



Members of Haiti's Department of Civil Protection and an aircrew with the 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment, Joint Task Force-Bravo, out of Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras, deliver humanitarian aid supplies from a U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook 25 August 2021 to residents in Maniche, Haiti. At the request of U.S. Southern Command, service members deployed to support relief efforts with the U.S. Agency for International Development for the people of Haiti after the nation was hit by a 14 August 2021 earthquake. The joint task force included all five branches of the U.S. military, as well as land, sea, and air assets from each branch. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Marleah Cabano, U.S. Air Force)

# The First Forty-Eight Hours

Maj. Cole Herring, U.S. Army

**O**n 14 August 2021, a 7.2-magnitude earthquake shook a remote portion of the Tiburon Peninsula in Haiti. It was the region's worst earthquake in over a decade, leaving 2,248 people dead and 136,800 buildings damaged or destroyed on a remote island with limited access and scarce resources.<sup>1</sup> Overshadowing the natural disaster in Haiti was the mass evacuation effort in Afghanistan.

Back in Florida, the vibration of cell phones alerted the members of Special Operations Command–South

(SOCSOUTH), a two-star level operational unit, as it recalled personnel and began planning to provide support if called upon. As a theater special operations command, SOCSOUTH holds the responsibility of providing a uniquely qualified team that can provide the geographic combatant command—U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) for the Caribbean—with timely, on-the-ground situational awareness and assessment of the assistance that the military can provide.<sup>2</sup> To begin, SOCSOUTH went immediately to the

archive of lessons learned from the support provided in response to the earthquake in 2010. By Sunday, 15 August, a situational awareness team consisting of fourteen personnel from SOCSOUTH departed for Haiti.

Upon request for support from the Haitian government, and shortly after sending a small team to Port-au-Prince to assess the situation, U.S. SOUTHCOM created and designated authority to Joint Task Force–Haiti (JTF-Haiti) for organizing and coordinating relief efforts provided by the U.S. military.<sup>3</sup> This left the question of who should lead an interagency mission in a time of crisis. SOUTHCOM charged SOCSOUTH with leading the military’s effort, but the military played a supporting role to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).<sup>4</sup>

The elephant in the room was why a special operations headquarters was given a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mission. Two main factors influenced SOUTHCOM’s decision to have SOCSOUTH lead JTF-Haiti. Through a recent training exercise, SOCSOUTH demonstrated and validated its ability to lead a joint task force through an immediate response scenario. This training exercise helped SOCSOUTH refine its command-and-control processes to provide a ready force. The other reason was driven by a more inherent characteristic of special operations units. Due

to the limitations of Haiti’s infrastructure and unknown situation, a small and effective military presence was more palatable.

Special operations units are uniquely suited to operating in small teams, within austere environments, and with multiple disparate groups to accomplish complex missions. SOCSOUTH possessed other skill sets that proved to be useful in the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mission. These included the ability to

respond quickly, identify key leaders, build partnerships, work with other agencies, continually seek areas for improvement, and cut through bureaucracy to accomplish the mission. These traits enabled JTF-Haiti to weave collaborative partner relationships in a more perfect union to quickly save lives and provide aid to a country in need.

Overshadowing the worst natural disaster in Haiti since 2010 was the mass evacuation effort in Afghanistan. This was an effort that took most of the military’s strategic air assets and the 82nd Airborne Division’s immediate response force.<sup>5</sup> Normally, a C-5 aircraft that can transport helicopters would be used to get the helicopters to their staging locations. In this case, the pilots themselves would have to fly the helicopters from their current locations, which included Honduras and Puerto Rico. All the military personnel would also flow into the country without the use of strategic airlift.

Once the situational awareness team landed, they searched for an area to establish a footprint for the small expeditionary cell. They erected a tent equipped with a small satellite communications kit in a soccer field just outside the embassy building but within the embassy walls. They set up in this location because the military country team that worked in the embassy told them there was no space available in the embassy. In hindsight, the embassy had ample space available for the small situational awareness team.

To get the job done, most of the team used work or personal cell phones for internal communication with others in Haiti. They were also using them for external communication to all personnel and supporting agencies outside of Haiti. This included communicating with ships at sea, personnel in the United States, and personnel in multiple different countries outside of Haiti. The limited cell service frequently caused dropped calls and further complicated communication.

In hindsight, there were conference rooms in the embassy that had ports for high-speed fiberoptic internet. Additionally, most personnel still left the embassy around 3 p.m., which also left an option to use available ports and phones after they departed. Unfortunately, these opportunities were identified by JTF-Haiti personnel a week later, and had they been used initially, it would have enabled JTF-Haiti to provide aid to the Haitian people even faster. It also highlights a need for the Department of Defense country teams to continually

**Maj. Cole Herring, U.S. Army,** is a Special Forces officer with eighteen years of experience. He served as the aide-de-camp to the Special Operations Command–South commander during the disaster response operation in Haiti and personally witnessed the events described in this article. He believes in the importance of continually improving the integration and cooperation required to use a whole-of-government approach to solving our current security challenges.

plan for the integration and support of military forces during a crisis.

Shortly after the communications tent in the soccer field was set up, it was taken down in preparation for then Tropical Storm Grace. Just before the storm's arrival, an Air Force special tactics squadron team of six personnel arrived to conduct airfield assessments,

day but was delayed due to the tropical storm. The antennas for communication were still being set back up, which meant that on the first day, the team's only means of communication with the assets and planning team back in Homestead, Florida, remained their cell phones. Having soldiers on the ground enabled the JTF-Haiti commander to make decisions faster and give vocal approvals, which

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bringing the total number from JTF-Haiti, also known as “boots on ground,” to twenty.

### Days Two through Seven: After the Earthquake

Tropical Storm Grace exacerbated the need for a rapid response, and it hit as the Haitian people were still recovering bodies from the rubble. Just forty-eight hours after the earthquake, the storm dropped fifteen inches of rain with wind at 37 knots, which delayed air transport.<sup>6</sup> The aid needed to get to the remote areas, which were the hardest hit and home to the most desperate people. The rainfall caused mudslides and flash flooding, making access to remote areas difficult, if not impossible, for trucks large enough to transport aid. Further compounding the issue was security. Gangs and desperate people intercepting the aid before it reached the point of need was a reality that the planners needed to consider.

JTF-Haiti had grown to include twenty-two helicopters, six ships, and eight transport planes. Despite the technical command-and-control structure, international military partners from the Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom energetically integrated with JTF-Haiti. Other international players not tied in with JTF-Haiti were still considered as they impacted the overall distribution plan.

On 17 August, Rear Adm. Keith Davids, the commander of SOCSOUTH and now JTF-Haiti, arrived with nine personnel, adding to the twenty personnel already on the ground. The flight had been scheduled for the previous

expedited traditionally bureaucratic processes.

From the onset, SOUTHCOM declared the mission would be conducted on unclassified networks. This was an early decision based on a previous after action review that played a key role in the success of the mission. It was far easier to work with the Haitian authorities, USAID, charitable organizations, and international partners with unclassified information. Intuitively, one might think it would be easier to work on unclassified systems. However, this proved to be the opposite, as the processes strained the intelligence personnel. Military exercises are also done on classified networks. These exercises are where personnel create standard operating procedures and become familiar with the programs that are used. Using only unclassified networks created an unforeseen learning curve throughout the organization; for example, setting up military internet relay chat rooms to flatten communications. With unclassified systems, Microsoft Teams required approval to bridge between the SOUTHCOM and special operations network. Additionally, a WhatsApp thread contained the most up-to-date information. Yet at Homestead Air Reserve Base, cell phones are not allowed. This meant that initially, the entire support team at SOCSOUTH did not have the most up-to-date information. Eventually, personnel retyped what was in the WhatsApp thread into ChatSurfer so that everyone everywhere had situational awareness and the most up-to-date information.

A room inside the embassy was provided for a video teleconference to run daily battle rhythm events, which

included a daily mission update brief with SOUTHCOM and a commander's update brief to the JTF-Haiti commander. The team began working on its first step: understanding. The simple question "How bad is it?" was difficult to answer. Some areas that reported the need for help requested assistance that was needed before the earthquake. This created a requirement to distinguish between the areas that were in need before the earthquake due to extreme poverty and the areas needing aid because

the United Nations, USAID, charitable organizations, the CPA, and the Haitian National Police. Previously, they had not all sat together in a room to discuss the relief effort.

JTF-Haiti identified the flight line as the center of gravity and formed a civil-military operations center there.<sup>8</sup> The flight line was where the aid was stored, so planners could see what needed to be delivered. Inside the civil-military operations center was a representative

“ The JTF-Haiti team worked eighteen to twenty hours per day building partnerships, optimizing the delivery of aid, creating load plans, creating safety plans, attempting to establish a footprint, creating contingency plans, and essentially ensuring the aid could be delivered rapidly the following day. ”

of the earthquake. The Haitian agency responsible for the entire relief effort was the Civil Protection Agency (CPA).<sup>7</sup> The CPA is essentially the Haitian version of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency. The JTF-Haiti commander conducted a joint reconnaissance with the leader of the CPA and USAID. They used a military helicopter to land in multiple remote locations and talked directly with the local leaders. After seeing and talking directly with the people, it was easier to understand what aid was needed because of the earthquake.

The head of USAID and the JTF-Haiti commander established a daily update to the ambassador. Establishing this meeting in person was possible because JTF-Haiti was executing mission command near the embassy instead of on a ship or in an isolated area, both of which had been considerations during planning for locations to conduct mission command. These daily updates synchronized information and were essential in facilitating a whole-of-government approach.

The next step was bringing stakeholder organizations in to work together. JTF-Haiti identified a need for synchronization across all the key stakeholders and needed to bring them together without officially having the power to do so and while remaining in a supporting role to USAID. Using their relationships and not from a position of authority, JTF-Haiti tactfully assembled leaders from

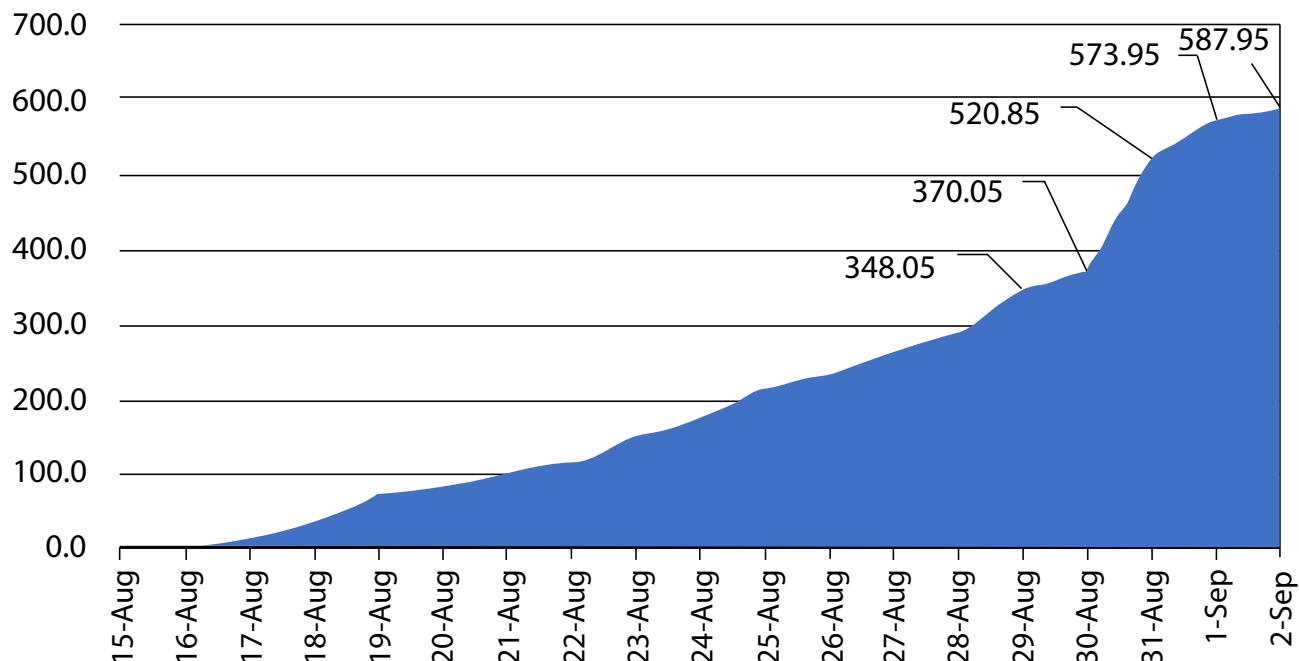
from USAID. The representative would input the request for support into the mission tasking matrix, which is the formal process used to generate a request from USAID to the Department of Defense to deliver aid. She sat next to the air planners. Proximity made the processes happen in conjunction with each other. It was also where the aid was loaded, so planners could communicate changes quickly.

The JTF-Haiti team worked eighteen to twenty hours per day building partnerships, optimizing the delivery of aid, creating load plans, creating safety plans, attempting to establish a footprint, creating contingency plans, and essentially ensuring the aid could be delivered rapidly the following day. Though everyone performed well, it was admittedly an unsustainable pace for the first week.

### **Days Seven to Eighteen After the Earthquake (Military Mission Complete)**

On 21 August, the footprint increased, and tents were set up in a Haitian hangar. The tents had air conditioning and power. Some were used to provide space to sleep, and others were used to create an operations center. The additional personnel and equipment significantly improved connectivity and communication with personnel stateside. They also allowed for operations at a sustainable pace.

## Cumulative Aid Delivered Thousands of Pounds



(Figure by author)

**Figure 1. Cumulative Aid Delivered**

As part of the planning, the team also created a messaging plan. They communicated to the local population in the most remote areas in Haitian Creole, warning them to stay away from helicopters for their safety. They messaged through charitable organizations on the ground, local leaders, local radio, and social media.

Establishment at the hangar also allowed the pilots and crew to park their aircraft and remain overnight in Haiti. Even with the increase in personnel, the core SOCSOUTH personnel never exceeded forty personnel on the ground. Most of the staff stayed in Florida and provided support to the forward element. The total number of JTF-Haiti personnel on the ground including pilots, crews, maintenance, and fuelers would hover around one hundred.

JTF-Haiti also worked to use the ships to deliver aid. The first concern was security at the port, and then a concern about accountability of the aid from charitable organizations. JTF-Haiti worked with the national police director and head of CPA to ensure the port at Jérémie

had sufficient security for the delivery of a large shipment of aid from a small amphibious transport ship known as a landing craft utility. Local police provided security at the port, while a large chain of U.S. marines, U.S. Navy sailors, and local Haitians unloaded over one hundred thousand pounds of aid by hand throughout the entire day.<sup>9</sup> The trucks could not drive onto the pier due to the damage from the earthquake, so a human chain was made to move the aid from the vessel to the trucks.<sup>10</sup> The chain was a symbolic reminder of what can be accomplished when everyone works together to accomplish a single goal: to get aid to those most in need. The distribution of aid significantly increased due to the efforts to optimize the distribution (see figure 1).

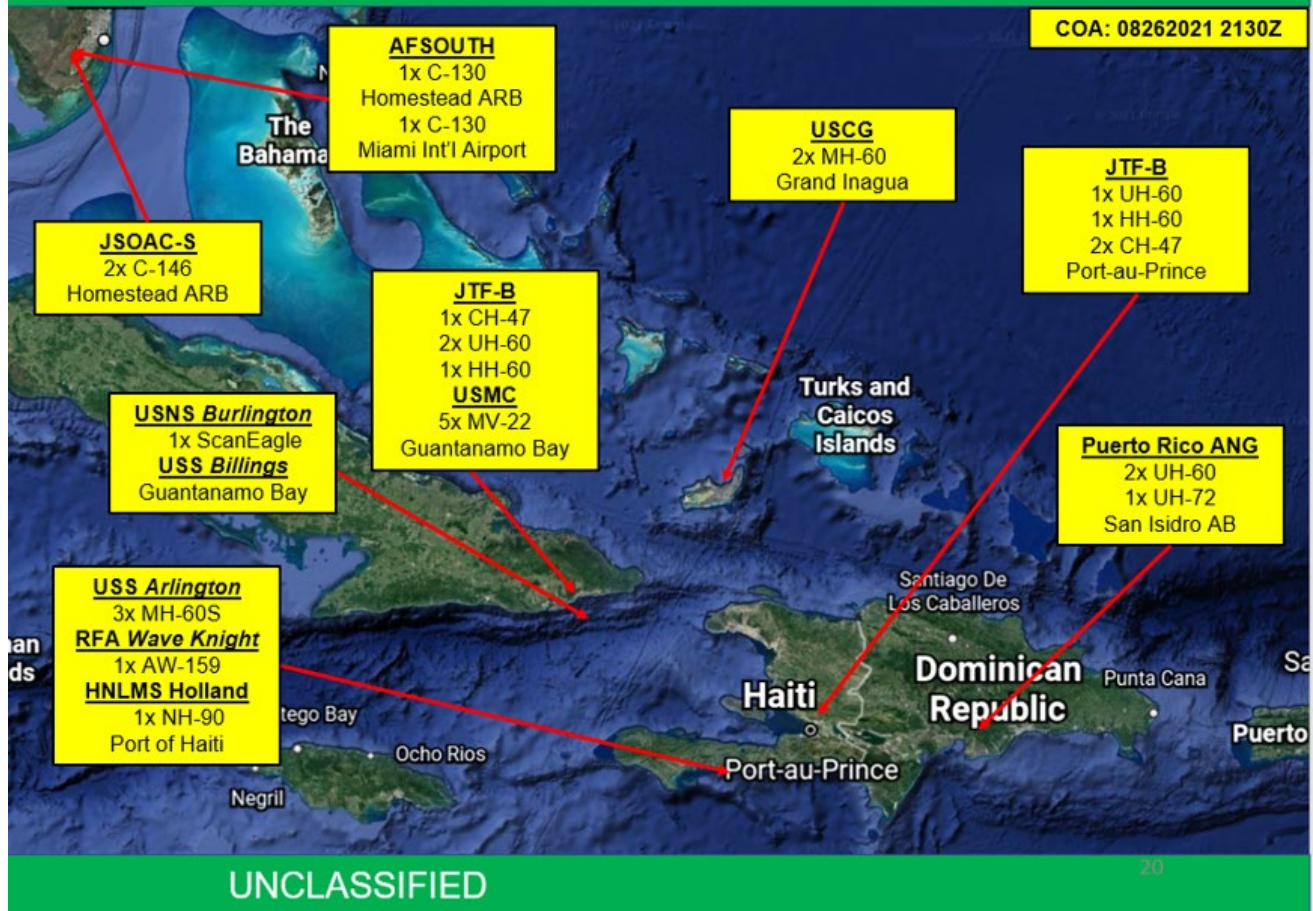
### Optimizing Aid Delivery

JTF-Haiti quickly realized there were bottlenecks slowing the delivery of aid. Army helicopters flew from Honduras and staged at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay (GTMO) in Cuba. Marine Corps CV-22 Osprey aircraft

# JTF-Haiti Air Laydown

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UNCLASSIFIED

(Figure by author)

**Figure 2. Air Laydown on 26 August**

were also staged there. Deck landings and overwater training proved to be critical. The USS *Arlington*—a Navy ship that can refuel helicopters, launch its own helicopters, deliver aid, and conduct beach landings—was used to reduce risk by positioning in a manner so it could respond in the event of an emergency. The Puerto Rican National Guard also brought in helicopters that staged out of the Dominican Republic. The U.S. Coast Guard sent aircraft that staged from Grand Inagua in the Bahamas. The air assets began flying out of their respective staging areas daily to Haiti to transport aid (see figure 2). This meant that valuable flight hours were used to get to and from the location. For the aircraft departing from GTMO, pilots were using two hours of flight time just to arrive in Haiti,

and another two hours to fly back. When they arrived, they had to refuel and load the aid that needed to be delivered. JTF-Haiti worked with the Department of State to quickly reach an agreement with the Haitian government that permitted the U.S. military to use a hangar connected to the international airport in Port-au-Prince. Within twenty-four hours, a small tent city consisting of ten tents with cots, air conditioning, and power was up and running. This coincided with the increase of staff personnel arriving. Support for portable toilets and showers was contracted and brought to the area.

This agreement allowed the pilots and crew members to park their aircraft and stay in Haiti. Pilots can only safely fly a limited number of hours per day, and staying in



A marine with Joint Task Force-Haiti (JTF-Haiti) and volunteers help offload boxes for redistribution in Port of Jérémie, Haiti, 31 August 2021. Marines and sailors from the USS *Arlington* were supporting JTF-Haiti during the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mission following a 14 August 2021 earthquake. (Photo by Cpl. Alize Sotelo, U.S. Marine Corps)

Port-au-Prince added four to five hours of flight time per helicopter that could be spent delivering aid. They could refuel and have the aircraft loaded the night prior. They also did not need to fly over water for a total of four hours going to and from GTMO. Pilots and crew members would wake up and be five hundred feet away from their aircraft. Staying in a hangar in the airport was significant because there were limited means of ground transportation within Haiti. Security concerns and gang activity limited other lodging options like hotels.

An issue that was identified concerned contracted maintenance support. Contracts were written in a manner that stated contractors' standard of living needed to be a barracks equivalent or higher. Hotels were not available, and the tents with cots were not sufficient for contracted maintenance personnel because of the way the contract was written. Although rectified, it was a reality that caused a delay in maintenance.

Another issue identified early was refueling. Initially, air assets were waiting an average of ninety minutes to refuel at the airport. (Unlike the 2010 earthquake, the international airport remained open.) To assist in this bottleneck, the USS *Burlington*, USS *Arlington*, and the United Kingdom's RFA *Wave Knight* were used to refuel. A second fuel point was also established on the ground using fuel blivits. This reduced the refueling time to an average of ten minutes.

The significant increase in air traffic that the U.S. assets brought to the airport raised safety concerns. JTF-Haiti and the Department of State created an agreement with the Haitian government that placed U.S. airmen into the Haitian control tower to observe. Immediately they increased safety and optimized the process. Additionally, the team established a system to park the aircraft safely. The Haitian control tower directed the U.S. aircraft to their designated area. The Haitian personnel in the tower then

focused on the international traffic coming in and out of the country. From there, U.S. military personnel gave more detailed information to the pilots and guided them safely into a parking spot. The aircraft was then loaded with aid or refueled. The system removed a significant burden from the Haitian air traffic controllers and greatly improved safety.

Another bottleneck was the cargo. The cargo arrived from benevolent organizations at the main airport. The problem was that the aid would not be configured for transport in a helicopter. The planners also did not know what aid was available to be delivered until it arrived at the airport. Identifying and fixing this key logistical issue with an experienced planner minimized the loading time of the aircraft.

## Recommendations

A whole-of-government approach means whole-of-government exercises and campaigning. Incorporate nonmilitary communication systems into military exercises. The reality is that we must be able to use whatever our partners are using to communicate; then, we need to incorporate that system, even if that system has significant security flaws. This is especially important during a crisis response, when there simply is no time to force a change to another system. During the response, WhatsApp and Signal were used due to their reliability to send messages when the cellphone signal was weak or intermittent. Even in the most remote areas, WhatsApp worked; therefore, charitable organizations, USAID, the Haitians, and JTF-Haiti personnel forward used the app heavily. Communication from the personnel in Haiti to everyone else was through chat surfer, Microsoft Teams, or other standard unclassified military communication systems. In the country the dominant platform used was WhatsApp.

Military teams in embassies, especially those in areas prone to natural disasters, should identify staging locations that can support a small footprint in the vicinity of, or in, key airports. They could then work with the Department of State to create preexisting agreements that would allow the U.S. military to respond faster during a natural disaster.

Integrate ships to deliver humanitarian assistance into exercises. Using the ships' capability sooner would have provided more aid to the Haitian people. One issue was resistance from charitable organizations, which

gave USAID pause on using the ship. The concerns were because the organizations no longer have accountability for their aid when it is loaded onto a ship. With a helicopter they see it loaded and have someone on the receiving end to receive it shortly after. Through building relationships, identifying the real reason for concern, and addressing these concerns directly, the ships were eventually placed into action to deliver aid. In exercises, ships could deliver small amounts of aid and work with charitable organizations through USAID to normalize the processes of using ships.

The risk to forces should be weighed against image concerns. Part of the pressure to have low numbers on the ground was an image concern. One was that the U.S. military numbers should not exceed USAID numbers because the military was in a supporting role. Additionally, some U.S. personnel were sensitive to an image of a U.S. invasion due to the history of the Marine invasion and occupation in 1915–1934.<sup>11</sup> Image concerns should continually be reassessed to see if they are valid and verify that they are worth any risk incurred. Most Haitians were concerned about food and water following the disaster. The U.S. belief that Haitians would perceive the U.S. military as an invading force was not the reality on the ground.

Use crowdsourcing combined with artificial intelligence software to build an initial understanding of the situation. Even in the remote areas where people lacked shelter, they had cellphones and cellphone service. A system could be established where the local populace texts pictures to a number, and then those pictures are automatically uploaded and plotted according to the location in the metadata of the picture. This would help the host nation, charitable organizations, USAID, and the U.S. military quickly build an understanding of the situation. For example, knowing if a mudslide is blocking a route could be answered quickly and at scale. Combined with a reward program, this initiative could provide intelligence at the speed of relevance at a low cost.

JTF-Haiti's logistical speed and reach overcame limited access to provide 587,950 pounds of aid and save or assist 477 lives in under three weeks.<sup>12</sup> The event left many lessons learned and best practices to sustain. The U.S. military capability was displayed during the earthquake response. In the end, the U.S. military reassured its partners and showed others that

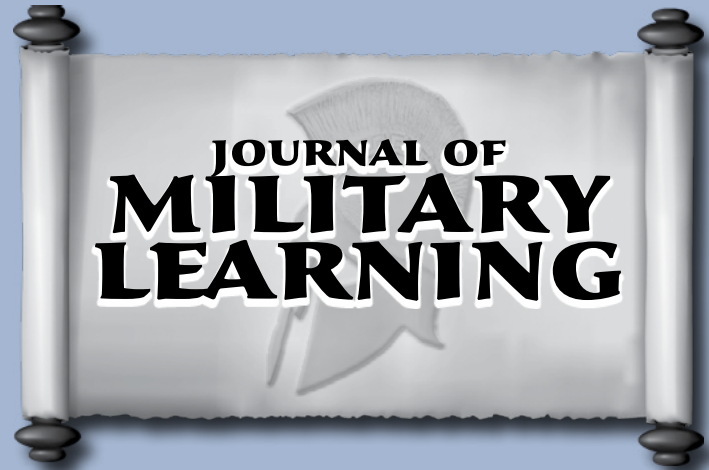


the U.S. military is formidable. One Haitian national said, “Ten years ago, you all came here and did what no one else could do. And now you are here doing it again. Doing what no one else can do.” ■

## Notes

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