motivation and social interaction.

RAPID RESPONSE

Military personnel want metrics to measure themselves against. In rapid response, time is that unit of measure. How fast can SOF safely and effectively arrive at a crisis location? SOCSOUTH's culture, and SOF writ large, is imbued with a readiness mentality and rapid response posture. It is a critical capability that SOF contributes to the Joint Force, and in this case, to USSOUTHCOM. Every month, the SOCSOUTH SSAT equipment is unpacked, tested and repacked. Every week, the SOCSOUTH SSAT roster is scrubbed name-by-name. Every day,

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the disposition of forces in the SOUTHCOM AOR is recalculated. It's tedious. It's mundane. It's imperative.

Enabling Rapid Response is just as much a culture as it is an action. It's a steady facet of all SOCSOUTH's operations, activities, and investments. Enabling Rapid Response is part of all SOCSOUTH's battle rhythm events. It effects planning at all levels, TDY trips, leave plans and sometimes cancelled leave plans. It effects SSAT composition and capability. Rapid Response is part of a special operator's core. The access and placement SOCSOUTH forces have throughout the theatre is indispensable. Language, cultural awareness, acclimatization, relationships, training and equipment, all contribute to SOCSOUTH's Rapid Response capabilities. SOCSOUTH's ability to quickly get on site anywhere in the SOUTHCOM AOR is formidable. SOF's response to Hurricane Irma proves a definitive reminder.

SAINT MARTIN

Despite the French request for U.S. assistance, airfield limitations forced the SSAT to land on the Dutch side of the island. The Dutch military and USAID's Disaster Assistance Response Team members were easy to locate. The security situation was relatively stable and there was a sense the Dutch military was in control of [their] situation. The Dutch were friendly, polite, and easy to work with. What took the SSAT members by surprise however, was how little was known about the French side of the island. The political decisions in France and the Netherlands were manifesting more than 4,000 miles away on Saint Martin. This is a lesson the SSAT would learn from their interaction on the island, and one they will carry for years to come. Politics always matter — even in HA/DR.

The SSAT coordinated with the Dutch military and received approval to move throughout their territory. Within 48 hours, the SSAT completed dozens of infrastructure assessments, identified local leaders, sent supply list of items most in demand, and most importantly, provided this information to USSOUTHCOM. Information was flowing. Every day the situation improved on the Dutch side. The SSAT worked closely with DART to cover more ground and compare notes



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and observations. It took time, but the relationships grew and interagency team gained momentum. Simultaneously, at USSOUTHCOM's COOP site, diplomatic efforts were underway for the SSAT to cross the border onto the French side. The French approved the crossing.

The French side of the island was noticeably more desperate. The streets less navigable. The buildings more damaged. The French military more cautious. The first time meeting the French military went well but when the SSAT asked to spend the night at the L'Esperance Airport, the French promptly denied the request. It made for a long drive back to the Dutch airfield. Infrastructure assessments continued on both sides of the island. The DART and SSAT primed the island for the SPMAGTF and handover began shortly after the Marines' arrival.

Steady state operations were within reach when news of Hurricane Maria grew louder. Puerto Rico was once again in a hurricane's path. The SSAT C2 element had to decide to relocate or ride out the storm in Puerto Rico.

PROACTIVE THEATER POSTURE

The original SSAT members operating on Saint Martin consolidated

and returned to CONUS for refit and recovery. AFSOC's ESOG flew their air package of operators and maintainers back to Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico. The SSAT C2 element relocated from Puerto Rico to Curacao. A new rotation of SSAT members landed on Puerto Rico to collocate with the SPMAGTF main body to ride out Hurricane Maria. There were a lot of moving pieces. Everyone however, was in place to continue operations through the new storm's duration and resume full operations after it departed.

Hurricane Maria ravaged Puerto Rico. The island had no power and our communications equipment could not operate in hurricane conditions. The Curacao C2 element assumed full command. Equipped with two lap tops and four smart phones, operations continued on Saint Martin and planning began for Dominica. As the new SSAT (later renamed to a Special Operations Forces Liaison Element) waited in Puerto Rico, the urgency rose to attain situational awareness on Dominica. SOCSOUTH re-missioned a Naval Special Warfare (NSW) team to Dominica. SOCSOUTH's proactive theater posture investments was paying high dividends. The ability to have deployed



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Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force team members set up a Lightweight Water Purification System at a water distribution site on Saint Martin. The system purifies approximately 1,800 gallons of water a day in order to supply communities affected by Hurricane Irma. U.S. MARINE CORPS PHOTO BY SGT. IAN LEONES

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Mission Planning on Ross University's rooftop. COURTESY PHOTO

forces in theatre, near a crisis, reduces risk and increases flexibility. Proactive theater posture is a strong pillar within SOCSOUTH's capabilities. The access and placement that deployment forces afford SOCSOUTH proved invaluable.

DOMINICA

The SOFLE, comprised of SSAT and NSW teams converged on Dominica with little information. Prior to their arrival, the C2 element now staging from the island of Martinique, conducted a one-hour recon of the airfield but nothing else. Shortly after the SOFLE's arrival, they made their way across the island to a large concentration of American citizens at Ross University School of Medicine. As in Saint Martin, the security condition seemed stable, but the SOFLE did not enjoy complete freedom of movement. US-SOUTHCOM sent constant reports of American citizens scattered throughout Dominica. The sheer number of reports overwhelmed the SOFLE and C2 element. The work that lay ahead seemed impossible.

By nightfall, the SOFLE secured the rooftop of the tallest building on the medical campus because the struc-

ture's height facilitated good communications. Vehicles were on hand. Department of State representatives were on site. *The USS Wasp* anchored off the western coast with two helicopters on strip alert. The hodgepodge of DoD and interagency capability began working together almost immediately. The SOFLE began locating and evacuating Americans. Every evening on the rooftop, the SOFLE reviewed all the information on hand and prioritized the next day's missions. As the missions decreased, the SOFLE used the extra time to begin infrastructure assessments of Dominica. Much like Saint Martin and Puerto Rico, the devastation was indescribable. The Dominican government had little disaster response capability and even fewer humanitarian assistance supplies; however, the Dominican people were resilient. The people enforced the momentum of their will on the inertia of the circumstances. They began clearing their roads and repairing their homes. They began helping each other endure and survive. The SOFLE received a warm welcome at nearly every location and a grateful Dominican smile could be found wherever the SOFLE offered assistance.

CONCLUSION

Crises are often difficult to predict and generate risk. SOCSOUTH's Rapid Response capability coupled with its Proactive Theater Posture reduces this risk across the SOUTHCOM Theater. Special operators across the services can converge on a crisis site where a SOF presence already exists or is in close proximity. Commander's may have to begin an operation from a cold start, but warm starts are often possible with SOCSOUTH's access and placement earned over decades of engagement throughout Latin America. **SW**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colonel Rafael Rodriguez, U.S. Army, is currently serving as the Special Operations Command – South J3. He graduated from the United States Military Academy, earning a BS in Economics in 1998. COL Rodriguez also graduated from the Naval Postgraduate School with a graduate degree in Defense Analysis in 2009. Prior to his current assignment, he served as an Army War College Fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.