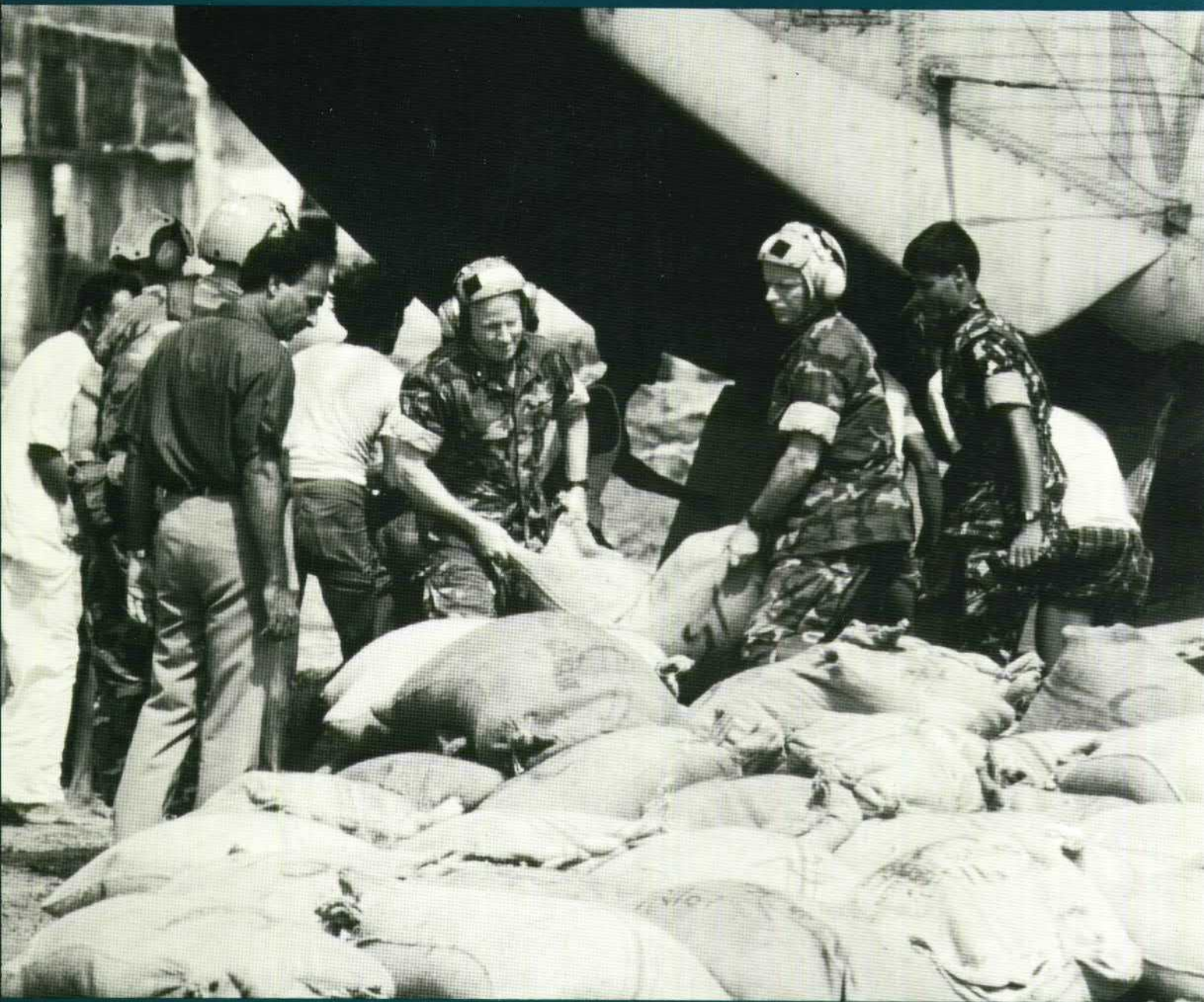


U.S. Marines in Humanitarian Operations
ANGELS FROM THE SEA: RELIEF
OPERATIONS IN BANGLADESH, 1991



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

*COVER: Marines unload sacks of rice from
CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter.* (Department of
Defense Photo (USAF) DF-ST-92-06112)

ANGELS FROM THE SEA: RELIEF OPERATIONS IN BANGLADESH, 1991

U.S. Marines in Humanitarian Operations



by
Charles R. Smith

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Foreword


The first half of 1991 was a demanding time for the armed forces of the United States. In January, while elements of U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines were still deploying to the Persian Gulf, where they would join other coalition forces in the liberation of Kuwait, a Marine special purpose force conducted Operation Eastern Exit, a daring rescue of American citizens and foreign nationals trapped in the American Embassy at Mogadishu, Somalia. Two weeks later Operation Desert Storm began and coalition aircraft flew against Iraqi targets in the Kuwaiti and Iraqi theaters of operation. In February, coalition ground forces slashed through the vaunted Saddam Line to liberate Kuwait, while their comrades afloat conducted one of the most successful strategic deceptions in military history. Soon thereafter, American and other coalition forces were involved in concurrent humanitarian operations, Provide Comfort in northern Iraq and Sea Angel in Bangladesh. In June, Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines erupted, causing massive damage. In response, American forces participated in Operation Fiery Vigil, the evacuation of Clark Air Force and Subic Bay Naval Bases, and Cubi Point Naval Air Station. With so much happening in so short a period, some of these operations did not receive the same amount of attention they would have, had they transpired during less tumultuous times. This monograph provides a detailed look at Joint Task Force Sea Angel, the first joint task force to be formed around a nucleus drawn from a Marine Air-Ground Task Force, and the Marine-led humanitarian relief effort in Bangladesh.

The end of the Cold War begat a revolution in American military strategy. Instead of a doomsday confrontation between superpowers, visionaries of the new world order foresaw an emphasis on low intensity conflicts in the third world and military "operations other than war." In addition, increasing emphasis would be placed on teamwork or "jointness" within the armed services, the formation of international coalitions not only for combined military operations, but also for humanitarian relief activities, and close cooperation among U.S. Government departments and agencies and international relief organizations. Operation Sea Angel validated the effectiveness of each. Sea Angel has served and can continue to serve as a model for future humanitarian operations in littoral areas.

The author of this volume Charles R. Smith, has been with the History and Museums Division since July 1971. He has written and edited several works on the early history of the Marine Corps, among them *Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1975). In addition, he is the author of *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1988) in the official monographs of the Marine Corps in the Vietnam War, and the co-author of the forthcoming volume on U.S. Marine activities in Vietnam in 1968. He is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and received his master's degree in history from San

Diego State University. He served in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) in 1968 and 1969, first as an artilleryman and then as a historian.

In the pursuit of accuracy and objectivity, the History and Museums Division welcomes comments from interested individuals.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. H. Simmons', with a stylized flourish at the end.

E. H. SIMMONS
Brigadier General
U.S. Marine Corps (Retired)
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

Preface

Angels from the Sea: Relief Operations in Bangladesh, 1991, relies on primary source documents and oral history interviews for its main sources. Originals or copies of these records are held at the Marine Corps Historical Center. The documents include command chronologies, official messages, journal files, after action and special action reports, operation orders, and command briefs.

The author supplemented these sources with records provided by the other services, Department of State, Agency for International Development, international relief organizations, and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation upon which it is based still carries a restricted or classified designation.

A number of reviewers, all of whom were participants in the events covered in the volume, read a comment edition of the manuscript. They were: Lieutenant General Henry C. Stackpole III, USMC (Ret); Ambassador William B. Milam; Dr. Mary C. Kilgour; Rear Admiral Stephen S. Clarey, USN (Ret); Brigadier General Peter J. Rowe, USMC (Ret); Brigadier General Randall L. West, USMC; Captain John R. Downs, MC, USNR; Colonel Gary W. Anderson, USMC; Colonel Stephen E. Lindblom, USMC (Ret); and Mr. Jon F. Danilowicz. Their comments, where applicable, have been incorporated into the text.

This history, like its subject, has been a cooperative effort. Lieutenant Colonel Ronald J. Brown, USMCR (Ret), former deputy command historian, then later, command historian, I Marine Expeditionary Force, aided the project by providing materials on the activities of the 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. Members of the Historical Branch, History and Museums Division, have reviewed the draft manuscript. Miss Evelyn A. Englander, head librarian, was very helpful in obtaining needed reference materials. Mr. Robert E. Struder, head of the Editing and Design Section, guided the manuscript through the various production phases. Mrs. Catherine A. Kerns contributed significantly to the publication effort, completing the design and layout, and Mr. William S. Hill, the division's visual information specialist, expertly produced the maps and assisted with the photo illustrations to the volume.

The author gives special thanks to Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret), Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, whose policies guided the preparation of this history; to former Deputy Director, Marine Corps History and Museums, Colonel William J. Davis, USMC (Ret), who provided support and guidance; to Mr. Benis M. Frank, Chief Historian, who aided the author by giving him the benefit of his considerable experience in writing Marine Corps history; and to Dr. Jack Shulimson, Head, History Writing Unit, for providing advice and for editing the draft manuscript.

The author also is indebted to those individuals within the Marine Corps,

Department of Defense, and other U.S. Government departments and agencies who freely exchanged information and made pertinent documents and photographs available for examination. Among them were: Colonel Eugene L. Gobeli, USMC; Colonel Kevin M. Kennedy, USMC (Ret); Lieutenant Colonel Steven A. Slade, USA; Lieutenant Colonel Larry A. Johnson, USMC; Major V. M. Bentinck, RM; Dr. Richard W. Stewart; Captain Len Palaschak, USA; Chief Warrant Officer Larson P. Wilkison, USMC; Mr. Robert B. Hilton; and Mr. Dennis J. King. To these individuals and all others connected with this project, the author is indebted and truly grateful. In the end, however, it is the author alone who is responsible for the content of the text, including all opinions expressed and any errors of fact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles R. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.

Charles R. Smith

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BHUTAN

INDIA

BANGLADESH

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U.S. Marines in Humanitarian Operations

Angels from the Sea: Relief Operations in Bangladesh, 1991

The Winds of Death

On night of 29 April 1991 howling winds of death roared up the Bay of Bengal, signaling the arrival of a killer cyclone. For eight hours the densely populated coastal lowlands and offshore islands of the nation of Bangladesh on the Indian subcontinent were battered by 235 kilometer-per-hour (140-mile) gale-force winds and swamped by a six- to eight-meter tidal wave. The first rays of sunshine the next morning revealed almost unimaginable devastation. The entire southeast countryside was under water. Trees had been uprooted or stripped of their leaves and villages had been leveled. What had been a lush, verdant landscape was now muddy brown. The bodies of an estimated 139,000 people and more than a million livestock floated in turbid water. The affected area was completely isolated. There was no electricity, every phone line was down, and roads had been washed away. There was no way accurately to assess, let alone repair, the damage. A greater danger, however, was that the situation could get worse before it got better. Famine and disease threatened Bangladesh and without immediate action this fast-unfolding tragedy could become a humanitarian disaster of monumental proportions. The disaster would be averted as the Bangladesh government, with the assistance of a Marine-led, American military joint task force, turned back the threat.

The People's Republic of Bangladesh, formerly the east wing of Pakistan, is the world's most densely populated agrarian nation. This troubled land is no stranger to natural disasters. Located between India and Burma on the stunningly beautiful, fertile, deltaic plain formed by the confluence of three Asian river systems, the Brahmaputra, Ganges, and Meghna, Bangladesh is situated at the head of a natural funnel formed by the shallow Bay of Bengal. Ravaged by floods and tornadoes, the country has been subjected to seven of this century's deadliest cyclones. Between 1960 and 1971 alone, five cyclones killed more than 540,000 people. As one American newspaper reported: "These are seminal disasters, interspersed among scores of other ghastly events that seem almost minor by comparison--300 die in a train fire, 400 perish when a ferry boat goes under," or Bengal tigers kill 50 people in a forest along the coast.¹ During the annual monsoon season, from May to October, it is not unusual for the welcome floods which are the lifeblood of this country to exceed the norm and cause extensive crop loss and cholera, and gastrointestinal epidemics.



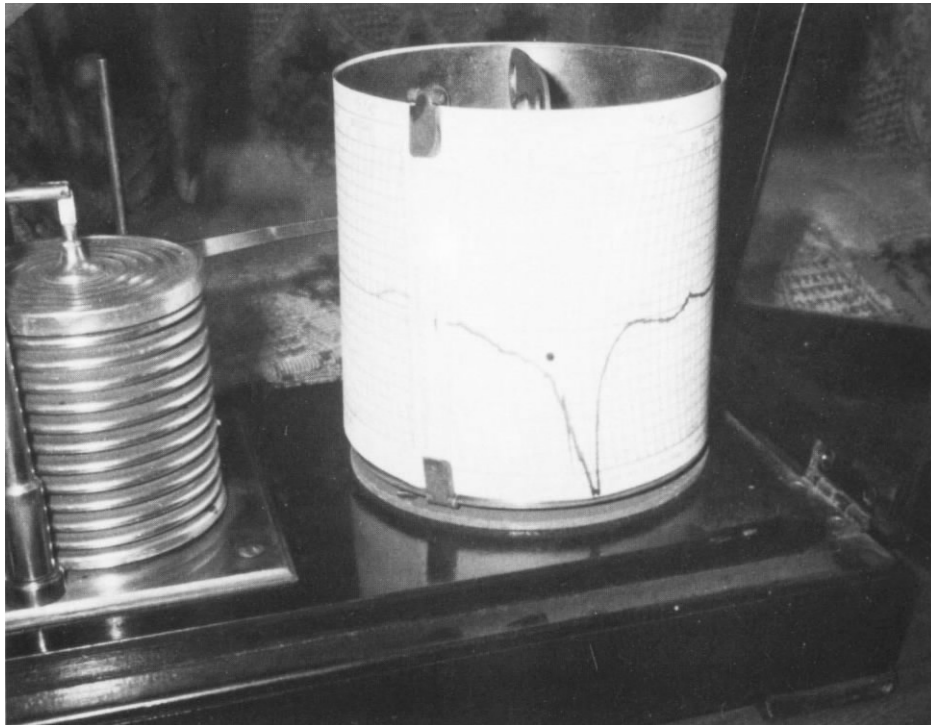
While the hurricanes of the Atlantic and Eastern Pacific and the typhoons in the Western Pacific are frequently more intense, the cyclones spawned in the Bay of Bengal often cause catastrophic loss of life and property due to Bangladesh's topography and population density. Since most of the country lies less than nine meters above sea level, a high tidal wave can sweep over most of the low-lying islands and immediate coastal areas. People, buildings, and crops surviving the initial onslaught are therefore at great risk of death and further damage until the waters recede, a process which can take weeks.

With about 116 million people occupying a nation the size of Wisconsin, overpopulation has forced large numbers of Bangladeshi to inhabit remote islands, silt islands or *chars*, and the coastal floodplain. The areas most vulnerable to the severe effects of cyclones are occupied by the poor and landless. They settle in the islands and coastal regions where they eke out a living without paying rent or sharecrop on land perennially at risk of inundation by salt water. Thus, it is the poor and landless who most often lose what little they have built and accumulated, and even a few days without food or income following a cyclone is a devastating experience from which they may never recover.

On 23 April 1991, the Bangladesh Space Research and Remote Sensing Organization detected a tropical depression just beyond the southern edge of the Bay of Bengal. As it moved northwest over the warm waters of the bay, the depression slowly evolved into a tropical storm and eventually became a cyclone. Meteorologists designated it Tropical Cyclone 02B.²

As early as the 24th, the Government of Bangladesh and international relief agencies issued storm warnings to alert the country's citizens, especially those living on off-shore islands and in coastal districts, of potential danger. Authorities urged the inhabitants of these vulnerable regions to move their families, domestic animals, and belongings into the relative safety of cyclone shelters, higher ground, or to areas at least 10 kilometers inland. The warning cautioned the people to bury food, drinking water, and medicine in sealed packets and cans. The containers, buried at least one meter underground, could be retrieved after the expected tidal surge had receded.³

As Tropical Cyclone 02B, now named Marian, moved slowly up the Bay of Bengal, thousands took refuge in cyclone shelters. Due to the lack of shelter space thousands more had to remain outside, seeking safety atop multistoried buildings and even in tall trees. Many people, however, stayed in their homes. They were skeptical of the warnings and weather forecasts, because for every actual cyclone there had been countless warnings. The fact that Marian had formed in the premonsoon season led many to believe that as previous early cyclones had it would pass by harmlessly. Others refused to leave their homes and the land they cultivated, fearing that since they possessed no title to the land they occupied, they could lose everything if someone else moved in while they were away. The government appeared to make little effort to evacuate those on vulnerable offshore islands.⁴



Photograph courtesy of Mary C. Kilgour

The barograph on board the Bangladeshi naval ship Umar Farooq, which rode out the storm in the port of Chittagong. At 0145 on 30 April the drop in barometric pressure to below 930 millibars could no longer be recorded by the ship's instruments.

On the 28th, Cyclone Marian assumed a more northeasterly direction. The Bangladesh government then activated its alert system, warning coastal and island residents of imminent danger from hurricane-force winds and the threat of a storm surge. Heavy winds and torrential rains began to buffet the country's southeast coast the following day. More than 320,000 Bangladeshi sought the protection of cyclone shelters and official buildings. The storm's death-blow came about midnight. Marian's center crossed the coast near the Meghna Estuary, located between the country's second largest city, Chittagong, and North and South Hatia Islands. A six- to eight-meter high tidal wave rolled over the low-lying off-shore islands, swept across the tidal plain, and then moved several kilometers inland. Plunged into darkness, the fortunate who had taken refuge in shelters watched in horror as their simply built homes, cattle, neighbors, and crops were swept away. Even substantial buildings trembled as if shaken by an earthquake before being hit by the tidal surge. "There was," as one observer noted, "an uncanny roaring sound of the whirlwind and on-rushing water grasping people and domestic animals into the jaws of death."⁵

On the morning of 30 April, all that was known in Dhaka, the capital, was that a cyclone causing uncertain damage had hit the islands and southeastern coastal areas. Telephone, FAX, and telegraph with the affected areas, as well as international communications, were down. While precise, verifiable



Photograph courtesy of Shahidul Alam

Cattle corpses lay in fields inundated by salt water on Sandwip Island. An estimated one million head of cattle perished during the storm.

information was unavailable, initial reports from the media, the government, and several voluntary agencies indicated that there was an unknown number of deaths and widespread property damage.⁶

Later that day, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia flew to the affected areas and upon her return to Dhaka that evening called her cabinet into session.* Following the cabinet meeting, she issued an appeal for international assistance, noting that while it would take some time before the full "extent of the damage [is] clearly known and the requirement of the affected people fully realized, it is, however, evident that the damage has been both colossal and extensive." The government, she continued, "has mobilized all its manpower and resources, and already launched a massive relief operation, but the magnitude of the damage appears to be such that it might prove impossible for the government of Bangladesh alone to meet the challenge and mitigate the sufferings of the helpless

* Begum Khaleda Zia was the widow of former army general and President, Ziaur Rahman (Zia), who was assassinated by dissident elements of the military while visiting Chittagong in 1981. The killing of Zia was followed by nearly 10 years of rule by another general who became President, Hussain Muhammad Ershad. Ershad was forced to resign in December 1990 following a period of strikes, protests, and a general disintegration of law and order. In February 1991, an interim government oversaw new elections. As the country's new and first woman prime minister, Begum Khaleda Zia promised to restore parliamentary democracy to Bangladesh after taking power in March, just six weeks before the cyclone.

people." It was under these circumstances that she appealed to the international community "to come forward in aid of the humanity in distress in Bangladesh and help the people affected by the cyclone." Food, shelter, pure drinking water, medicine, and clothing were of immediate need.⁷

The government, which less than five months before had ended more than 15 years of military dictatorship, was unprepared to respond quickly and effectively to a disaster of this magnitude. Within days instead of hours, the young democratic government activated coordinating committees and mobilized its armed forces to restore access to clean drinking water, reestablish communications, and distribute relief supplies from its own stockpiles. Although the effort eventually would involve all elements of Bangladesh society, the armed forces were the key players initially. Constantly prepared for disaster operations, they could mobilize trained human resources with an effective chain of command, and operate on a decentralized basis when communications were inevitably knocked out. The army soon established temporary camps and began feeding refugees, while the Bangladesh air force, using the remaining dozen undamaged helicopters, began food and medicine drops to isolated communities.⁸

The international community responded more quickly. Neighboring India immediately sent aid supplies and three helicopters. Saudi Arabia, Canada, and the United Kingdom each pledged millions of dollars. China and Japan promised humanitarian aid. The European Economic Community undertook to send food, tents, clothing, medicine, and other essentials. Private relief agencies and non-government organizations, such as the Red Crescent Society, International Red Cross, Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE), World Health Organization, Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM), and Caritas Bangladesh, activated volunteers and supplies already in Bangladesh and agreed to provide additional assistance.

In Dhaka, United States Ambassador William B. Milam, a career diplomat and an expert on international economic, environmental, and energy issues, rapidly moved to coordinate the American response. After receiving unconfirmed reports of widespread devastation on the 30th, he, at the request of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Mission Director Mary C. Kilgour, a former Marine Corps officer candidate with more than 25 years of service with the agency, declared a disaster and authorized the immediate release of \$25,000 to the Bangladesh government for relief activities. In addition, an estimated \$2 million worth of just-arrived medical supplies previously donated through the Department of Defense's Humanitarian Assistance Program, but not delivered, were turned over to the Ministry of Health. The 5,500 pounds of medical supplies included prepackaged kits containing surgical and first-aid equipment and intravenous fluids, which the Government of Bangladesh had requested the previous year. The American mission also took steps to obtain a comprehensive assessment of the situation by dispatching trained staff members from four USAID-funded non-government organizations to the affected areas with a standardized rapid assessment program developed by the mission.⁹

The following day, at the invitation of the Bangladesh government, Ambassador Milam and other heads of foreign missions toured the most devastated areas. In their discussions with local officials, they were told that the critical need was pure drinking water. "The tidal surge, river flooding and heavy rainfall," the embassy reported, "caused considerable damage to water distribution systems in built-up areas and flooded many of the shallow and deep 'tube wells' that the majority of the rural citizens use for fresh water." This lack of pure drinking water "will result in possible loss of life due to dysentery and other water related diseases."¹⁰

The mission's initial assessment was confirmed on 2 May. Prime Minister Zia, after meeting with representatives of non-government relief agencies, issued a fresh international appeal. She asked for an immediate \$56 million in assistance, noting that the "threat to the cyclone survivors was from death due to dehydration, starvation and disease."¹¹ The government also requested the donation of a number of items which could be procured locally such as food and medicine, and items such as helicopters, tents, water purification tablets, and bleaching powder which were in short supply or could not be obtained in Bangladesh. These items were needed to supplement the government's on-going, yet uncoordinated, relief efforts.¹²

As a result of Prime Minister Zia's appeal and Ambassador Milam's visit, the mission, which saw the "supply of first and foremost fresh water and, secondly, potable water" as the greatest need, immediately donated more than 727,000 water purification tablets to the Bangladesh government and non-government organizations for distribution. Its supply depleted, the mission then sent an urgent request for funds to the Department of State's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to purchase additional purification agents and oral rehydration salts. The embassy also queried the Department of Defense (DOD) concerning the possibility of obtaining 2 million chlorine-based tablets from DOD stocks.* "We realize that the number is large," noted the defense attache, Lieutenant Colonel James A. Dunn, Jr., USA, "and that Operation Provide Comfort may have drawn down stocks." But, as he pointed out, "there are as many as one million plus families who will need fresh water each day until normal systems are restored."^{13**}

With the deployment of an ever-increasing number of Bangladesh military personnel and non-government relief workers to the affected areas, the extent of the devastation gradually emerged. Ten districts, home to approximately 11.2

* Chlorine-based water purification tablets were preferred over the standard military canteen-type, iodine-based tablets as the latter posed problems if taken by pregnant women.

** A graduate of the Armed Forces Staff College and an Army tank officer, Lieutenant Colonel James A. Dunn attended the Bangladesh Staff College before being assigned as defense attache in 1989.



Photograph courtesy of USCinCPac

Housing was destroyed in Khankanabad, Banskhali, south of Chittagong.



Photograph courtesy of Shahidul Alam

This devastated patch on Sandwip Island was once home to 26 families.

million people, were affected by the cyclone. Of those ten, the four coastal districts of Bhola, Noakhali, Chittagong, and Cox's Bazar bore the brunt of the storm and storm surge. Within the four coastal districts the greatest concern was for the 5.2 million people living in 13 *upazilas* or administrative subdistricts, and the city of Chittagong, the historic city that served as a primary entry point for supplies destined for the China-Burma-India theater during World War II. By 2 May, the government confirmed more than 37,000 dead and reported tens of thousands missing. The death toll was expected to exceed 100,000, since the off-shore islands of Kutubdia, Sandwip, and Maheshkali, with a population of more than 600,000, virtually were submerged. Chittagong, the only port in the storm-ravaged region capable of receiving relief supplies, was blocked by sunken ships and its air facilities severely damaged.

Tragic stories equalled the number of bodies that washed ashore with the tide. One such was that of a desperate man in the village of Kutubdia who "reaches out for a floating banana tree on which to rest his baby boy. But a poisonous snake bites the man's arm and he drops silently into the turbid floodwaters. The tree floats away. The baby drowns." In the same village "another man blacked out at the sight of waves 'as high as mountains'. Hours later, when he came to, he realized that his wife, son and three daughters had been swept out to sea . . . 'I have lost everything. I have lost everything,' the man said. 'God, why has it happened to me?'"¹⁴ For those who survived the cyclone, they had to contend with cholera, shortages of food and water, and everyday bouts with malnutrition, dysentery, diarrhea, and malaria.

The American Relief Effort

On 3 May, President George Bush sent a message to Prime Minister Zia expressing his condolences and those of the American people over the devastation caused by the cyclone. "Our hearts go out . . . to the families of the numerous victims of this terrible tragedy," Presidential spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said. The United States stands ready, the President assured the Bangladesh government, to assist in the varied tasks of relief and reconstruction. In addition to the more than \$2 million already provided, the United States, Fitzwater reported, was "looking into other means to help Bangladesh obtain its highest priority needs for clean water, dry food, helicopter transport, clothing, and temporary shelter."¹⁵

In Bangladesh, on the 3d, Agency for International Development Director Mary Kilgour, accompanied by Defense Attache Lieutenant Colonel James Dunn and First Lieutenant David Silverman, commanding officer of the U. S. Army's 2d Platoon, Company B, 84th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy), flew to



Photograph courtesy of Mary C. Kilgour
USAID Director Mary C. Kilgour hands over water purification tablets to Oli Ahmed, Civilian Relief Coordinator, at the Chittagong Circuit House Civilian Relief Center.

Chittagong to view the damage to the city and port.* The USAID director met with the Minister of Communications, Oli Ahmed, a native of Chittagong, who was coordinating the relief effort, and turned over 450,000 water purification tablets. Lieutenant Colonel Dunn and Lieutenant Silverman toured the heavily damaged port facilities and airfield with senior Bangladeshi military officials. Lieutenant Silverman determined that the repair of the airfield's terminal and tower was within the engineer detachment's capabilities. The following day Director Kilgour returned to Dhaka and Lieutenant Colonel Dunn flew to the offshore islands where he viewed the devastation.¹⁶

The four USAID-funded, non-government assessment teams made their first report, based on field trips to the affected areas, to the mission's staff on the 4th, the proclaimed national day of mourning for the flood victims. By then the country's confirmed death toll stood at 92,000, but the teams estimated that it would soon exceed 150,000. The total population in the moderate to severely affected areas they estimated at 5 million, half of whom were homeless. The off-

* When the cyclone struck, the 15 soldiers from 2d Platoon, Company B, were deployed to Mymensingh, north of Dhaka, constructing schools on training Exercise Baker Carriage II. The Pacific Command authorized the American Embassy to coordinate all United States military disaster assistance, including the diversion of the platoon from school construction to the relief effort. (USCinCPac msg to AmEmbassy, Dhaka, 010045ZMay91)

shore islands had no source of fresh water and it was unlikely that a fresh water supply would be reestablished for at least several weeks. The survivors, they reported, lacked water, food, shelter and had lost all of their possessions; the dead lacked adequate burial.

Of those inhabiting the rural coastal areas, 70 to 80 percent were homeless and more than a third of these were in overcrowded, dirty, unorganized shelters without sanitation or water supply. Many had not eaten in the last 24 to 48 hours. The teams noted that half the cattle and most of the fowl were lost. The dry season or *boro* rice crop was lost and they surmised that it could not be replanted for six months due to the inundation of salt water. In urban areas, such as Chittagong and Cox's Bazar, the poor suffered a near total loss of shelter, food supplies, fuel, and cooking utensils. The middle and upper classes lost less and had access to some food, however, with dry, unspoiled food in short supply, the teams reported that its price was beginning to climb sharply.¹⁷

The cyclone also ruined the affected area's infrastructure; by this time the reported damage was far worse than that inflicted by past cyclones. The large, just-completed bridge spanning the Karnaphuli River in Chittagong had been knocked down by an errant crane, making communications with the south more difficult. Hundreds of kilometers of embankments, used for flood protection and to prevent the inundation of crop lands by salt water, had been breached or tally destroyed by the storm surge. Major thoroughfares and sections of the Dhaka



Department of Defense Photo (USAF) DF-ST-92-02643

Salt water inundated the rice fields of Sandwip Island destroying much of the boro, or dry season rice crop.



Photograph courtesy of Shahidul Alam

People of Chowkatalli on Sandwip Island collect water from a tubewell just meters away from a pond containing both human and cattle remains.

to Chittagong railway were cut, as were telecommunications between the area and the capital. The area's only ground satellite station at Betbunia, northeast of Chittagong, was wrecked. It was estimated that it would take several weeks before satellite communications could be restored.^{18*}

Access to fresh water, the non-government teams reported, should remain the first priority. If fresh water could not be procured, then water purification materials, such as tablets, or locally purchased alum or bleaching powder, needed to be distributed, followed by oral rehydration salts, and dry food which children could consume. The import and distribution of other items such as milk powder had to be discouraged. To assist with the distribution effort, the teams echoed the mission's conclusions and the request made by the Bangladesh government that the United States and several other bilateral donors provide flatbottomed, inflatable boats; helicopters; water containers; rations; and communications equipment.¹⁹

The mission relayed a brief outline of the teams' assessments, recommendations, and requests to the Department of State, which had established a working group on the American government's relief effort. In addition to the Department of State, the group was made up of representatives from AID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, other units within AID, the Office of the

* Because international telephone and FAX were down, all communications between the embassy and Washington had to be by cumbersome cable.

Secretary of Defense, and appropriate sections of the Joint Staff. During the group's first meeting, its members determined that assuring an adequate supply of oral rehydration salts and water purification tablets was the highest immediate priority, and the item which the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance would focus on even though its funding authority virtually was exhausted.

The problems of aid organization and distribution, however, dominated the working group's discussions. While the supply of food stockpiled in government warehouses, or "Go Downs," and non-government storehouses was considered adequate to deal with the disaster, the means of delivering the food to those in need was not. Department of Defense representatives, noting that they were still gathering information on the availability and exact cost of providing helicopters, most probably from the Philippines, estimated that it would cost in excess of \$3 million to transport eight helicopters to Dhaka and that it would take a minimum of five days. With cost in mind, the group agreed that it might be more practical to charter helicopters or provide funds for helicopters from a third country, and that the money saved then be used for water and land transportation. Before any specific action could be taken, the group, in addition to passing on its thoughts, asked that the embassy provide "well-defined action recommendations both for immediate relief and for near-term reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts."²⁰

While members of the working group continued their efforts in Washington, American Embassy personnel moved ahead in Dhaka. Agency for International Development representatives met with officials of the Bangladesh government and non-government relief agencies daily, constantly updating their assessment of the damage and need for assistance. They also began to make cash grants to several prequalified, non-government organizations to address immediate health needs, and requested an Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance allotment of an additional \$4.25 million in grant funds to support the proposed relief efforts of other non-government organizations.²¹ On the military side, Defense Attache Lieutenant Colonel Dunn queried Admiral Charles R. Larson, USN, United States Commander in Chief, Pacific (USCINCPac) on the availability of water containers and rations, and on the possibility of using satellite coverage for damage assessment. Informed by the Department of State and USAID that helicopters might have to be rented if needed, he also sent messages to nearby defense attaches inquiring if helicopters could be obtained and their rental rates.²²

By 6 May, the confirmed death toll had risen to more than 125,000. The Bangladesh government reported that 77,800 confirmed dead were from Chittagong District, 39,700 from Cox's Bazar, and smaller numbers from the remaining hard-hit districts. Within Chittagong District, 35,000 of the dead were residents of Sandwip Island, more than 10 percent of the island's precyclone population; 30,000 from the subdistrict of Banskhali, 10,000 from Anwara subdistrict; and 1,900 from the city itself. Even greater damage had occurred in the areas surrounding Cox's Bazar, where as much as 25 percent of the population of Kutubdia Island was reported killed. Women and children constituted more than 60 percent of all dead. The estimated number of homeless was placed between two and one half and three million people.



Photograph courtesy of Shahidul Alam

An urban bustee or village in Chittagong, totally destroyed by the cyclone, was rebuilt temporarily on a roadside with salvaged bamboo and matting.

That day, despite strong rains and heavy seas which had thwarted earlier attempts, several ships of the Bangladesh navy reached the offshore islands of Sandwip, Manpura, and Kutubdia, and began the task of setting up relief camps. Although hampering to the relief effort, the rains did provide the only fresh water the islanders, most of whom were marooned and hungry, had received since the cyclone struck a week before. As had the navy, the Bangladesh army deployed additional communications teams and troops to the affected areas to reestablish communications and assist with the daily airlift of more the 30 metric tons of bread. The government also sent additional companies of the Bangladesh Rifles, one of the country's two paramilitary forces, to assist local officials in maintaining order.²³ The efforts of the government, both civilian and military, were, as the American Embassy pointed out, heroic and involved numerous personal sacrifices, but the task was overwhelming.²⁴

A week after the cyclone struck, relief workers had made little headway in reaching and aiding those in the greatest need of help. Dependent upon a few ships, a dozen of their own helicopters and three sent from India, the government's efforts moved ahead slowly. Although relief supplies poured in from around the world, the lack of adequate transportation hindered timely distribution of much-needed relief supplies. This prompted Ambassador Milam to request that Lieutenant Colonel Dunn ask CinCPac "if U.S. Marine Corps or U.S. Navy assets that may be transiting the Indian Ocean, southern Bay of Bengal or near Singapore might be diverted to assist in relief operations." Most important assets would include helicopters for the delivery of relief supplies and personnel and landing craft which would be able to reach nearby offshore

islands. It was vital to land relief supplies, especially potable water, immediately. Lieutenant Colonel Dunn envisioned "that the ships could anchor off Chittagong for coordination with local government/military relief operators and then conduct operations under their control." While it was not clear at that time how long relief operations would continue, the Ambassador, Dunn noted, believed that the Navy or Marine Corps assets would be needed for at least two to three weeks. Should that long a stay prove a problem, their help for less time, he said, would still be extremely useful. Dunn also inquired whether units then deployed to Thailand on the Cobra Gold series of training exercises might be diverted to Bangladesh.²⁵

In a separate request, Lieutenant Colonel Dunn reported that Ambassador Milam had been approached by Bangladesh officials and asked if the United States could assist by providing long-range communications and a "mini-air traffic control" unit to restore control of airspace in the disaster area. This was crucial because Bangladesh, Indian, and Pakistani helicopters were operating with no air traffic control.²⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Dunn also requested the use of a small, twin-engine Beechcraft support aircraft, to assist the staff of the embassy and defense attache's office in damage assessment.²⁷

The use of American military aircraft, ships, and communications teams was being considered in Washington. In discussing the range of options available to assist the Bangladesh government's relief efforts, Defense Department representatives assigned to the Department of State working group reported that the nearest embarked helicopter assets, those of the 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), were in the Persian Gulf, but could not be diverted to Bangladesh as they were earmarked to support a possible evacuation of American



Photograph courtesy of Shahidul Alam

Hundreds of people line up near one of the first temporary emergency relief centers established by the Bangladesh government on Sandwip Island.

citizens from Ethiopia. The 5th MEB's redeployment also was tied to the safe withdrawal of U.S. Army forces from southern Iraq, the termination of Navy combat air patrols, and the movement of more than 30,000 Iraqi refugees to havens in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.²⁸ The only other helicopter support options were to deploy a number of Marine Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight and Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters attached to Contingency Marine Air-Ground Task Force 4-90 from the Philippines using Air Force Lockheed C-5A Galaxy transports or to airlift helicopters from Okinawa or the West Coast. Expenditures to support the latter options, defense representatives noted, would be prohibitive. The cost of each one-way C-5A sortie would approach \$400,000, excluding fuel, maintenance, and associated charges. As to other forms of disaster assistance, such as food, water purification tablets, flatbottomed, inflatable or shallow-draft aluminum or fiberglass-hulled boats, and plastic water containers, the defense staffers reported the items could be procured if the Department of State provided the funds. The bottom line was that unless the President said "do it," or the Department of State found funds to pay the bill, there was little the Department of Defense could do.

The State Department informed the American Embassy in Dhaka of the problems and exorbitant costs of leasing commercial heavy-lift helicopters or transporting Department of Defense air assets. As the department noted: "we have conflicting information on the need for helicopters and need to sort out the requirements before we make a final decision on whether to proceed." The department also reported funding then under consideration would not authorize the use of commercial or Department of Defense helicopters. It concluded by asking the embassy to confirm its requirement for heavy-lift helicopters in view of the fact that the then-current level of funding did not include funds for helicopters: "We need urgently therefore your best needs assessment so that we can determine whether we should go ahead with our search for sources of funding."²⁹

In reply to the department's request, Ambassador Milam noted that the "mission understands that OFDA and perhaps others think a substantial sum for helicopters could be better spent chartering or hiring boats. Initially [the] mission also [was] inclined toward that view." But, he continued, "we have lately become convinced . . . that U.S.-provided helicopters are essential to [the] relief efforts." In support of his position, Ambassador Milam noted that the most devastated areas where people were starving could only be reached by helicopter. Although the Government of Bangladesh possessed nearly 300 shallow-draft boats, donated by Japan in 1988, they could not, he reported, navigate open ocean in order to supply or resupply the hard-hit, offshore islands. Peripheral to the issue of disaster relief, but of extreme political importance, was that the Bangladesh government's first relief request made of the United States was for helicopters. A number of government officials, he noted, had speculated that the reason Bangladesh had not been supplied with helicopters was that the United States had no confidence in the "newly and fairly elected government." "While our calculations about the need for helicopters is not based on this factor," he



Photograph courtesy of Col Eugene L. Gobeli, USMC

A local ferry sits abandoned in the midst of rice fields covered with salt water. Devastated areas such as this could only be reached by helicopter.

continued, "it is important that we be visibly responsive to this democratic government's urgently expressed needs." "If cost effectiveness and numbers of tons per blade hours is to be the guide for deciding whether helicopters should be sent to Bangladesh, then perhaps they should not be sent. If filling a desperate need, as stated by the BDG [Bangladesh government] and delivering food/supplies that will save lives is the primary consideration, then helicopters should be sent." Ambassador Milam strongly urged that \$2 million be found to fund three heavy lift, Department of Defense CH-46 helicopters for a period of two weeks. Military aircraft, he concluded, would be administratively easier to support than commercially leased aircraft.³⁰

While the Department of State tried to resolve diplomatic and financial difficulties, events in Ethiopia made U.S. military assistance to Bangladesh much more likely. At that time, the 5th MEB was embarked on board the ships of Amphibious Group 3 (PhibGru 3) in the Persian Gulf. This force had not been previously available because it was standing by to evacuate more than 600 American citizens caught up in a civil war in Ethiopia. In early May, even though rebel factions had gained ground against government forces, the threat subsided and the 5th MEB was no longer needed.

The 5th MEB and PhibGru 3 were reorganized in preparation for their redeployment in the wake of Operation Desert Storm and lost about one-third of their combat capability. The 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) (MEU [SOC]) and five amphibious ships of Amphibious Squadron 1

were detached from the 5th MEB and PhibGru 3, respectively. They were to stay in the Persian Gulf as a strategic reserve, covering Central Command's pull-out and ready to provide air and ground forces should an Ethiopian evacuation become necessary.* Two Military Sealift Command ships assigned to PhibGru 3, the crane ship *Flickertail State* (T-ACS 5) and the cargo ship *Cape Girardeau* (T-AK 2039), also stayed behind to support Central Command's retrograde. After the breakout of the 11th MEU (SOC), the remaining ships of PhibGru 3, led by the amphibious assault ship *Tarawa* (LHA 1), conducted routine maintenance in various Arabian Gulf ports and prepared for their redeployment. On 7 May, U.S. Naval Forces, Central Command, released PhibGru 3 and ordered it to return to the United States by way of the Indian Ocean and the Philippine Islands. PhibGru 3 was scheduled to come under the operational control of the Seventh Fleet on 10 May and could, if so ordered, be off the coast of Bangladesh seven days later.³¹

With the release of PhibGru 3 and the 5th MEB, the Pacific Command, which concurrently was considering and planning for a number of relief options, became convinced that using the task group's assets was the "best way to go" should the Department of Defense be directed to assist. Because of its inherent flexibility and capacity to react quickly, an amphibious task force was well-suited for relief operations in Bangladesh. The areas most in need of help were the offshore islands and the coastal lowlands, both of which were well within the reach of a landing force. It could easily provide needed transportation using landing craft, small boats, helicopters, and amphibious vehicles. Operations could be sea-based, hence, would require only minimal American forces on the shore, reducing the logistic demands on the fragile Bangladesh infrastructure.

As a result of the defense attache's query on the 6th, and subsequent discussions held between representatives of the command and Pacific Fleet, the Commander, Seventh Fleet requested the amphibious task group forward a "plan to provide immediate assistance including units to be diverted, proposed command structure, logistics support required, and ETA [estimated time of arrival] Chittagong area." Since the task group would be needed, according to embassy estimates, for two to three weeks, Seventh Fleet notified commanders of Naval Task Forces 76 and 73 that the potential existed that elements of Amphibious Ready Group Bravo, the amphibious cargo ship *St. Louis* (LKA 116), tank landing ship *San Bernardino* (LST 1189), or the Maritime Prepositioning Ship *First Lieutenant Jack Lummus* (TAK 3011), would be directed to relieve the amphibious task group on station. The task force commanders, like PhibGru 3, were to provide a coordinated plan of action, the

* The 2,000-man 11th MEU (SOC), composed of Battalion Landing Team 3/1, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 268, and Marine Service Support Group 11, had been embedded into the 5th MEB for Operation Desert Storm and was embarked on the *New Orleans* (LPH 11), *Denver* (LPD 9), *Mobile* (LKA 115), *Germantown* (LSD 42), and *Peoria* (LST 1183). Another PhibGru 3 ship, the *Tripoli* (LPH 10), struck a mine and was seriously damaged in January 1991.

earliest possible departure date for each ship, and estimated time of arrival off Chittagong.³²

Responding to Seventh Fleet's request, PhibGru 3 reported that it could arrive the morning of 16 May, assuming a speed of 16 knots. Its planned concept of operations encompassed four main phases: a liaison visit between PhibGru 3 and 5th MEB personnel and relief officials at Chittagong; the airlift and surface movement of relief supplies and water-making facilities to pre-designated landing zones; the turnover of the relief mission to international agencies or follow-on relief organizations; and, finally, the return of personnel and equipment to their respective amphibious ships. Should the group be tasked with the relief mission, it requested appropriate radio frequencies, landing zone and distribution site locations, aeronautical and topographical charts, additional medical supplies and vaccines, especially against rabies, and the designation of specific liaison personnel from the Bangladesh navy and government or from a non-government relief organization.³³

Task Force 76 reported that while a number of options were considered, it would recommend that the *St. Louis* proceed from Subic Bay in the Philippines to Okinawa where it would load a number of Marine Corps items best suited for relief operations such as reverse osmosis water purification units (ROWPUs), generators, and bulldozers.* From Okinawa, the *St. Louis* would steam to Chittagong, arriving about 23 May. The *San Bernardino* and *Lummas* would continue with their scheduled operations and not be deployed. This option, it noted, precluded any reliance on Military Airlift Command support and allowed adequate time to prestage the best humanitarian relief package from equipment available on Okinawa.³⁴ Seventh Fleet passed both the proposed recommendations of Task Force 76 and the concept of operations submitted by PhibGru 3 to CinCPac for consideration.

On the morning of 9 May, CinCPac informed Lieutenant Colonel Dunn that the command was closely monitoring the situation in Bangladesh and was taking a number of specific actions on his requests for assistance. The quantity and cost of chlorine-based water purification tablets and water cans were being identified. Thirteen pallets of relief and medical supplies, singled out by the Pacific Command's Humanitarian Assistance Office, were readied for shipment on Okinawa and would be airlifted by an Air Force Lockheed C-141 Starlifter to

* The Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Unit is a frame-mounted, portable water purification system capable of purifying water from almost any deep or shallow well or surface water source. The ROWPU is able to remove nuclear, biological, and chemical contaminants as well as minerals and biological impurities. The single greatest benefit of the reverse osmosis process is the ability to desalinate salt water. Powered by a 30-kilowatt generator, the ROWPU is capable of producing potable water at a rate of 600 gallons per hour.

The ROWPU's end product, drinkable water, posed a problem for many Bangladeshi. They could not comprehend how a machine, or a water purification tablet, could produce safe drinking water from water taken from polluted tube wells, and ponds or irrigation canals that had once contained the corpses of their livestock and countrymen.



Photograph courtesy of Shahidul Alam

A section of the damaged port of Chittagong illustrates the numerous wrecks which clogged the port, preventing ocean-going relief ships from delivering needed supplies.

Bangladesh on 10 May. Although the command informed Dunn that the closest helicopter assets were on board ships of the amphibious group and their use was "operationally preferred and logistically much more supportable" than drawing on air assets on Okinawa or in the Philippines, CinCPac noted that it could do nothing unless the group's diversion was requested and authorized. The same was true for Pacific Ocean Division Corps of Engineer personnel to be used in a damage assessment of Chittagong harbor and the use of communication personnel and equipment. Any CinCPac assistance was dependent upon the receipt of a specific American Embassy request and subsequent approval by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.³⁵

In Bangladesh, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance notified the embassy that the Department of State had approved the requested allotment of an additional \$4.25 million for disaster relief. USAID quickly obligated grants totalling more than \$3.6 million with CARE, Save the Children Fund (USA), The Asia Foundation, World Vision, and a number of other non-government relief organizations. After receiving approval from the Bangladesh army, the embassy deployed the 15 soldiers from the U.S. Army's 84th Engineer Battalion to Chittagong to assist with the repair of the city's airport terminal and tower.^{36*} Following the receipt of a request from the Bangladesh air force for additional parachutes to facilitate aerial delivery of relief supplies which

* The Army engineers did little in the terms of major reconstruction because construction materials were in very short supply and the availability of heavy engineer equipment was limited.

Lieutenant Colonel Dunn promptly forwarded to the Pacific Command for action, the defense attache, accompanied by several USAID officials, flew to Chittagong to continue damage reconnaissance.³⁷

Upon their return to Dhaka and after subsequent discussions at the embassy, the mission's country team agreed that helicopters would be needed to perform relief operations. Accordingly, Ambassador Milam informed the Department of State of the recommendation on the 9th. Of the more than 5 million people severely affected by the cyclone, he reported, approximately half lived on islands or in coastal areas not served by main roads. The few feeder roads that existed were impassable and the island population was hard to reach due to rough seas and the shortage of large boats. The Bangladesh military, he noted, "has been able to reach these areas with relief goods intermittently by helicopter and occasional air drops You know better than I what an inexact science disaster assessment and assistance are." The ambassador concluded by noting that: "Our best judgement at this time, given humanitarian need, logistical difficulties of reaching island and remote mainland coastal areas, loss of BDG [Bangladesh government] helicopters and overuse of remaining ones, and need for newly elected government to perform well quickly is that U.S. supply of a few helicopters would be money well spent."³⁸

At Ambassador Milam's request, Lieutenant Colonel Dunn advised CinCPac of the mission's "high interest in possible diversion" of the amphibious task group and asked "if earlier arrival was possible."³⁹ In response, CinCPac noted



Photograph courtesy of Mary C. Kilgour

The cyclone's fierce winds brought down several of the port's cranes, which hindered the relief efforts and placed a greater emphasis on the need for helicopter support.

that the task group could possibly arrive earlier if an increased speed of advance was authorized. The original 17 May arrival date off Chittagong was based on an assumed speed of 14 knots, but an increase to 16 knots, as suggested by PhibGru 3, was feasible. Any increase in speed, however, would increase "fuel costs dramatically and will not be ordered until [the group was] committed by CJCS [Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff]." ⁴⁰

At Camp Courtney on Okinawa, on the 9th, III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) staff received indications from Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac), in Hawaii that the MEF was one of several candidates being considered as the nucleus around which a joint task force would be formed and deployed within the next 24 hours. At the time, the MEF commanding general, Major General Henry C. Stackpole III, and his Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (G-3), Colonel Stephen E. Lindblom, were in the Philippines attending a Seventh Fleet planning conference. Colonel Warren R. McPherson, III MEF Chief of Staff, informed Colonel Lindblom of the situation. They agreed that a planning cell should be formed to follow events as they unfolded and that Major General Stackpole should be apprised of any developments.

As all voice communications with Bangladesh were disrupted and the only communications available was by teletype through the American Embassy in Dhaka, little was known about the situation on the ground other than that provided by the mission's country team. Assuming a near total destruction of the affected area's infrastructure and an inability on the part of the Bangladesh government to support an American military effort, the MEF planning cell developed a "worst case" relief package that included a survey and reconnaissance party, command and control, satellite communications capability, limited transportation assets, and a reverse osmosis water purification component. This flexible relief package could be expanded or reduced as the situation demanded.

Late on the 9th, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, notified III MEF that there were indications that the Commander, Seventh Fleet, Vice Admiral Stanley R. Arthur, would be designated the joint task force commander. The planning had been done, so all that remained was to wait until the situation clarified as the staff expected that deployable elements of the MEF would be involved in the relief effort if the staff was not. ⁴¹ This on-again, off-again process was not helpful. "The affected commands," as Colonel Lindblom later noted, "should have been given advance word and kept in the loop as decisions were being made." ⁴²

The American relief effort in Bangladesh received a boost on the 10th with the arrival of the C-141 from Okinawa and a Air Force C-5A transport from Southwest Asia. With an estimated value of \$25 million, the Department of Defense-donated provisions included medical supplies, blankets, tents, foodstuffs,

and other relief commodities.* These supplies were unloaded with the assistance of embassy staff and Bangladesh military personnel. They were then turned over to representatives of the Bangladesh army's Supreme Command on behalf of the Ministry of Relief and were taken to government warehouses for later distribution. This donation supplemented on-going embassy relief endeavors. The relief priorities of providing water, food, diarrheal disease control, and emergency shelter remained unchanged. The overriding need, however, was to "establish effective transportation and logistics systems to the severely affected islands and inaccessible coastal areas."⁴³

The embassy again asked for help in alleviating the problem. American Defense Attache Lieutenant Colonel Dunn forwarded Ambassador Milam's personal appeal for helicopter support to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, Admiral Charles R. Larson, with a copy going to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

Admiral, I ask to take a few moments of your time to pass on a request from the American Ambassador to Bangladesh, Mr. William B. Milam. As your staff is aware, through . . . messages on the same subject, the AmEmbassy in Dhaka is attempting to obtain the services of the USS *Tarawa* and her 16 CH46 helicopters to assist in life saving measures in Bangladesh.

Colossal damage has been sustained in the coastal regions of southeastern Bangladesh in a 30 April 91 cyclone and DOD assistance has led the way in U.S. relief. Your staff, and that of your subordinates and the Joint Staff, have provided spectacular support to the U.S. defense attache office and the AmEmbassy in this crisis.

Mr. Milam and the country team strongly believe that the aircraft on the *Tarawa* are the closest and best organized force to now bring aid and save lives of the millions of affected Bangladeshis. Funding by USAID and State Department does not now seem to be available to finance the deployment of the *Tarawa*.

If funding for the deployment of the *Tarawa* and her aircraft could be made available, either through operational or exercise funds, lives of our Desert Shield ally could be saved.

* The donation did not contain food items as the Bangladesh government had advised the embassy that even though 26 sea containers of excess meals ready to eat (MREs) were available from Desert Storm, the government did not want MREs or other rations that contained or might contain pork. (USDAO, Dhaka msg to USCinCPac, 110704ZMay91)

Lieutenant Colonel Dunn concluded his appeal on behalf of the ambassador by requesting that "all attempts be made to make the *Tarawa* available for this noble mission."⁴⁴

The Bangladesh government and American Embassy appeals were echoed by the United Nations. After meeting with private aid agencies in Dhaka, representatives of the world body declared "that foreign nations had failed to mount an effort sufficient to help the survivors of the cyclone." They concluded that "Bangladesh urgently needed helicopters, water purification tablets, tents, medical kits, plastic sheets, powdered milk and drugs, particularly anti-diarrhea medicine." The United Nations representatives considered the means of transporting these and other supplies to the cyclone victims essential.⁴⁵

The repeated entreaties by Ambassador Milam and his staff for helicopter support had not gone unnoticed in Washington and Hawaii. On the 9th, following discussions between Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence S. Eagleburger, and Deputy and Acting Secretary of Defense Donald J. Atwood, the Department of State formally requested that the Department of Defense provide relief assistance in the form of heavy-lift helicopters, specifically those attached to the 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. The helicopters were to be used "to deliver relief supplies to low-lying coastal areas, flooded areas and areas not accessible by roads" for a period of approximately 14 days.⁴⁶ Shortly after 1700 on the 10th, Secretary Atwood forwarded a memorandum to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin L. Powell, directing "the commander in chief of the appropriate unified command or specified command to order appropriate elements of the Fifth Marine Expeditionary Brigade to make best speed to international waters adjacent to Bangladesh." The brigade's mission was to provide "transportation support to humanitarian relief efforts in Bangladesh." In a note appended to the memorandum, Secretary Atwood directed Major General Stackpole to Bangladesh to "assess and set up" communications and authorized a "speed up" of Amphibious Group 3.⁴⁷

Late that evening, a warning order, prepared by the Joint Staff and approved by the Chairman, was sent to CinCPac requesting that Admiral Larson provide a "commander's estimate with alternative courses of action" for the President's consideration by noon on the 11th. The command was to be prepared, when directed by the President, to "provide support for relief operations to assist the Government of Bangladesh in recovering from tropical cyclone damage for a period of approximately 2 weeks." Authorized courses of action included--but were not limited to--providing helicopter lift of relief supplies, relief of Bangladesh government and U.S. Embassy personnel, search and rescue assistance, and communications help until the Bangladesh government could reestablish communications in the disaster area. Other commands, such as the Strategic Air and Special Operations Commands, were to provide appropriate support as required.⁴⁸

Upon receipt of the warning order, CinCPac activated a crisis action team to address immediate and long-term assistance concerns. Working throughout the night, the team communicated its assessment and proposed concept of

operations to the American Embassy in Dhaka and the Joint Staff in Washington early on the 11th. The established overriding priority was to assist in minimizing the death of additional Bangladeshi citizens in the postdisaster period. To that end, CinCPac proposed, when directed by the President, to execute a three-phase operation designed to provide command, control, and communications capability, "immediate short term disaster relief, and longer term sustainable humanitarian assistance to designated areas in Bangladesh."⁴⁹

During phase one, a joint task force, codenamed Productive Effort, would be formed and the designated commander, Major General Stackpole, would deploy to Dhaka. He and his staff would establish liaison with the embassy's country team, officials of the Bangladesh government, private volunteer and international relief organizations, and would furnish CinCPac with an on-site mission assessment. To provide a means of assessment during phase two, CinCPac would deploy the first American rotary wing assets, consisting of five U.S. Army UH-60 Blackhawks, an environmental preventive medicine assessment capability, and a command, control, and communications augmentation cell. Following the assessment phases, the final phase would encompass an "organized, sustained effort to provide protracted humanitarian assistance." The Joint Task Force (JTF) commander would "direct and coordinate the relief efforts provided by light-, medium-, and heavy-lift



Department of Defense Photo (USAF) DF-ST-92-06107
MajGen Henry C. Stackpole III, commanding the III Marine Expeditionary Force headquartered on Okinawa, was given command of the joint American effort to provide disaster relief to the victims of the Bangladesh cyclone.

helicopters, surface and shallow draft craft and personnel" from Amphibious Group 3 and embarked 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. All activities would be limited to those permitted by the Department of State through the American ambassador to Bangladesh. In addition, CinCPac set a spending ceiling of \$500,000, noting that service-incurred costs would be born by each obligating service.⁵⁰ "Rest assured," the Pacific Command informed the American Embassy, "USCinCPac is capable and prepared to respond with significant assets and speed to render appropriate assistance to our regional neighbors in Bangladesh."⁵¹

Moving rapidly, CinCPac activated Joint Task Force Productive Effort and formally designated Major General Henry C. Stackpole III, its commander. A Connecticut native, General Stackpole was commissioned a Marine second lieutenant in 1958 after his graduation from Princeton University. He served two tours in Vietnam and held command, staff, and school assignments before being appointed commanding general of the III Marine Expeditionary Force, 3d Marine Division, and Marine Corps Bases, Japan. He concurrently held the posts of Okinawa Area Coordinator under U.S. Forces, Japan, and Commander, Landing Force, Seventh Fleet. General Stackpole, as the Joint Task Force commander, was given operational control of all U.S. Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine forces ashore or entering Bangladesh "to assist the Government of Bangladesh in recovering from tropical storm damage."⁵² Deployment of the task force, however, would have to await an order from the President.

The Presidential order came early on 11 May. Based on the assessments and recommendations of the Departments of State and Defense and discussions between Deputy Secretary Eagleburger and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, President Bush formally issued the order to dispatch the proposed joint task force to Bangladesh. In making the announcement, a White House spokesman noted that while the humanitarian effort would be "a significant contribution--in people and cost involved, . . . it is not unprecedented." Several recent examples were cited to support the use of American military personnel in humanitarian relief projects, such as aiding Kurdish refugees, and providing relief to victims of the San Francisco-area, Armenian, and Mexican earthquakes. "We have a long history of coming to the aid of people who need it," the spokesman said.⁵³

Once the President approved the proposed disaster relief effort, the Secretary of Defense instructed CinCPac through the JCS to initiate Operation Productive Effort.⁵⁴ In the Philippines, General Stackpole received a call from the CinCPac J-3 (Operations) informing him that the President had decided to assist Bangladesh and inquired how soon he could be in Dhaka. Twenty-four hours, responded Stackpole.⁵⁵ General Stackpole and Colonel Lindblom immediately left Subic Bay and flew to Okinawa where he met with his staff, which had formed a crisis action team, at Camp Courtney. Already in contact with their counterparts at CinCPac and airlift traffic managers at Kadena Air Base on the island, the staff reported one C-141 Starlifter would be ready at 1800 that same evening, and that there would be limited ground and helicopter transport

available for the survey and reconnaissance party upon its arrival in Dhaka. In addition, the staff had contacted the American defense attache about the current situation in Dhaka regarding water, food, transportation, shelter, electrical power, and security.⁵⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Dunn informed them that the situation in the capital was "normal," that a variety of accommodations were available, and that preliminary briefings by appropriate embassy staff and Bangladesh officials had been scheduled.⁵⁷ Given this information, Stackpole decided to go with a very small advance party, limited to no more than 30 Marine and Navy personnel, until the actual situation in Bangladesh could be ascertained. The remaining III MEF staff members would follow within 24 hours. Due to the absence of a military threat, few intelligence personnel would accompany the advance party or follow-on staff to Bangladesh. As CinCPac had directed the deployment of additional forces to augment the initial party and ordered PhibGru 3 to increase speed to 16 knots and proceed to a location in international waters off Chittagong, General Stackpole decided to wait and create a staff in Bangladesh that had a true joint character.⁵⁸

Prior to their departure from Kadena, the 28-man advance party checked and adjusted mount-out boxes and field chests which held critical supplies and office equipment for operating in an expeditionary environment, updated their vaccinations, and made numerous other preparations necessitated by the short notice deployment. In addition, they "quickly ascertained that very little in the way of joint doctrine existed concerning humanitarian relief operations," noted Lieutenant Colonel Gary W. Anderson, so they "took an extensive file on OPERATION PROVIDE COMFORT."⁵⁹ The team carried enough food, water, and shelter to be self-supporting for the first 72 hours in-country, and included satellite communications equipment.⁶⁰ By 1800 on the 11th, the advance survey and reconnaissance party staged at Kadena Air Base.

At 2100, General Stackpole and the advance party left Kadena enroute to Dhaka with a scheduled stop at Utapao, Thailand. While refueling at Utapao, a problem of overflight rights for Burma and India arose. Due to the short notice, emergency nature of the mission and the fact that the flight was taking place on a weekend, both countries refused to grant permission for the aircraft to proceed. "I had to make a hard decision leaving Utapao, Thailand as to whether we were going to have fighters scrambled to come after us from India or not," Stackpole later recounted. Despite the lack of clearance, Stackpole decided to press on, informing both countries that the mission was "for humanitarian purposes." Skirting their air defense network "to the extent we could," the flight proceeded on to Dhaka without incident.^{61*}

* Burma required diplomatic clearance for Stackpole's aircraft and all follow-on Military Airlift Command (MAC) aircraft prior to granting flight clearance through the Yangon flight information region. Since the proposed route did not come within 12 nautical miles of Burmese territory, no diplomatic clearances were requested by the U.S. Because of the lack of clearances, MAC aircraft experienced numerous delays. To avoid the delays, aircrews filed flight plans that skirted the Yangon flight information region.

Marshalling the Forces

Early on the morning of 12 May, the Air Force C-141 Starlifter carrying Major General Stackpole and the advance party broke through a heavy layer of clouds and began its final approach into Zia International Airport outside Dhaka. The aircraft touched down shortly before 0700 and taxied to the airport's main terminal. General Stackpole was greeted by Ambassador Milam, Lieutenant Colonel Dunn, and members of the country team, as well as a delegation of Bangladesh officials that included State Minister of Relief and Rehabilitation, Luftur Rahman Khan; Chief of the General Staff, Major General Abdus Salam; and other general officers from the government's Supreme Command Headquarters. Following their arrival, General Stackpole and the primary members of his staff drove into Dhaka, dropped off their gear at the government's guest house in the Dhaka Cantonment, adjacent to Army Headquarters, and then moved on to a breakfast meeting with the ambassador, the defense attache, and senior embassy and USAID officials. The remainder of the advance party was billeted temporarily in an embassy-leased house on the outskirts of the capital not far from the American Club.⁶²

Stackpole and the senior members of his team spent the morning being briefed by the ambassador and embassy personnel and the afternoon receiving an update of the situation and ongoing relief efforts from Bangladesh military and civilian officials and representatives of several non-government relief organizations. Despite the gallant efforts of the Bangladesh government and military, all reported that the situation was bleak and required immediate action. "My initial impression," General Stackpole told Admiral Larson that evening, "is that although the situation is grave, the immediate threat posed by the situation, such as dehydration, starvation, and injury, can be dealt with in the stipulated 14-day time frame. However, estimate considerable assistance needed to stabilize health crisis will be required for an additional 14 days. The Bangladesh military is providing heroic support within capabilities, but desperately needs help to do so successfully." The "Ambassador and staff," he concluded, "have rendered superb support and briefings in helping us get our feet on the ground."⁶³

Stackpole and his staff met to review a number of common observations and to work on a preliminary assessment of the situation which would be relayed to CinCPac. By the time of the meeting, Stackpole had assumed operational control of the U.S. Army's 84th Engineer Battalion detachment, and combat camera, public affairs, and maintenance personnel from the on-going Cobra Gold exercise in Thailand who were also assigned to augment the Joint Task Force. A Disaster Assessment and Relief Team (DART) from the 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group A (Airborne), which was flown from Okinawa via the Philippines on board two Air Force Lockheed HC-130 Hercules aircraft belonging to the 17th



Photograph courtesy of American Embassy, Bangladesh
American Ambassador William B. Milan, left, MajGen Henry C. Stackpole III, and LtGen Muhammad Noor Uddin Khan, chief of staff of the Bangladeshi army, were briefed during the preparatory stage of the relief operation.

Special Operations Squadron, 353d Special Operations Wing, was also chopped to the Joint Task Force.* The Special Operations Force commander, Lieutenant Colonel George W. Norwood, USAF, was designated the Special Operations component commander and attended the late evening meeting.⁶⁴

Briefings by Bangladesh, embassy, and non-government relief agency representatives provided Stackpole and the Joint Task Force staff with an accurate picture of the situation. The most pressing relief effort problem was the prioritization of existing aid supplies and their distribution. The task force staff agreed that neither the massive use of ground forces, nor a large influx of relief supplies would be needed. The quantity of food, especially grain, stored in government and non-government relief organizations' warehouses was considered adequate to meet the emergency. With the road network virtually destroyed and the affected area covered by shallow water, only helicopters, air-cushion landing

* The DART was task organized from 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group with the command and control element and an advanced operational base composed of a Special Forces Operational Detachment Bravo and two Special Forces Operational Detachment Alphas. The team was composed of 36 Special Operations personnel, including command and control, operations, intelligence, logistics, communications, medical, and weather personnel.

A third aircraft, a C-130 from the 1st Special Operations Squadron, carrying additional Joint Task Force command and special tactics team personnel was forced to remain in Thailand when the aircraft developed a main landing gear malfunction.

craft (LCAC), air drops, and the limited use of conventional landing craft could be used. As General Stackpole stated to CinCPac: "We will deliver food, water and supplies to GOB [Government of Bangladesh] Forces in place for immediate distribution to [the] population to preserve life."⁶⁵

General Stackpole, in his preliminary assessment, reported two major concerns. The first, shared by Ambassador Milam, was "to avoid the appearance of stepping in to relieve the government." The newly elected democratic government, Stackpole noted, was trying hard to cope with the unprecedented disaster and its sovereign right to lead the relief effort had to be respected. America's operational control rather than command would be emphasized.⁶⁶ "Believe it important," he continued, "that we be visibly working hand in hand with the GOB [Government of Bangladesh] and Bangladesh military as a team." Stackpole's philosophy from the outset "was to 'backbone' the gallant Bangladesh efforts rather than be intrusive or overwhelming in demands on the fragile infrastructure of this third world nation."⁶⁷ He considered it vital that the government be in charge of the relief effort and that a coordinating mechanism be created which would bring all agencies involved together and to work toward a common end. The arrival of the amphibious task group, he noted, would be "invaluable due to their ability to operate in a sea-based mode. This sea-based presence will also help us avoid further stressing an already strained national infra-structure."⁶⁸

Stackpole's second concern was for needed medical support. Abysmal sanitary conditions and the resultant contamination of the affected area's water supply would produce, he surmised, more deaths from disease than from starvation or dehydration. Although follow-on medical teams would be needed, he stressed that the distribution of food and water was the primary focus of the effort. "Overall," he concluded, "[I] am confident that forces currently planned can alleviate immediate crisis as it exists in next 14 days." However, an "end state" eventually would need to be defined in coordination with the American ambassador, CinCPac, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff "to ensure that we do not appear to be an 'occupying force' in the long run. Currently envision providing immediate lifesaving response for 14 days and follow on support as required for a further 14 if NCA [National Command Authorities] requires. Currently do not envision presence beyond that."⁶⁹

Stackpole's preliminary distribution plan involved transport of food and supplies by fixed-wing aircraft from Dhaka to Chittagong, about 190 kilometers south of the capital. Relief supplies would then be delivered from Chittagong to the outlying coastal areas and islands by helicopter and surface craft. Until regular Air Force C-130s capable of carrying larger payloads arrived, General Stackpole proposed using the two Special Operations HC-130 aircraft for the initial runs between Dhaka and Chittagong. The five UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters and crews from the 4th Battalion, 25th Aviation Regiment of the U.S. Army Pacific's 25th Infantry Division, accompanying the Joint Task Force augmentation cell from Hawaii, were to be designated the initial primary rotary wing delivery platforms. Upon the arrival of Amphibious Group 3 with Marine

Aircraft Group 50's 26 medium- and heavy-lift helicopters on 15 May, the 5th MEB would assume the main burden of distributing relief supplies to inaccessible areas within the disaster zone.

Before submitting a formal assessment and detailed campaign plan to CinCPac for approval, General Stackpole wanted to make a visual reconnaissance of the disaster area.* The visit was scheduled for early the following morning so as to be completed by midday, before the eruption of daily afternoon thunderstorms which could make flying difficult. Stackpole's initial survey would stress the requirements needed to reopen Chittagong airport for routine flight operations, in addition to looking for unflooded landing zones, landing craft ramp sites, and secure areas where reverse osmosis water purification units could be set up.⁷⁰

At 0800 on 13 May, Stackpole and the senior members of his staff met with Lieutenant General Muhammad Noor Uddin Khan, Chief of Staff of the Bangladesh Army, Ambassador Milam, Director Kilgour, and key members of the Bangladesh Supreme Command staff. Following a short meeting they boarded two Bangladesh air force UH-1 Huey helicopters for an extensive tour of the disaster area. Stops included Chittagong city and airport, Sandwip, South Hatia, Kutubdia, and Maheshkali Islands. "The devastation was extremely sobering," noted the Joint Task Force commander.⁷¹ "I have seen combat," but "I have never seen greater carnage." As he later recalled:

It dwarfed anything that happened in Desert Storm. And because the total infrastructure was destroyed in these outlying islands and up to five kilometers inland along this 110 mile coastline, there was no way to bury [the dead] in mass graves or even be able to get out into the area and get control of the situation. All communications were knocked out. Water supplies . . . were completely polluted by this point in time. The toxicity of the bodies, now bloated, was a serious problem for us. People were dying of cholera. They were dying of a variety of other diseases. Simple scratches had become infected; amputations were legion. We had many, many problems which to solve.⁷²

The devastation, Stackpole reported, "imbued all concerned with [a] renewed sense of purpose concerning the absolutely vital need for relief operations." The tour also confirmed his belief that the distribution of water, food, and supplies would be the main focus of the Joint Task Force's relief effort. With adequate

* On 12 May, the embassy sent a liaison team to Chittagong in order to coordinate the effort and to prepare for Stackpole's visit. The presence of embassy personnel in Chittagong proved to be "extraordinarily useful and essential" as the operation progressed. (Jon F. Danilowicz, Comments on draft ms, 18Feb95)



Photograph courtesy of USCinCPac

One of five U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopters from the 4th Battalion, 25th Aviation Regiment, based in Hawaii, is unloaded at Zia International Airport. The helicopters were part of the Joint Task Force augmentation cell.

food supplies available, the problem would be getting it to the areas where it was needed due to the destroyed infrastructure.⁷³

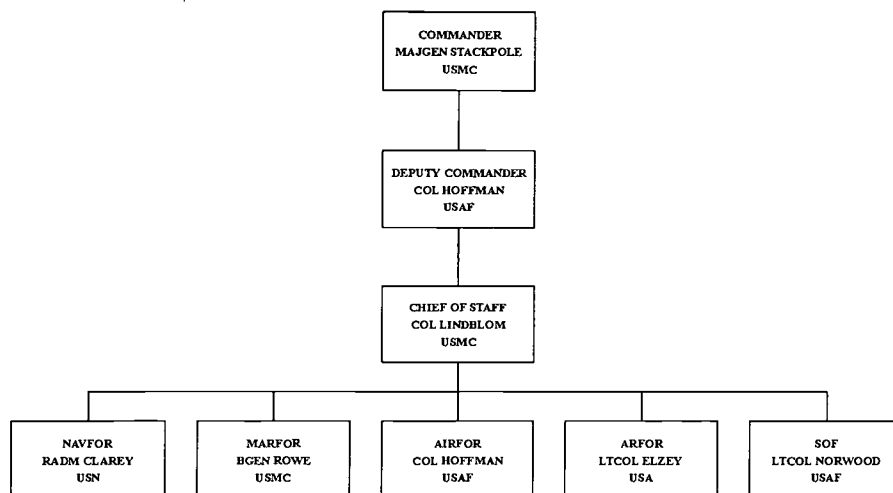
Shortly after General Stackpole's return to Dhaka, the Air Force C-5A Galaxy transport carrying five U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopters, support equipment, and the 56-man augmentation cell arrived from Hawaii.⁷⁴ The cell was composed of helicopter support, communications, and public affairs personnel, and the initial elements of the Navy's Environmental and Preventive Medicine Unit 6 (NEPMU 6). In addition, it included the Joint Task Force's deputy commander, Colonel Edward G. Hoffman, USAF. He also was designated the JTF Air Force component commander. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas F. Elzey, USA, in command of the Blackhawk detachment, was named the JTF Army component commander. While welcome, the cell lacked standing operating procedures and competent personnel to deal with administrative, automated data processing, contracting, purchasing, and comptroller matters.* While separate elements of the cell had trained for such deployments, the cell as a whole was not prepared.

* The Pacific Command eventually deployed professional personnel from Hawaii and Okinawa, but in the interim the embassy lent a number of staff members to assist the JTF in the areas of public affairs, legal, public health, and contracting.

As the staff continued to grow, a tentative headquarters site was identified at Tezgaon, the old international airport midway between Dhaka and Zia International. The unused Bangladesh air force barracks at Tezgaon was selected, as it was not far from the Presidential Secretariat building which housed the civil-military team formed by the Bangladesh government to manage the relief effort. The barracks soon proved unsuitable as a JTF Operations Center due to its small, compartmented rooms which separated principal staff sections, hindering the flow of information within the staff and to higher headquarters and component commanders.

The embassy and the American International School provided accommodations at no cost for the staff. "Our living situation is much better than we had anticipated," wrote Lieutenant Colonel James L. White, USAF, commander of a contingent of the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing from Yokota Air Base, Japan. "We live on the second floor of the embassy Storage and Furniture Warehouse. It is air conditioned and we have used our [own] cots and their mattresses. We have outdoor showers and a small embassy commissary, which

JOINT TASK FORCE SEA ANGEL BANGLADESH



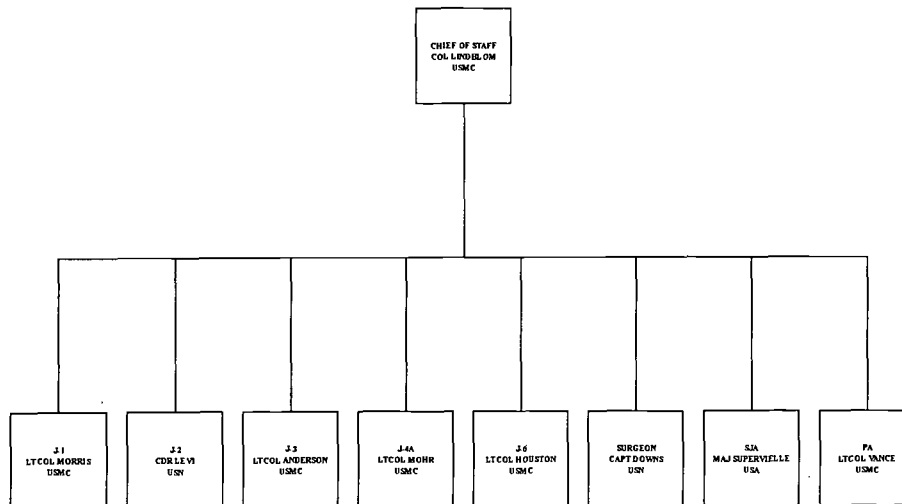
helps a lot. We eat MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] except for dinner, which is a hot meal provided by the American Club."⁷⁵ In addition, the embassy loaned support equipment such as copying machines and air conditioners, allowed the JTF to requisition office supplies and other items from the General Service Office store, and provided local transportation and laundry service on a reimbursable basis.⁷⁶

Late in the day, General Stackpole again met with Ambassador Milam and senior Ministry of Relief officials and military officers in charge of relief operations. A number of Bangladeshis present expressed concern as to the JTF's resources and how they would be used. Following an explanation by General Stackpole of the task force's mission, resources, and proposed role in the relief effort, and Ambassador Milam's reassurances, apprehension slowly gave way to guarded support.⁷⁷

Based on his personal observations, discussions with Bangladesh officials and members of the embassy's country team, and political and geographical realities, Stackpole decided to split the JTF staff between Chittagong and Dhaka. Colonel Stephen Lindblom, III MEF operations officer, would remain in Dhaka as the Joint Task Force's Chief of Staff with Marine Lieutenant Colonel Gary W. Anderson as his operations officer. Located in the capital near government ministries and the country's only major airport, the Dhaka center would function primarily as a planning and liaison headquarters. In addition it would coordinate--in consultation with representatives of the Bangladesh government, American embassy, other foreign military contingents and embassies, and non-government relief agencies--incoming aid, the staging of relief materials, and the setting of priorities for flights to forward areas. With few exceptions, all air and sea assets contributed to the relief effort by other foreign governments were placed under the JTF's operational control. The Chittagong center, situated at the city's Patenga Airport, would schedule helicopter flights and landing craft operations to move the relief supplies to outlying islands and coastal areas within the disaster zone. The center would not only act as a transshipment point, but also as the local coordination center for civilian, Bangladeshi, and foreign military forces engaged in the relief effort. Air Force Colonel Mike Ferguson was designated the chief of staff for Joint Task Force (Forward) (JTF Forward) headquarters at Chittagong. Navy Captain Edward P. Anglim from Amphibious Group 1 became his operations officer. General Stackpole and Colonel Hoffman planned to rotate between the two centers, providing constant command presence.⁷⁸

After his inspection tour, General Stackpole forwarded an update of the situation to CinCPac and requested additional communications and airlift support. At that time, the only voice communications among Dhaka, Okinawa, and Hawaii was the portable, single-channel, ultra-high-frequency PSC-3 satellite communications terminal carried by the advance party. The lack of a high-gain tactical satellite antenna, unstable local power, and harsh environmental conditions initially limited the system's effectiveness. Although Army Special Forces brought long-range communications equipment and quickly established a

JOINT TASK FORCE SEA ANGEL DHAKA



functioning net, it rapidly was overburdened. Hard-copy (non-voice) message traffic had to be relayed through the embassy's message center. Although the JTF had access to the host country's limited civilian and military telephone service between Dhaka and Chittagong, the establishment of reliable command, disaster relief, and air traffic control nets, in addition to "Autodin" and "Autovon" support for the disaster control centers, was "critical to operations," Stackpole reported.* He also requested four more Air Force C-130 transports and the necessary command and support packages to provide adequate intra-theater lift. His immediate priorities were: to establish the forward headquarters at Chittagong; place Special Operations assessment teams at six Bangladesh military relief sites; position water purification units at about a dozen secure locations; and begin relief and reconnaissance flights as soon as possible. "Every

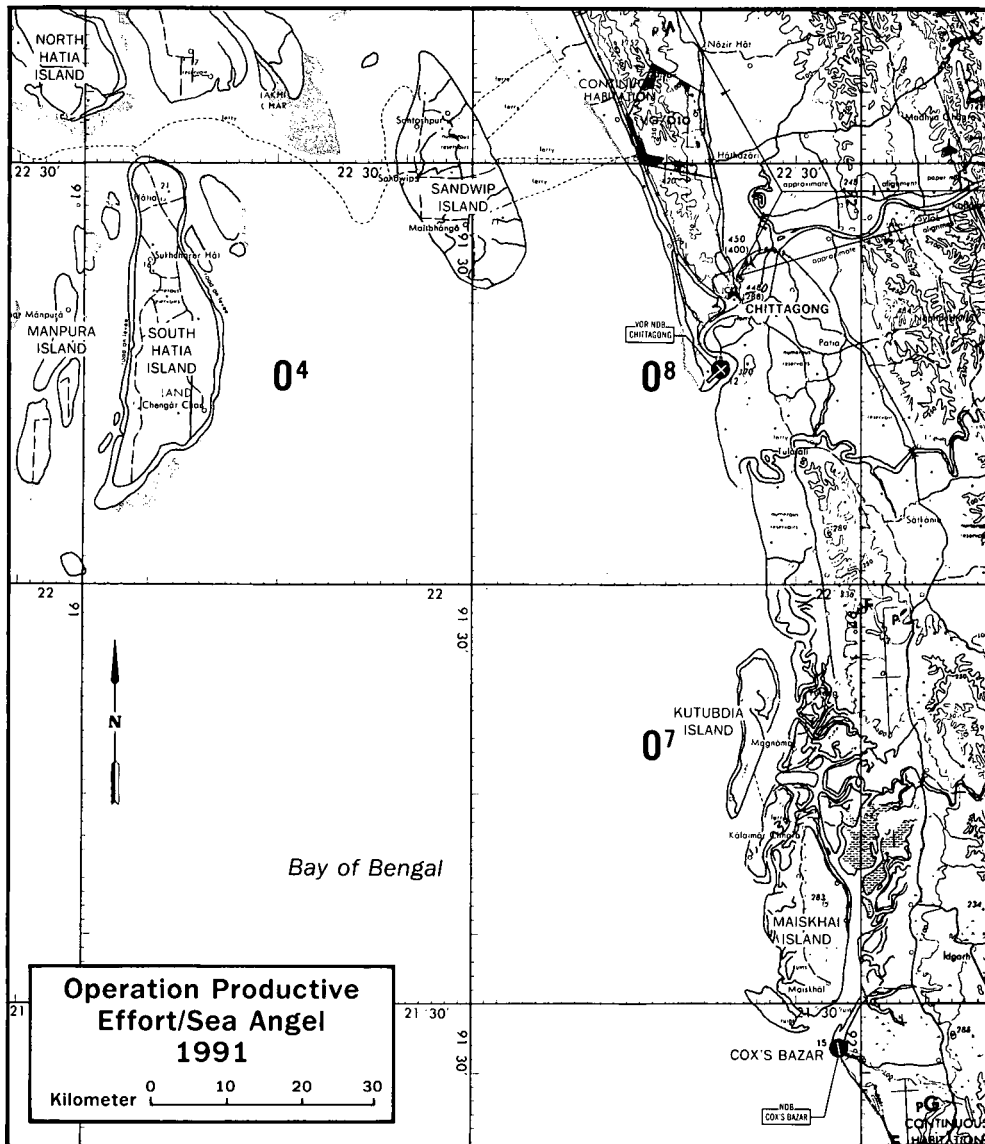
* The Automatic Voice Network (Autovon) and Automatic Digital Network (Autodin) are the principal long-haul voice and digital communications networks within the Defense Communications System.

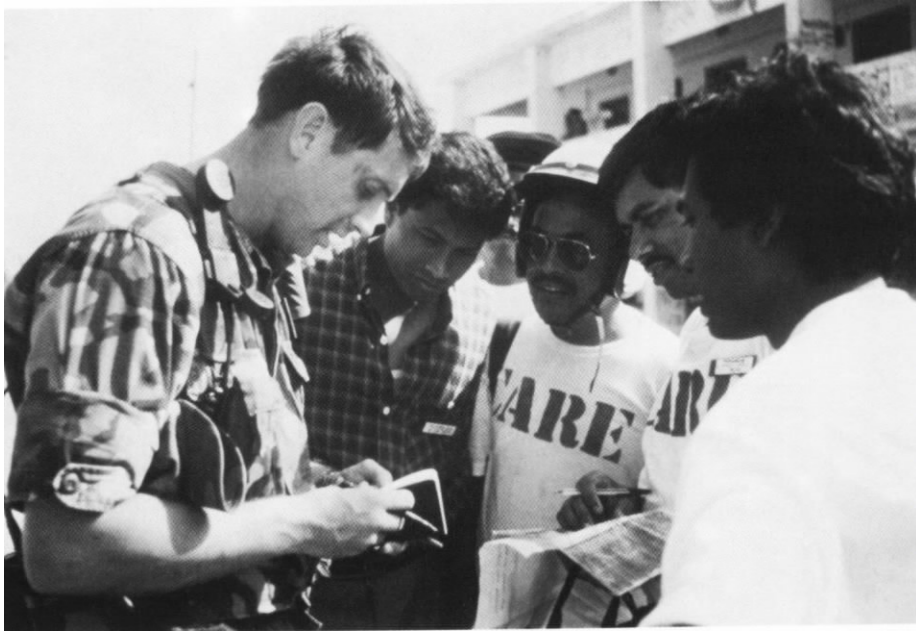
effort," he emphasized, "is being made to conduct assessment and follow-on op[eration]s in conjunction with Bangladesh civil and military authorities. . . . Believe JTF can make real and immediate impact on efforts to reduce mortality and stabilize the situation almost immediately."⁷⁹

General Stackpole followed up his assessment with a more detailed concept of operations for Phase I of the campaign plan developed by the CinCPac crisis action team. The goal of the on-going first phase was to take immediate action to minimize mortality and stabilize the situation by overcoming the recurring problem of distribution. "In doing so," Stackpole said, "we must maximize cross support until we reach a point where the whole effort is greater than the sum of [its parts]." Beginning on 15 May, the forward operations center would be activated at Chittagong airport and begin relief operations in the hardest-hit areas. In addition, communications teams and water purification units would be located at key Bangladesh army relief centers. To facilitate the aid effort, each service component of the joint command would be assigned an individual sector based on its available assets, for the distribution of food and relief supplies. The northern sector, encompassing the coastal region north of the Karnaphuli River, was assigned to the Army component; the Marine component was given the southern sector, the coastal area south of the Karnaphuli River, centered on Cox's Bazar and Kutubdia Island; and the island sector, which incorporated Sandwip, North and South Hatia, and Manpura Islands, as well as the smaller surrounding mud flats, was allotted to the Navy component. The Special Operations and Air Force components were to provide assessment and airlift support as required.⁸⁰

Taking Stackpole's assessment, the operational concept, Task Force 76's recommendation, and the amphibious task group's projected 14-day commitment into consideration, CinCPac suggested that the *St. Louis*, instead of the Maritime Prepositioning Ship *Lummas*, relieve the Navy task group and embarked Marine brigade. Pacific Command's recommendation was based upon the size and nature of the cargo and the existing harbor conditions at Chittagong. On the 13th, Seventh Fleet ordered the *St. Louis*, under the command of Captain John W. Peterson, to proceed from Subic Bay in the Philippines to Naha, Okinawa. At Naha, the *St. Louis* would load 28 reverse osmosis water purification units (ROWPUs), each weighing more than five tons, for use in the relief effort. Another eight units would be airlifted to Bangladesh. The amphibious cargo ship was scheduled to depart Okinawa on the 19th and arrive off Chittagong 10 days later. There she would replace the amphibious task group, which then would resume its return voyage to the West Coast. The *Lummas* was placed on alert status should the ship be needed.⁸¹

To support the deployment and use of the water purification units and assist with the humanitarian effort, III MEF activated Contingency Marine Air-Ground Task Force 2-91 (CMAGTF 2-91).⁸² Drawn from 26 different MEF units, the contingency air-ground task force was composed of a command element from the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, a ground element drawn from Company F, 2d Battalion, 23d Marines, and a combat service support element consisting of





Department of Defense Photo (USAF) DF-ST-92-06142

U.S. Air Force TSgt K. L. Jones, a member of a Mobile Area Assessment Team, coordinates Joint Task Force relief efforts with CARE personnel on Kutubdia Island.

medical, engineer, motor transport, supply, and maintenance detachments from the 3d Force Service Support Group.* The Marine task force included no aviation combat element. Within 96 hours of activation, 44 Marines and Navy corpsmen, with the eight ROWPUs, generators, floodlights, and associated equipment, had been airlifted to Bangladesh, moved to their designated locations, and were producing potable water. On the 19th, the remaining 190 Marines, in addition to medical and repair parts packages worth more than \$1 million, embarked on board the *St. Louis* and departed Okinawa for Bangladesh.⁸³

On 14 May, as Major General Stackpole, Ambassador Milam, Lieutenant General Noor Uddin Khan, and others continued their reconnaissance of the affected area, the vanguard of JTF Forward headquarters deployed to Chittagong. Units included Special Operations Force personnel organized as Mobile Area Assessment Teams. These teams were positioned at key Bangladesh relief sites throughout the mainland and offshore islands. The small, three- to four-man teams were composed of a communications specialist, medical technician, engineer, and at times a team leader, and were accompanied by two Bangladesh soldiers. The teams: conducted an area assessment; selected and, to a limited degree, secured helicopter landing zones; established long-range communications;

* 2d Battalion, 23d Marines, was a Selected Marine Reserve unit headquartered at Encino, California. The battalion was mobilized in December 1990 and deployed to Okinawa to fill the depleted ranks of the 9th Marines.

administered limited medical and disaster assistance; and coordinated follow-on or supporting relief efforts, noting any specific medical, food, water, or equipment needs. It was only after the deployment and subsequent debriefing of these teams, as General Stackpole later noted, "that the Bangladeshi had the full impact and magnitude of what had occurred."⁸⁴ In addition to the Special Forces teams, Air Force specialists from the 1723d Special Tactics Squadron were tasked to do assessments of the airfields at Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, and Dhaka to determine their load-bearing capabilities.

As the day wore on, the remaining elements of the CinCPac augmentation cell arrived in Dhaka and were quickly integrated into the JTF staff or supporting component units. The forces included additional Army Blackhawk aviators and support personnel, a six-man reserve civil affairs team from the 351st Civil Affairs Command, a Corps of Engineers harbor assessment team, and communications, public affairs, and medical staff.* Among the later group was Captain John R. Downs, MC, USNR, who was designated the JTF surgeon.

The following day, preparations for the expanded international relief effort moved into high gear. In Dhaka, as the Agency for International Development continued to expedite the relief effort by extending additional grants to several non-government agencies, the JTF staff continued to work on the campaign plan, which would be forwarded to CinCPac once it received planning input from the amphibious task force. In addition, the staff collaborated with members of the Bangladesh government's civil and military relief team and representatives of major non-government organizations to build a national-level coordinating committee to establish priorities. The first meeting of the national committee took place on the 15th to set the priorities for the following day as to the type and quantity of relief supplies airlifted to Chittagong. Chaired by Bangladesh army Brigadier Shafaat Ahmed, charged by Prime Minister Zia with responsibility for the relief effort, the committee included representatives from the JTF, U.S. Agency for International Development, Bangladesh military, government civil agencies, and several non-government relief organizations such as the Red Crescent Society and CARE. The national coordinating committee met daily until 28 May when it was determined that an adequate amount of relief supplies had been delivered to Chittagong. Future meetings would only be called when needed.

Also on the 15th, JTF Forward headquarters was formally established at Chittagong with the arrival of additional American military and embassy

* The civil affairs team was to assist in coordination efforts among the Government of Bangladesh, non-government relief organizations, American Embassy, and U.S. military forces. As a member of the team, native-born Sergeant First Class Faruque U. Ahmed returned to Bangladesh a hero. However, he did not view himself as such. "I'm just a soldier doing my job," he said. "I'm just happy to get an opportunity to do something good for my homeland." (Maj John R. Spotts, USAR, "Operation Sea Angel: USCINCPAC Responds," *Asia-Pacific Defense Forum*, Fall 1991, p. 44.)

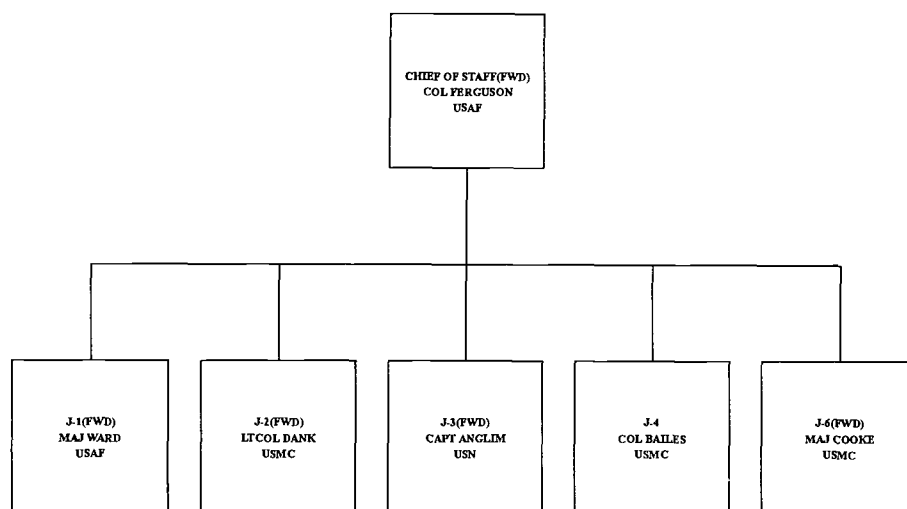
personnel and the first relief supplies on board a Special Forces HC-130 from Dhaka. Organized on short notice and consisting primarily of senior officers, the forward headquarters had few clerks, little in the way of administrative supplies and equipment, and no cots, water cans, or other "camp" supplies. Although initially "small in number and shallow in density," as the 5th MEB's commanding officer later noted, the Chittagong forward headquarters would become the major player in the relief effort.⁸⁵

With the establishment of the headquarters, the first meeting between government civilian, military, and non-government organization representatives and members of the JTF took place. As a result of the meeting, the Chittagong Coordination Cell was formed, co-chaired by government secretary and zonal relief coordinator M. Mokammel Haque and Marine Colonel Russell F. Bailes, Jr.⁸⁶

Prior to the arrival of the JTF, distribution of relief supplies within Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts had been coordinated separately by each of the agencies involved, without an agreed focus of effort. The joint coordination cell would provide the needed focus and ensure optimum use of the task force's transportation assets in the distribution of relief supplies. The cell was located at the Patenga Airport recruit training school facility and was composed of representatives of the JTF, Bangladesh government, 24th Bangladesh Army Division, and several non-government organizations. The cell established a prioritized list of relief supplies to be transported: (1) food, water, and medical supplies; (2) clothing; (3) shelter and building supplies; and (4) tube well supplies, power pumps, and piping. Based on this list of priorities, the cell planned and scheduled the movement of supplies by helicopter or surface craft. Requests for emergency supply or personnel lift had to involve a life-threatening situation, and if validated, would be scheduled for immediate movement. In addition, the cell established relief supply delivery sites within each of the districts included inside the Chittagong Disaster Zone. Initially, these sites would be under government control in order to provide crowd control and protection for the surface craft and helicopters.⁸⁷

As the forward headquarters became operational, it assumed control of the two squads of Army engineers and the five Army Blackhawk helicopters, deployed to Chittagong to support the positioning of the first of several Special Forces Mobile Area Assessment Teams to the outlying islands. The forward headquarters tasked these assessment and communications teams with providing assistance to the Chittagong cell in determining relief effort requirements. The teams took with them the first relief supplies transported to a designated disaster site. In addition to distributing the first relief supplies, JTF Forward attempted to provide emergency medical care, but found that it was beyond the capabilities of its limited aid station.⁸⁸ A majority of the first day's activities, however, was directed toward preparing for the arrival and subsequent deployment of the amphibious task force composed of Amphibious Group 3 and the 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade.

JOINT TASK FORCE SEA ANGEL FORWARD OPERATING BASE CHITTAGONG



PhibGru3 was composed of seven amphibious ships and one support ship: the general purpose amphibious assault ship *Tarawa* (LHA 1); the amphibious transport docks *Vancouver* (LPD 2) and *Juneau* (LPD 10); the dock landing ships *Anchorage* (LSD 36) and *Mount Vernon* (LSD 39); the tank landing ships *Frederick* (LST 1184) and *Barbour County* (LST 1195); and the fleet oiler *Passumpsic* (T-AO 107). The amphibious group's landing craft included four air cushioned landing craft, utility and mechanized landing craft, and both inflatable and rigid raiding craft.⁸⁹

Rear Admiral Stephen S. Clarey commanded the eight-ship, 3,000-man amphibious group. A native of Hawaii, Admiral Clarey graduated from Williams College before attending Naval Officer Candidate School in 1962. Trained at various Navy schools and a veteran of Vietnam service, Clarey previously had commanded the tank landing ship *Suffolk County* (LST 1173), destroyer *Elliot* (DD 967), and Destroyer Squadron 21. In addition to his shipboard assignments, Clarey had held a number of service and joint staff positions before assuming command of PhibGru3 in March 1990. He also commanded the Maritime Repositioning Force in Southwest Asia during Operation Desert Shield.



Department of Defense Photo (USAF) DO-307-SPT-91-7071

When the first U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopters arrive at landing zones on Sandwip Island they are rapidly unloaded and the relief supplies quickly distributed.

The 4,000-man 5th MEB, as all Marine air-ground task forces, had four elements: a command element, a ground combat element, an aviation combat element, and a combat service support element.* The brigade headquarters, reinforced with reconnaissance, intelligence, communications, and military police personnel, was the command element. The ground combat element was Regimental Landing Team 5 (RLT 5), commanded by Colonel Randolph A. Gangle. Marine Aircraft Group 50 (MAG-50), commanded by Colonel Randall L. West, was the aviation combat element. Brigade Service Support Group 5 (BSSG 5), commanded by Major Robert G. Johnson, provided logistic support.⁹⁰

The 5th MEB's commanding general was Brigadier General Peter J. Rowe. Born in Connecticut, General Rowe graduated from Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, and received a master's degree from San Diego State University. During 30 years' service, he had commanded almost every sized infantry unit, and had been assistant division commander of the 1st Marine Division prior to assuming command of the 5th MEB. In May 1990, he was

* Formed at Camp Pendleton in October 1990, the 5th MEB sailed for the Persian Gulf where it was assigned to the Marine Forces Afloat, later became I Marine Expeditionary Force reserve ashore, participated in combat actions at the Ice Cube and Ice Tray and the Al Wafrah Forest in Kuwait, and then backloaded to sail for home. The "embedded" 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (SOC), which comprised about one-third of the brigade's strength, was detached on 16 March 1991 and remained in the Arabian Gulf until July 1991.

"dual-hatted" as the commanding general of both the Landing Force Training Command, Pacific, and the 5th MEB.

The 5th MEB could muster a solid nucleus for humanitarian operations. The brigade command element possessed a staff well-versed in rapid planning and had good communications assets. RLT 5 was ready to send headquarters staff, liaison officers, volunteer laborers, transportation assets, and supplies ashore. MAG-50's inventory included medium-lift transport helicopters, heavy-lift cargo helicopters, and light utility helicopters. BSSG 5, although stripped of a majority of its assets with the departure of the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), could provide water-production units, portable electric generators, trucks, forklifts, and other engineer resources.⁹¹

Brigade headquarters included 400 personnel and was composed of Headquarters and Service Company and the 5th Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Intelligence Support Group (5th SRISG). The 5th SRISG was specifically organized to provide intelligence support for the 5th MEB and included detachments from 1st Radio Battalion, 4th Force Reconnaissance Company, 9th Communications Battalion, and a military police detachment.

RLT 5 was built around two battalions of the 5th Marines and an artillery battalion from Camp Pendleton, reinforced by combat support units composed of both active duty Marines and Reserve. The landing team included: Headquarters Company, 5th Marines; 2d Battalion, 5th Marines; 3d Battalion, 5th Marines; 2d Battalion, 11th Marines; Company B, 1st Reconnaissance



Department of Defense Photo (USN) DN-ST-90-05672

The Tarawa-led seven-ship Amphibious Group 3, with the embarked 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, which deployed from the Persian Gulf to the Bay of Bengal to assist with the relief effort.

Battalion; Company A, 4th Tank Battalion, a Reserve unit from Miramar, California; Company A, 4th Assault Amphibian Battalion, a Reserve unit from Norfolk, Virginia; Company A, 4th Combat Engineer Battalion, a Reserve unit from Charleston, West Virginia; and Company B, 1st Combat Engineer Battalion.

The aviation combat element was MAG-50, which was composed of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 265 (HMM-265) from Kaneohe, Hawaii; Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 169 (HMLA-169) from Camp Pendleton; Detachment B, Marine Attack Squadron 513 (VMA-513) from Yuma, Arizona; Detachment A, Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 772 (HMH-772), a Reserve unit from Alameda Naval Air Station, California; 3d Low Altitude Air Defense Battalion (3d LAAD) from Camp Pendleton; a detachment from Marine Wing Support Squadron 372 (MWSS-372) from Camp Pendleton; and a detachment from Marine Air Support Squadron 6 (MASS-6), South Weymouth, Massachusetts.* The aircraft available included 12 Boeing CH-46E Sea Knights (HMM-265), 4 Sikorsky RH-53D Sea Stallions (HMH-772), 10 Bell UH-1Ns (HMLA-169), 7 Bell AH-1W Sea Cobras (HMLA-169), and 6 McDonnell Douglas AV-8B Harriers (VMA-513).** PhibGru3 carried two Sikorsky SH-3H Sea King night-capable, search and rescue (SAR) helicopters.***

According to Lieutenant Colonel Richard T. Kohl, who commanded Marine Service Support Group 24 during Operation Provide Comfort, the international humanitarian relief operation in northern Iraq, Marine combat service support elements were perfectly suited for humanitarian operations because of their special equipment and expeditionary nature. This was especially true for BSSG 5. BSSG 5 was formed at Camp Pendleton, California. Its nucleus was composed of stay-behind cadre when the 1st Force Service Support Group (1st FSSG) left for the Persian Gulf to support I Marine Expeditionary Force. These cadres merged with recently activated units of the Selected Marine Corps Reserve in late November. BSSG 5's muster rolls comprised engineers, mechanics,

* Four aircraft from HMH-772 joined MAG-50 on board the *Tarawa* from the Naval Air Facility, Jubayl, Saudi Arabia, in anticipation of being needed for the Ethiopian evacuation. Due to heavy ship loading conditions, the unit was authorized to bring only those personnel necessary for minimum flight operations. The shortage of maintenance personnel to service the four RH-53Ds subsequently strained the supply and maintenance support for these Sea Stallions during the relief effort in Bangladesh.

** The Sikorsky RH-53Ds were similar in appearance to CH-53Ds, but had twin T64-GE-415 engines and automatic flight controls for sustained low-level flight. Four of the UH-1Ns were grounded due to structural weaknesses that required depot repair work.

*** The SH-3H is an anti-submarine warfare (ASW) helicopter. The ASW systems had been removed from these aircraft and they were deployed specifically as night SAR helicopters, the first such deployment in the Navy, and a precursor to removing the ill-suited, organic Navy UN-1Ns and subsequent deployment of HH-46 SAR helicopter detachments on board amphibious assault ships. (RAdm Stephen S. Clarey, Comments on draft ms, 23Feb95)

drivers, forklift operators, communicators, medics, fuel handlers, and other specialists. Its equipment included 14 forklifts, 10 water purification units, 10 portable generators, 8 motorcycles, 7 bulldozers, and 16 five-ton trucks.

Major Robert G. Johnson commanded BSSG 5. Its elements included detachments from Headquarters and Service Battalions, 1st and 4th FSSGs; 1st Landing Support Battalion; 6th Motor Transport Battalion (Lubbock, Texas); 6th Engineer Support Battalion (Battle Creek, Michigan); 1st and 4th Supply Battalions; 1st and 4th Maintenance Battalions; 1st Medical Battalion; 1st Dental Battalion; and 6th and 7th Communications Battalions. The main drawback was that the brigade service support group was short of personnel. It originally sailed from San Diego with only about one-fourth of its theoretical strength; this number was further reduced to 313 when the 11th MEU was detached.*

One day after leaving the Persian Gulf, the amphibious task force received an order instructing it to prepare for possible participation in relief operations in Bangladesh. On 11 May, the Seventh Fleet ordered the ships of the amphibious task group to the Bay of Bengal to support humanitarian operations with the mission of delivering relief supplies and providing other assistance as needed. The amphibious task force was not deploying to establish a foothold, so Admiral Clarey and General Rowe expected to be in-country only a short time. The plan of action, as described by one 5th MEB staff officer, was to "hurry up, hurry in, and hurry out."⁹²

Of major concern to both Admiral Clarey and General Rowe was how the weather, terrain, and hydrography of the affected region might impact operations. Additional issues were the threat of infectious diseases, the status of the refugees, the condition of lines of communication, and the ability of the Bangladesh government to cope with these problems. Both felt that relief operations were going to make heavy demands on their available communications, transportation, and medical assets.⁹³

The four-day period from 11 May, when the execute order was received, to 15 May, when the amphibious task force made landfall, was devoted to planning, although the exact concept of support was unknown pending a reconnaissance of the area and coordination with the JTF staff. Despite the lack of hard information, preparations continued. The 5th MEB intelligence section prepared map studies and gave orientation lectures. The operations section worked out task organizations and prepared contingency operations plans. The logistics section reconfigured landing craft loads to carry engineer equipment and relief supplies instead of combat equipment. Helicopter crews labored to prepare desert operations-configured aircraft for the vastly different Bangladesh environment. Embarkation teams unloaded tactical equipment and supplies and reloaded engineer equipment, rations, medical supplies, and relief aid.⁹⁴

Planning by medical personnel encompassed an analysis of medical civic action program (MedCAP) capabilities. Fifteen authorized medical allowance

* A Marine brigade service support group's normal strength was approximately 2,900.

blocks--five battalion aid station equipment blocks, five blocks consisting of battalion aid station consumables, and five military sick call blocks--were on hand. These supply blocks were configured for combat operations and designed to treat combat casualties, and were not intended to support disaster relief operations involving a large number of women and children. If medical civic action teams were to be deployed, it was apparent that most of their medical supplies would have to come from the Government of Bangladesh or non-government relief agencies.

Of immediate concern to amphibious task force medical personnel were the preventive measures that needed to be taken prior to beginning operations ashore. Important among these were malaria prophylaxis and immunizations for hepatitis A and typhoid. The task force possessed an outdated disease risk assessment that simply advised that the country suffered from poor sanitation and sanitary practices, so a new assessment was requested from Navy Environmental and Preventive Medicine Unit 6 outlining the malaria chemo-prophylaxis recommendations for Chittagong and outlying islands. In its response, NEMPU 6 suggested that personnel going ashore take Doxycycline for two days prior to exposure through the 28th day following the exposure. Bed and head nets, insecticides, and gamma globulin inoculations were considered essential. The unit also advised typhoid vaccinations be updated, but recommended that Marines and sailors not be immunized against cholera. Based on the unit's suggestions, all personnel going ashore were immunized against hepatitis A, typhoid, yellow fever, and started on a malaria chemo-prophylaxis. To avoid contracting cholera, they were instructed to steer clear of the local food and water supplies.*

As the task group neared the Bay of Bengal, PhibGru 3 and 5th MEB planners recommended the early launch of the Marine Aircraft Group's four RH-53D Sea Stallions across Indian territory to Bangladesh so that they could be available early in the relief effort. Task force planners soon scrapped the proposal because of the distance involved and the lack of maintenance support facilities along the proposed route.^{95**} Steaming around the tip of India and into position in the Bay of Bengal, one of the *Tarawa's* embarked AV-8B

* Arrival off Bangladesh revealed that the updated disease risk assessment was based on generalizations about the country and overstated the threat of disease in and around Chittagong. Fortunately, the cyclone initially had reduced the mosquito vector population. Had the operation continued much longer, the forces ashore would have encountered a greater risk of contracting malaria.

** It was noted at the time and later that had the MV-22 tilt-rotor medium lift aircraft been available, "relief aircraft could have arrived on scene and begun relief operations some five days before the amphibious task force was in position to launch conventional helicopters." In addition, the transit time between the central distribution point at Chittagong and delivery landing zones could have been reduced resulting in the delivery of more relief supplies in less time. (BGen Randall L. West, Comments on draft ms, 10Apr95; MAG-50 MCLLS Report 60534-18689 (05631))

Harriers was lost while conducting deck landing qualifications on the *Vancouver*.⁹⁶

Shortly after the amphibious task group arrived off the Bangladesh coast on the afternoon of the 15th, Admiral Clarey, General Rowe, Colonels Gangle and West, and key staff members flew to Chittagong to meet with General Stackpole. In his briefing, Stackpole outlined the situation as he saw it. There were plenty of relief supplies on shore and more were on the way. A dedicated, but inexperienced, democratic government was struggling to take control of the situation. Non-government relief agencies lacked adequate communications and transportation. During the storm, he explained, Bangladesh had lost eight ships, more than 60 percent of its helicopters, most of its fixed-wing air transport, and almost all of its communications resources. The airfield at Chittagong, at first under three feet of water, was just now being placed into operation. Most of the port's docks and piers had been carried away by the high winds and heavy surf. Inland, the major lines of communication, consisting mostly of unpaved roads and trails, had been either destroyed or rendered impassible. The massive loss of the area's livestock, a primary form of transit, seriously degraded the ability to move heavy and large items. As a result of the devastation, the most critical immediate issue was the distribution of prestaged relief supplies. Helicopters, landing craft, small boats, and ground transportation assets were needed to move food, water, medicine, and relief personnel to the remote areas devastated by the cyclone.⁹⁷

With these issues in mind, General Stackpole told Clarey and Rowe that the



Photograph courtesy of 5th MEB
Marine BGen Peter J. Rowe, left, and RAdm Stephen S. Clarey, USN, welcome a Bangladeshi delegation on board the Tarawa.

role of PhibGru 3 and the 5th MEB was going to be delivery of the food, medicine, and expertise. The commander of the JTF assumed operational control of the amphibious task force, rather than it being placed "in support of" the JTF. General Stackpole's intent was that the Marines and sailors would be the providers, while the Bangladeshi were the implementers.

Since the amphibious task force possessed more than 90 percent of the available helicopter transport, General Stackpole assigned it the largest segment of the disaster zone. Encompassing 23,000 square kilometers, this sector included more than 240 kilometers of coastline from Chittagong in the north to Cox's Bazar in the south and the off-shore islands of South Hatia, Sandwip, Kutubdia, Manpura, and Maheshkali. Stackpole's initial plan had called for the Marine forces to be assigned to the southern sector and naval forces to the island sector. This division of labor was discussed and debated at the meeting. Both Brigadier General Rowe and Admiral Clarey, noting that a synergistic relationship had developed among the units under their command as they had been operating together for some time, recommended to General Stackpole that the JTF "capitalize on what we brought as a combined Navy/Marine Corps team."⁹⁸ Agreeing with Rowe and Clarey, Stackpole decided that the amphibious task force should continue to operate as a single unit, thus exploiting its unique combined capabilities.

The mission assigned the amphibious task force was to provide support for relief operations to assist the government of Bangladesh; to be prepared to lift relief supplies using its landing craft and helicopter assets; and to provide medical assistance, water production, engineer and material handling equipment, security, rations, communications, and other support on short notice. General Stackpole's intent was that the mission be accomplished within two weeks, that the forces ashore, except for those guarding cryptographic materials, carry no weapons as they would not be working in a hostile environment, and that a minimum "footprint" be created by using as few Americans on shore as possible. Naval logistics support, therefore, would be sea-based throughout the operation. Helicopters would distribute relief supplies from Chittagong to the outlying areas and be refueled at sea. Marine aircraft group representatives stationed ashore would monitor, control, and dispatch aircraft for mission assignments. RLT 5 would provide material handling teams to help load, unload, and distribute relief supplies. BSSG 5 would furnish engineer support, including water production, heavy equipment and operators, and medical assistance. The ships of PhibGru 3 were to provide surface landing craft and air traffic control personnel.

The requirement for a small "footprint" ashore necessitated that there would never be more than 500 Marines, sailors, airmen, or soldiers on shore during daylight hours. Maintaining a larger force ashore would have placed an undue burden on the already beleaguered local infrastructure by increasing the demand for berthing space, sanitation facilities, and waste disposal. Logistically, requirements for food, water, and living supplies would likewise rise. Increasing the forces ashore also would mean that more Marines and sailors would risk being exposed to disease. While not a primary consideration, General Stackpole



Department of Defense Photo (USA) DA-SC-88-00434

The Tarawa was forced to remain more than 80 kilometers off the Bangladesh coast because of strong tidal currents and contrary wind conditions.

was aware of criticism leveled against the government by opposition parties and politicians in both Bangladesh and India. He felt that by adding more troops to the relief effort he might have added credence to their charges that American forces had been sent to Bangladesh to establish a foreign military presence in the area.^{99*}

The hydrography of the Bay of Bengal dictated that the amphibious task group should be divided to support operational plans. The flagship *Tarawa* with MAG-50 embarked remained in navigable waters in a modified offshore deployment location more than 80 kilometers from Chittagong. Strong tidal currents that were generally out of phase with the prevailing winds making flight operations at anchor impossible, forced the *Tarawa* to remain underway throughout the operation.¹⁰⁰ The landing and transport ships moved closer to shore to facilitate material offloading by landing craft and helicopter and served as forward refueling and replenishment stations. Choppy water, tricky currents, underwater hazards, and high winds obviated operations after dark.

Since the 5th MEB would carry the major burden of the amphibious task force's relief effort, General Rowe and his staff developed a six-phase concept of operations: (1) a forward command element would be collocated with JTF Forward headquarters at Chittagong; (2) helicopter insertion of communications personnel and liaison teams into designated landing zones to coordinate operations with the JTF and relief agencies on the scene and positioning amphibious task force ships in the northern Bay of Bengal to provide sea-based logistics support; (3) lifting supplies ashore employing the brigade's helicopters and the task group's landing craft, including the movement of water-making

* India's West Bengal's ruling Communist Party expressed surprise over the arrival of "thousands of American" soldiers and implied that the Government of Bangladesh had handed direct responsibility for the relief effort to the Americans and suggested that U.S. forces had no intention of leaving the country "very soon." It linked the arrival of American forces to imperialist activities in west and south Asia, including alleged assistance to separatist forces in India.

facilities and potable water; (4) provide additional support as directed; (5) turn over the relief mission to international agencies or follow-on relief organizations within two weeks; and (6) backload equipment and personnel to the ships of the amphibious task force.¹⁰¹

Admiral Clarey and General Rowe, while retaining their respective posts in the amphibious task force, were designated the operation's Naval Forces and Marine Forces component commanders. As both officers now held two commands, it was necessary to appoint a mission commander to direct operations ashore personally. In making his choice, General Rowe weighed a number of competing factors. Since the mission essentially was logistical in nature, the logical choice was the commanding officer of the BSSG 5, but it was commanded by a major and General Rowe felt his rank relative to the other members of the JTF staff "could prove a hindrance, notwithstanding Major Johnson's exemplary competence." The mission commander would have to educate a joint staff that had been only recently created from diverse organizations and as yet possessed no clear understanding of command relationships or the capabilities of the amphibious task force. He would also have to secure mission orders and obtain enough latitude to accomplish the assigned tasks.

Because a major contribution to the relief effort would be helicopter transport, General Rowe's next logical choice was MAG-50's commanding officer. While Colonel West was sufficiently senior to operate within the JTF command structure, the intensity of air operations would require his undivided attention. If he was saddled with overall command of the operation ashore, MAG-50's assets might be spread too thin. Colonel Randolph Gangle was experienced in commanding a regimental landing team composed of three infantry battalions and attached artillery, tank, light armored infantry, engineer, and reconnaissance units. "Senior and savvy," he and his regimental landing team staff "were a sound base around which to form an integrated mission command."¹⁰² "There were no book solutions to the situation," Brigadier General Rowe later noted, "it was the decision I agonized over most and it went the right way."¹⁰³

Early on the morning of 16 May, Colonel Gangle established a mission liaison detachment in the JTF Forward headquarters at Chittagong. This detachment contained Marine and Navy personnel, including the mission commander, a Navy commander to supervise surface craft operations, the regimental landing team's operations and intelligence officers to coordinate operations, and aviation officers to create air tasking orders and coordinate aircraft control. Administrative supplies and equipment, camp provisions, communications gear, limited rolling stock, material handling equipment, ROWPUs, and other essential items also were landed at Chittagong.

Colonel Gangle's integrated staff streamlined coordination among the aviation, seaborne, and ground elements, ensuring the efficient exploitation of the amphibious task force's capabilities. Middlemen were eliminated. Gangle could, for example, speak directly with Navy Commander Thomas J. Hirsch regarding surface craft operations or to Navy air traffic control personnel without going