A Firsthand Account of Our Military's Relief Efforts To Save Lives

By Jim Garamone
Haiti

hope to countless people in impoverished countries in need of health care.

The *Comfort* was a "cold ship," with only a skeleton crew and a few sailors aboard to maintain the medical equipment prior to the activation order. But on that Friday, she hummed with activity. The Merchant Mariners readied the engines, turned on the water, and did countless other chores needed to prepare her for sea. Longshoremen using cranes moved food, medical supplies, and equipment onboard. The flight deck was packed with boxes and pallets of supplies. A small forklift was making room for more.

The *Comfort* was coming to life. Merchant Mariners arrived and found their bunks long

An air crewman assigned to Helicopter Sea Squadron (HSC) 22 carries a Haitian child to the flight deck triage area aboard the multi-purpose amphibious assault ship USS *Bataan* (LHD 5). U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Second Class Julio Rivera.
enough to drop their bags before going to work. Buses from Bethesda National Naval Medical Center in Maryland and Portsmouth Naval Hospital in Virginia arrived delivering doctors, nurses, corpsmen, and health specialists needed to staff the floating hospital. Sailors from San Diego, Jacksonville, Florida, Great Lakes, Illinois, and other naval stations arrived. Each was assigned a place to rack out and sections to report to.

In some cases, the medical specialists knew each other, but most of the sailors were meeting for the first time.

The Navy’s top doc—Dr. (Vice Admiral) Adam Robinson—arrived that evening and put the mission in perspective. “This is not a training mission,” Robinson stated. “I suspect that we will have medical and naval assets in Haiti, six months minimum, and I think longer than that.”

On Saturday—a full day ahead of the scheduled departure—the ship slipped its lines and headed into the Chesapeake Bay to begin her voyage to Haiti. South of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, the ship kicked it into high. That’s a relative term as the Comfort is not a fast ship. It is not one of the sleek “grey hulls” that can do more than 35 knots. The Comfort can do 17 knots “with the wind behind us on a good day,” one of the Merchant Mariners told me.

While still in the bay, the smoking deck was crowded with sailors using cell phones to check on families after their quick departures. Off of Norfolk, a two-helicopter detachment from the Bay Runners arrived on board.

The medical staff and the crew used the voyage south to get the equipment and supplies ready for the expected rush of patients in Haiti. The smell of bleach permeated the ship as personnel scrubbed the operating rooms, receiving areas, and wards. An announcement came over the ship’s speakers requesting personnel who spoke Haitian Creole or French. A total of 14 men and women came forward. Their contributions to the medical treatment Haitians received would be immeasurable.

Corpsmen ensured equipment was where it needed to be. Others made up beds in the wards. Still oth-

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Left: U.S. Coast Guard Petty Officer Second Class Jose Estrada rushes an injured Haitian girl to an awaiting helicopter January 19, 2010, at Haitian Coast Guard base Amiral Kilick in Canefour, Haiti. DoD photo by Petty Officer Third Class Brandyn Hill, U.S. Coast Guard.

Facing: A local child looks on as members from the amphibious assault ship USS Kearsarge (LHD 3) provide medical aid at a neighborhood school. U.S Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Third Class David Canals.
ers went through supplies. I was walking around the ship late at night when I came across three supply specialists getting rid of barely outdated intravenous IV fluids. They told me that the people of Haiti were going to get the same level of care that patients do in flagship Navy health care facilities around the world.

All the aspects of a modern hospital had to be functional when the ship arrived in Port-au-Prince—the pharmacy, the laboratory, the CAT Scan machine, the X-ray machines—were all to be checked and re-checked.

It wasn’t just the supplies that needed checking and updating. The air conditioner in the main intensive care unit wasn’t working and the temperature was approaching 100 degrees. The Merchant Mariners worked around the clock to fix it, and as the ship approached Haiti the temperature in this crucial facility was down to a comfortable level.

Seventy miles out, the need for the ship was hammered home. The USS Carl Vinson—an aircraft carrier that was among the first to arrive in Haiti—had two patients, a six-year-old boy and a 20-year-old man, aboard that could only get treatment aboard the Comfort. A helicopter from the Vinson made a night flight to deliver them.

It was at that moment the medical crew kicked into overdrive. Litter bearers took the patients off the helos and into the receiving area. Doctors, nurses, and corpsmen took them into a bay where they monitored vital signs and examined their injuries. The patients were moved to the operating room and finally into a nicely cooled ICU.

The crew worked together as if they had been a team for years. The initial casualties helped prepare all of us for the deluge that would come when the ship arrived in Port-au-Prince.

The ship dropped anchor in the city’s harbor around 8:30 A.M. on January 20. The first casualties arrived by 10 A.M. and the controlled chaos began.

Crush injuries, traumatic amputations, broken bones—the injuries came in all shapes and sizes and affected everyone from the elderly to newborns. The crew knew that time meant lives and moved the patients through as fast as they could. There was a waiting line to get into the CAT Scan and operating rooms.

MedEvacs came in from the grounds of the Presidential Palace—itself a wreck—and from the Vinson and the USS Bataan, an amphibious ship also assisting in the rescue effort. Flights stopped after sunset, but the work on the ship continued with the last operation finishing at 4:30 A.M.

The Comfort sent sailors ashore to manage the

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Triage at MedEvac stations at the Presidential Palace, which had room for four choppers at once and enough land for a triage site.

The next day, however, authorities closed the site and moved the MedEvac center to Terminal Varreux down on the shore.

The terminal was not the first choice for this mission. Away from the main hospital and overgrown with weeds, the first helicopters to land knocked over the tents used for treatment and triage sites.

But still people poured in. The sailors of the Comfort’s rapid assessment team worked with all who made their way to the site. Israeli army medics brought a number of people they had treated who needed further care. One, in particular, had a lasting affect on us all—a seven-year-old boy with one leg in a cast. His other leg had been amputated at the top of the thigh. The Israelis had improvised a gurney to get him to us, using a supply box to prop up his remaining leg on the stretcher.

French and Belgian forces, the United Nations, the Red Cross, Catholic Charities, and many other organizations worked with our sailors to treat the injured.

Another aid group, driving multi-colored buses as ambulances, brought still more victims. A man carried a baby girl with an IV tube in her arm, but she was unresponsive and later died. A woman arrived with sepsis (a severe infection). She was on a stretcher 50 feet from the helicopter door when she died. Another woman arrived in labor. She got on the helo and delivered a healthy baby girl after landing aboard the Comfort.

Port-au-Prince had been decimated. The smell of decaying flesh was everywhere. Haitians brought bodies to collection points for pick up. Most people didn’t want to sleep inside their houses for fear of aftershocks or another earthquake. Yet through it all, the sailors of the Comfort and the soldiers of the 82nd Airborne—who were in the center of the city—did their best to sort out the chaos. They worked to look for those who could be saved and offer comfort to those who couldn’t.

“I couldn’t not come,” said one young Navy petty officer. “If you have the skills to help, you need to do it. It’s as simple as that.”

—Jim Garamone is a reporter for the American Forces Press Service. He spent two weeks in Haiti covering U.S. military rescue efforts.