

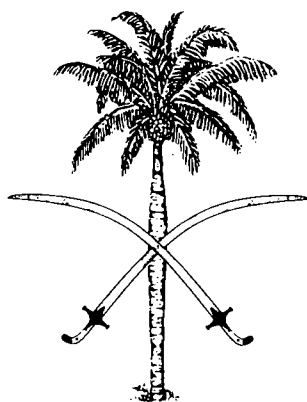
# Humanitarian Operations in Northern Iraq, 1991 WITH MARINES IN OPERATION PROVIDE COMFORT



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

*COVER: A painting by Col Peter M. "Mike" Gish depicts a CH-46E from the Black Knights of HMM-264 delivers relief supplies to a Kurdish refugee camp in northern Iraq during Operations Provide Comfort. In March 1991, more than 760,000 Kurds fled into the rugged Taurus Mountains of Eastern Turkey and Northern Iraq to avoid the wrath of Saddam Hussein.*

# Humanitarian Operations in Northern Iraq, 1991 WITH MARINES IN OPERATION PROVIDE COMFORT



by  
Lieutenant Colonel Ronald J. Brown  
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

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

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## Foreword

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This monograph tells the story of more than 3,600 U.S. Marines who supported Operation Provide Comfort, an international relief effort in northern Iraq from 7 April to 15 July 1991. The term "monograph" was carefully chosen. This short work does not purport to tell the entire story of Operation Provide Comfort, but focuses on Marine activities and contributions. The author presents historical glimpses of the Kurds, modern Iraq, and non-Marine activities only to provide necessary background information. This monograph is not an exhaustive analysis of the operation nor does it try to define Provide Comfort's place in the diplomatic history of the Middle East.

The U.S. Marines have continued a long tradition of humanitarian relief operations. Assistance during the San Francisco earthquake, Hurricane Hugo, and Operations Sea Angel and Fiery Vigil, and Restore Hope are but a few recent examples of these efforts. Provide Comfort was another such operation. In less than three months allied forces created a safe haven in northern Iraq, provided emergency food and medical aid, moved more than 750,000 refugees back to their homeland, and helped them reestablish normal lives. Marines were among the first Americans to deploy, and then were among the last to leave northern Iraq. During that time the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) operated more than 500 miles from its sea base, the farthest inland a Marine expeditionary unit had ever been deployed. A purpose of this monograph is to show how the success of Operation Provide Comfort can serve as a case study for future humanitarian operations.

Lieutenant Colonel Ronald J. Brown has been a member of Mobilization Training Unit (Historical) DC-7 since its inception in 1976. This unit, composed of specially skilled reservists, augments the activities of the Marine Corps Historical Center. Members include historians, artists, and museum experts. Each member is assigned a suitable historical project. Additionally, members practice fieldcraft and test division doctrine by participating in major exercises or deployments. However, the ultimate purpose of the MTU has been to provide historians for combat and contingency operations. It was envisioned that teams of historians and artists would be called to active duty and assigned to major Marine commands should such a contingency arise. This plan was first tested during Operation Urgent Fury (Grenada) and was validated during Operations Desert Storm and Provide Comfort.

Lieutenant Colonel Brown, a history teacher in civilian life, was an infantry officer in Vietnam. Formerly executive officer of MTU(HIST) DC-7, he is also the author of *A Brief History of the 14th Marines*. Lieutenant Colonel Brown was sent to Saudi Arabia in 1991, where he served as deputy command historian, then later, command historian, I Marine Expeditionary Force. He volunteered to cover Operation Provide Comfort. He was joined at Zakho, Iraq, by Colonel Peter M. "Mike" Gish, a retired reservist famous for his work as an artist. The results of their efforts were combined to produce this monograph.

This work is one of an experimental series about U.S. Marine operations in the Persian Gulf. Each monograph will be written by historians who actually participated in the events described. It is hoped that those who walked the ground and smelled the powder can provide insights sometimes lost when history is written from the official records many years later. It is recognized that these monographs will have informational gaps and lack the detailed panorama provided by the passage of time. Therefore, they are viewed as preliminary works that eventually will be incorporated into a more complete official history. Lieutenant Colonel Brown completed this monograph immediately after his return from the combat zone, before many official records had been submitted and prior to publication of most secondary works about Operation Provide Comfort. Therefore, in the interests of accuracy and objectivity, we welcome comments on this monograph from interested individuals.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "E. H. Simmons". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "E." and last name "Simmons" clearly legible.

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

## Preface

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This monograph tells the story of the U.S. Marine deployment in support of Operation Provide Comfort from April to July 1991. As part of an international humanitarian intervention force, U.S. Marines played a major role in almost every aspect of Combined Task Force Provide Comfort: the 24th MEU (SOC) and CMAGTF 1-91 operated from forward bases at Silopi, Turkey, and throughout northern Iraq; Marines served as staff officers at Zakho, Silopi, and Incirlik; 24th MEU (SOC) rear parties remained with Phibron 8 at Iskenderum Harbor; and FMFEur (Designate) Marines provided long-distance direct support from Germany and England.

This monograph relies heavily on primary sources, mostly the author's observations and the first-hand testimony of participants, to capture the emotions and perceptions of the moment, what historians call the "climate of the times." No single source does a better job of capturing this climate than the art work of Colonel Peter M. "Mike" Gish, USMCR (Ret), whose paintings illustrate this monograph. Colonel Gish is a great campaigner, a good friend, and a fine artist.

My way into northern Iraq was smoothed by the careful ministrations of Major Charles V. Mugno and the assistance of Senior Master Sergeant Thomas L. Robb, USAF; Staff Sergeant Thomas A. Traylor, USAF; and Staff Sergeant Marie Y. Herrera, USAF, of the Combined Task Force History Office. In the field, Brigadier General Anthony C. Zinni, USMC, gave me excellent guidance and opened many doors. Colonel James L. Jones Jr., USMC, and the staff of the 24th MEU (SOC) made me a part of the team and were never too busy to help. My thanks also to Lieutenant Colonel Joseph A. Byrtus and the Black Knights of HMM-264 for their time and taxi service. Lieutenant Colonel Richard T. Kohl (MSSG-24) was a gracious host and a fine comrade whose company I enjoyed immensely. The staff of MSSG-24 was very helpful to me and the best friends one could have, especially Mongo, Jake, Harley Bob, the Rate, and Doctor No. Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Bailey and Contingency MAGTF 1-91 enthusiastically provided everything I requested and more. It was a great surprise to find Captain Wayne O. Ouzts--an old pal from Desert Storm--at Incirlik, ready to buy a broke friend his first libatious refreshment after so many months in the desert.

I owe a special salute to the combat historians of MTU(HIST) DC-7 who served during Desert Storm: Colonel Charles J. Quilter II, Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Cureton, Lieutenant Colonel Frank V. Sturgeon, and combat artist Lieutenant Colonel Keith A. McConnell.

Thanks also go to the fine staff at the Marine Corps Historical Center, without whose support this monograph would not have been possible: Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons (Ret), Colonel Daniel M. Smith, Mr. Benis M. Frank, Dr. Jack Shulimson, Mr. Charles R. Smith, Major Charles D. Melson, Captain David A. Dawson, Mr. Danny J. Crawford, Mr. Robert V. Aquilina, Mrs. Ann A. Ferrante, Ms. Lena Kaljot, Ms. Regina Strother, Ms. Shelia

Phillips, Mrs. Meredith P. Hartley, Ms. Nancy C. Miller, Ms. Joyce C. Conyers, Sergeant Kevin L. Parker, Lance Corporal Joshua R. Ford, Captain Roberta E. Breden, Mr. Charles A. Wood, Mr. Richard A. Long, Mr. J. Michael Miller, Ms. Jennifer L. Gooding, Mr. William S. Hill, Ms. Patricia E. Morgan, Lieutenant Colonel Carmen Dragotta, Mr. Kenneth L. Smith-Christmas, Lieutenant Colonel Steven D. Hinds, Lieutenant Colonel Dale K. Johnson, Captain Joe Wells, Jr., Staff Sergeant John Hudson, Sergeant Michael S. Weldon, Sergeant Robert E. Clarke, Sergeant Andre L. Owens III, Lance Corporal James D. Lyles, Jr., and Staff Sergeant Randy Shouse. Special thanks to Colonel Allan R. Millett, Mr. Robert E. Struder, Mrs. Catherine A. Kerns and Ms. Evelyn A. Englander.

The author is solely responsible for the content of this text, including all opinions expressed and any factual errors. Comments, corrections, additional information, and other pertinent items are solicited from participants and interested readers.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ronald J. Brown', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ronald J. Brown



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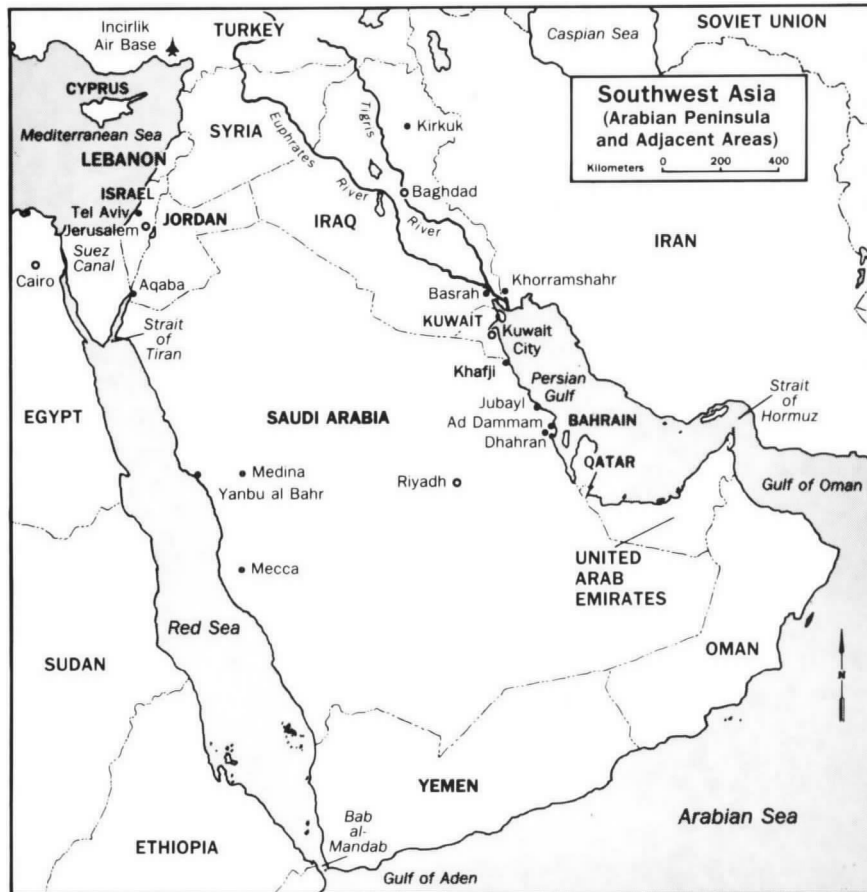
## With Marines in Operation Provide Comfort

### *Call To Action*

In early April 1991 the rugged, snow-capped mountains of northern Iraq were flooded by waves of refugees fleeing the wrath of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. In the aftermath of a failed revolt, more than two million people decided to leave Iraq. The resulting exodus was a dangerous journey toward an uncertain future. Many of the roads were mined, and helicopter gunships sometimes strafed the refugee columns that stretched as many for as 30 miles back from the border. Some fled in automobiles, others jammed on board buses. Open-bed trucks overflowed with humanity, tractors and donkey carts hauled families, and barefoot young mothers carried infants or dragged shell-shocked children as they trekked toward the chilly safety of the mountains. Most of these refugees were Kurds, an ethnic tribal minority that comprised one-fifth of Iraq's population and claimed northern Iraq as an ancestral home, Kurdistan.

After Desert Storm devastated Iraq's military, the Kurds tried to rid themselves of the yoke of Saddam's regime. At first, they easily drove disheartened Iraqi soldiers out of Kurdistan. A festival atmosphere prevailed and the towns and villages were filled with celebrating people. The revelry was premature. Saddam carefully reconstituted his army, used it to crush a Muslim revolt in the south, then turned his attention to the north. Saddam's troops soon overwhelmed the Kurdish Peshmerga ("Those Who Face Death") fighters whose rifles and pistols were no match for tanks, artillery, and helicopter gunships. One by one the cities of Kurdistan fell. On 31 March 1991, the city of Zakho, the final Kurdish bastion before the Turkish border, was bombarded by artillery fire and strafed by helicopter gunships. When Iraqi forces neared the town, rumors of an imminent chemical attack spread like wildfire. Most of Zakho's Kurds fled under cover of darkness and began a difficult four-day journey to the border. For them, to flee provided the only hope of survival.

The lucky and the rich among them escaped into Turkish or Iranian towns, but most could only retreat to the dubious safety of the mountains. Soon, the barren hillsides along Iraq's borders were peopled by thirsty, starving refugees living without shelter from the wind and bitter cold. Each night families faced sub-freezing temperatures with a single blanket for warmth. Hunger, exhaustion, disease, exposure, and dehydration were rampant. Water had to be ladled from muddy potholes, melted from snow, or dipped from contaminated streams. The situation was classified a "medical apocalypse" by the international organization Doctors Without Borders. Measles, cholera, typhus, and dysentery swept through the unsanitary camps. Health care was almost non-existent. Often one doctor served several thousand people, able to perform only the most rudimentary surgery, without anesthetic, and unable to provide proper medication.



More than 750,000 refugees were starving. Relief workers reported about 1,500 refugees were dying each day. By early April, two out of three people in northern Iraq were dislocated civilians. The situation seemed hopeless. In an act of desperation, Kurdish leader Moussad Barzani made an uncharacteristic plea for help when he publicly asked the United States for assistance.

At first, American President George W. Bush was reluctant to intervene, but he eventually reacted to public pressure to join relief efforts underway from Europe. The decision to commit American resources was made on 5 April 1991. Urgent orders for action flashed to American military units around the world. The first Marines to be alerted were 19 parachute riggers from the Air Delivery Platoon, 1st Landing Support Battalion, 1st Force Service Support Group at Camp Pendleton, California. On the island of Sardinia in the Mediterranean, the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) [MEU (SOC)] was ordered to sail for the eastern Mediterranean. On the Pacific island of Okinawa, a contingency Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) was created from the 3d Force Service Support Group (FSSG). At Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, members of an unmanned aerial vehicle detachment from the 2d Remotely Piloted Vehicle (RPV) Company, 2d Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Intelligence Group (SRIG), dumped desert sand out of their seabags and mounted

out for the Middle East less than three weeks after returning home from Operation Desert Storm. Ten Marines from the 4th Civil Affairs Group (CAG), a Reserve unit from Washington, D.C., turned around and flew back to the Middle East instead of being released from active duty. In Saudi Arabia, Marine reservists volunteered to stay in the Persian Gulf to assist the Kurds rather than return home as scheduled. From the four corners of the globe, Marines embarked to support Operation Provide Comfort, soon to become the largest humanitarian relief operation in Marine Corps history.<sup>1</sup>

### *Joint Task Force Provide Comfort*

In response to President Bush's expressed desire for immediate action to assist dislocated civilians in northern Iraq, General John R. Galvin, USA, Commander-in-Chief Europe (CinCEur), ordered the formation of an American military force to support humanitarian relief efforts. On 5 April 1991, Major General James L. Jamerson, USAF, was detached from his duties as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, U.S. Air Force Europe (USAFE), to serve as the commander of a joint task force--tentatively named Provide Comfort--created to assist Iraqi refugees. Military aircraft were ordered to deliver relief-related items and medical units were prepared to deploy to refugee camps in eastern Turkey. General Jamerson's initial tasking was a two-phase operation: the first phase



Photograph courtesy of MajGen Anthony C. Zinni, USMC  
*MajGen James L. Jamerson, USAF, and BGen Anthony C. Zinni, USMC, stand at Incirlik Air Base, Adana, Turkey. MajGen Jamerson was the first commanding general and BGen Zinni was his deputy when Joint Task Force Provide Comfort was formed in April. They assumed similar roles during Operation Provide Comfort II in July when this photograph was taken.*

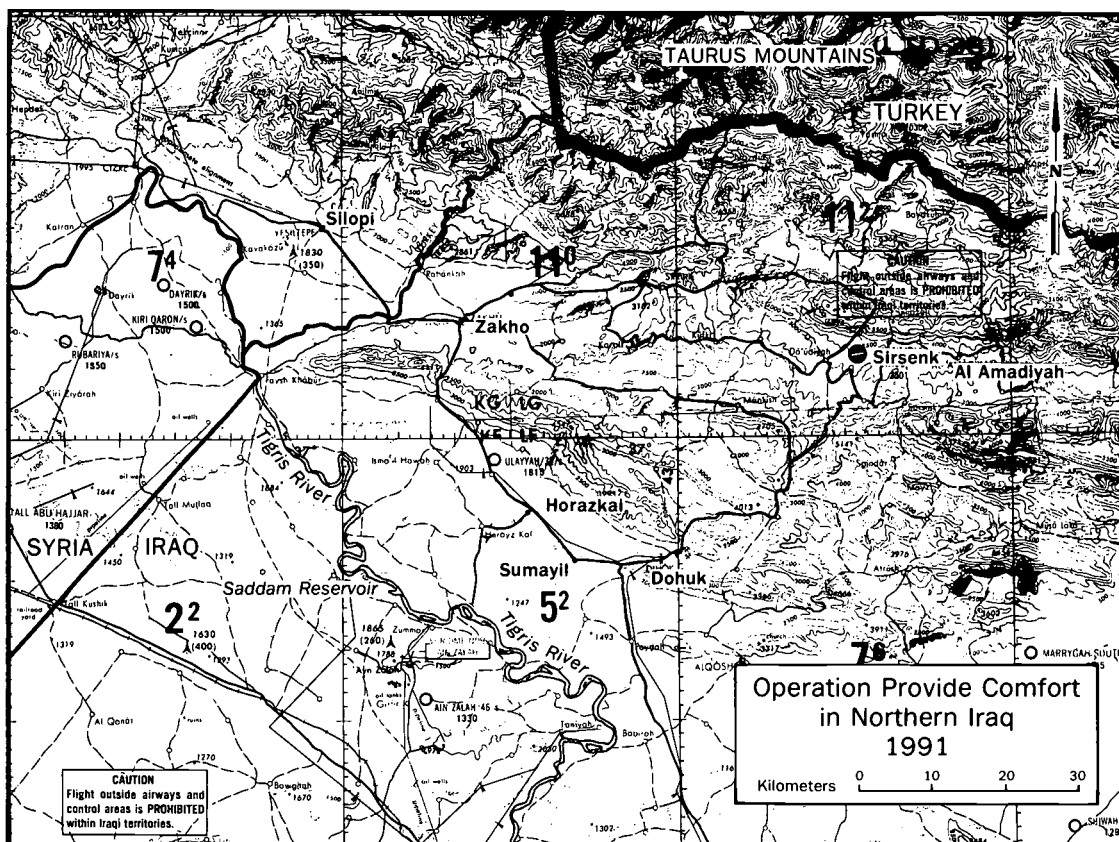
called for delivery of emergency relief, the second was to be a sustained effort to deliver humanitarian assistance.<sup>2</sup>

Joint Task Force Provide Comfort deployed to Incirlik Air Base at Adana, Turkey, on 6 April 1991. General Jamerson's first briefing painted a gloomy picture. The refugee camps were scattered across some of the most inaccessible terrain in the world. Refugees were virtually clinging to cliffs. There was inadequate shelter, no potable water, little food, poor sanitation, and limited medical care. Hard-pressed Kurdish families often faced the difficult choice of saving either their aged parents or their young children because there was not enough food and water to go around. The relief needs were so massive that no single international agency had the resources to support an adequate effort. To make matters worse, all this misery existed in a politically complex, potentially hostile environment.<sup>3</sup>

The initial Provide Comfort deployment was a scaled-down package made up of the lead elements of the USAF 39th Special Operations Wing (SOW). The remainder of the joint task force was assembled from units in England, Germany, and Italy. They included a headquarters, follow-on echelons of the 39th SOW, and the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) [SFG (A)]. The command component was Joint Task Force Provide Comfort Headquarters made up of detachments from USAFE Headquarters; the 7440th Composite Wing; Headquarters, Joint Special Operations Task Force (later redesignated Joint Task Force Alpha); and a Patriot missile battery.

Brigadier General Richard W. Potter, USA, was temporarily released from his post as Commanding General, Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEur), to lead a joint special operations task force to support Operation Provide Comfort. This unit was first labeled "Express Care."<sup>4</sup> Joint Task Force Express Care consisted of a headquarters detachment, the 39th SOW, and the 1st Battalion, 10th SFG (A). The headquarters detachment was provided by SOCEur at Bad Toelz, Germany. The aviation component was the 39th SOW from Rhein Main, Germany, and Woodbridge, England. The 39th SOW was comprised of the 7th Special Operations Squadron flying Lockheed MC-130 Talons, the 21st Special Operations Squadron flying Sikorsky MH-53J Pave Low deep-penetration search and rescue helicopters, and the 67th Special Operations Squadron flying HC-130 aerial refuelers. Its ground organization included command, administration, ordnance, maintenance, supply, and support personnel.

The ground component of Joint Task Force Express Care was the 1st Battalion, 10th SFG (A). The Army's Special Forces were experienced, highly skilled, unconventional warriors specially trained to work and live with indigenous populations in remote areas. About 200 Special Forces soldiers were assigned to support Provide Comfort. These units included headquarters, combat intelligence, service, support, signals, and tactical detachments. The 1st Battalion, 10th SFG (A) had one C-Team (command group), three B-Teams (control detachments), and 12 A-Teams (operational units). The men of the Special Forces were called the "Green Berets" by most Americans because of their distinctive headgear, however, during Operation Provide Comfort most



Special Forces soldiers in the field opted to wear soft-cloth, ranger-style fatigue caps. Ironically, the military forces wearing green berets in northern Iraq were the French, British, and Dutch Marines.

The first Special Forces A-Teams were inserted into the border camps on 13 April 1991. They were air-lifted into the mountains, located the refugee sanctuaries, then prepared them to receive assistance. A-Teams were composed of a command element and about 10 specialists above the rank of sergeant, each an expert in weapons, communications, medicine, engineering, or demolitions. These small detachments were lightly equipped, air-deployable, self-reliant combat teams designed for sustained independent field operations. During Express Care, their mission was to organize refugee camps, receive and assist supply distribution, and act as liaison between the Kurds and other allied forces.

### *Express Care*

The immediate task facing JTF Provide Comfort was to bring emergency relief to stop the dying and suffering. Implied in this mission was locating the refugees, identifying their most pressing needs, and building an efficient distribution system. This initial effort, the first stage of Operation Provide Comfort, was labeled "Express Care."

The first humanitarian relief air operations were conducted on 8 April 1991. Six Lockheed C-130 two-seat, four-turboprop, medium-lift cargo aircraft departed Incirlik carrying food (dehydrated combat rations called MREs, an acronym for the designation Meals, Ready-to-Eat), blankets, and water.<sup>5</sup> This first flight delivered 27 tons of supplies using container delivery system bundles weighing about 1,000 pounds each. Support sorties were flown by KC-135 aerial refuelers, RC-135 reconnaissance "snoopers," EC-130 electronic jammers, and E-3 AWACS command planes. General Jamerson reported that 3,022 people from four American services supported these drops: 687 from the task force; 399 Desert Storm personnel, and 1,936 permanent party personnel. These first air drops took place within 36 hours of JTF Provide Comfort's formation.<sup>6</sup>

Doctor Marcel Bonnot from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs observed the first airdrop while visiting a refugee camp near Uludere, Turkey. He noted that there were desperate shortages of food and water, that sanitation and personal hygiene were practically non-existent, and that diarrhea, skin diseases, and infections were common. The arrival of the first aircraft was a dramatic and emotional scene. The noisy camp hushed when the sound of arriving airplanes was heard. At first, many refugees rushed for cover, thinking the humming engines heralded a reappearance of Saddam's air force. However, when no bombs began falling, eyes focused upward and followed a lumbering C-130 as it slowly circled the camp.

A roll of toilet paper thrown from the plane tested wind direction. Suddenly, a series of large objects dropped from the plane's tail section. The fearful Kurds were astounded when gigantic white parachutes blossomed and bundles of food floated toward earth. The hungry people they mobbed the drop zone and each scrambled to capture one of the small brown plastic MRE packets. Despite the confusion on the ground, the lack of a distribution system, and poor understanding about the proper use of MRE rations, the Kurds in the camp realized that someone was helping them.<sup>7</sup>

British and French aircraft joined the American airlift the second day. Australia, New Zealand, and Italy flew supplies to Incirlik. Denmark, Luxembourg, Japan, Spain, and Belgium flew supplies into Diyarbakir. A German composite helicopter force commanded by Brigadier General Frederick W. Ehmann conducted independent relief operations from Diyarbakir using Sikorsky CH-53D Sea Stallion heavy-lift helicopters. Aircrews bringing these gifts of life flew in marginal weather conditions--low clouds, thunderstorms, and snow flurries--while navigating through narrow valleys to deliver their payloads to drop zones on the sides of steep mountains. Operations became more efficient as time passed and by the sixth day the daily delivery rose from 27 tons to 284.6 tons.

The initial phase of Operation Provide Comfort was underway, but it was apparent much more needed to be done. Joint Task Force Provide Comfort identified 12 major camps near the Iraqi border. Each camp had at least 40,000 people! Every camp suffered food and medical shortages. Official estimates placed the number of dead at about 600 each day, but observers on the scene



guessed the number to be about triple the official tally. Made aware of the problem by the international media, sympathetic countries pledged money, supplies, equipment, and troops to support the relief effort. As a result, General Jamerson's mission was expanded from 10-day emergency aid to 30-day sustainment operations, and then was later extended to no less than a 90-day deployment.

### *The First Marines Arrive*

The first Marine contribution to Operation Provide Comfort was a detachment of parachute riggers from the Air Delivery Platoon, 1st Landing Support Battalion, 1st FSSG at Camp Pendleton, California. Although just returned to the United States after a tough eight-month stint in the desert of Saudi Arabia, they repacked their well-worn sea bags and departed Norton Air Base for Incirlik on 8 April, less than 48 hours after returning home. At Incirlik, the detachment was attached to the 21st Theater Army Area Command's 7th Special Operations Command. The Marines labored side-by-side with other service personnel for almost three months, often working "eight-hours on/eight-hours off," a round-the-clock shifts. They built and loaded more than 350 pallets daily, stacked with food, bottled water, baby food, coats, blankets, and tents. Parachutes were attached and the pallets were placed onto aircraft for delivery to the refugees. Despite the hardships, these hard-working Marines tackled this difficult assignment with enthusiasm and were later commended for a job well done.<sup>8</sup>

### *Combined Task Force Provide Comfort*

The decision to expand Provide Comfort's mission from relief to sustainment, coupled with a growing international military and civilian presence, required structural changes in the task force organization. On 9 April 1991, Joint Task Force Provide Comfort was redesignated Combined Task Force Provide Comfort in recognition of international cooperation. Lieutenant General John M. "Shali" Shalikashvili, USA, assumed command of Combined Task Force Provide Comfort on 17 April. General Jamerson became the new deputy commander and Marine Brigadier General Anthony C. Zinni became the new chief-of-staff. Combined Task Force Provide Comfort eventually numbered more than 20,000 allied troops divided into two ground task forces, a logistics support unit, and an air contingent.

Provide Comfort's ground elements were designated Joint Task Force Alpha and Joint Task Force Bravo. Logistics units were either assigned to, or closely coordinated with, the Combined Support Command (CSC) at Silopi. Aircraft were provided by all four U.S. armed services and each multinational force. The Marines provided a composite helicopter squadron; the U.S. Navy furnished a carrier air wing and a combat support helicopter squadron; the U.S. Army brought two attack helicopter squadrons, an assault helicopter squadron, a



Photograph courtesy of MajGen Anthony C. Zinni, USMC  
*LtGen John M. Shalikashvili, CG CTF Provide Comfort, meets with Iraqi BGen Danoun Nashwan.*

transport helicopter squadron, and an aerial medical evacuation company; the U.S. Air Force had a fighter squadron, a ground attack squadron, and a fighter/attack squadron. Each of the other allied forces brought its own aircraft. Not part of the military task force, but closely associated with it, was a host of international relief agencies and volunteer organizations.

### *Joint Task Force Alpha*

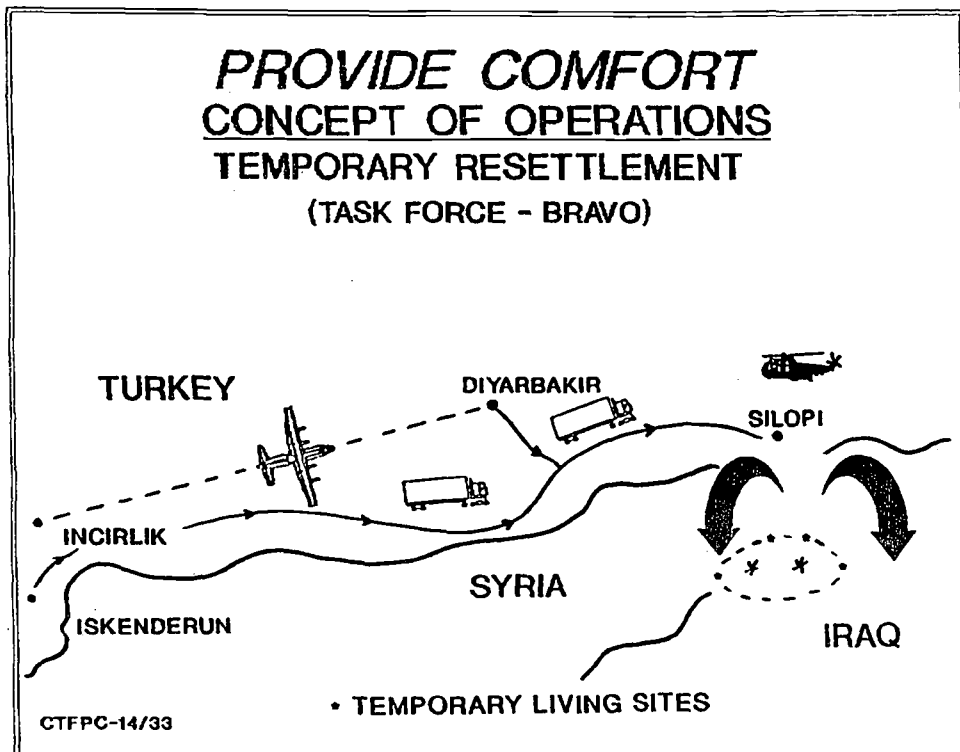
General Potter's Express Care was redesignated Joint Task Force Alpha (JTF-A) on 17 April and was given the missions of providing immediate relief, improving the camps, and encouraging dislocated civilians to return to Iraq. The ground element of the task force was the 1st Battalion, 10th SFG (A), supported by the USAF 39th SOW and the helicopters of the 24th MEU (SOC) Forward. The 4th Psychological Operations Group and the U.S. Army's Civil Affairs Command supplied assistance teams. In late April and early May, the remainder of the 10th SFG (A), the British 40th Commando, Royal Marines, and Italian Alpine troops joined JTF-A.

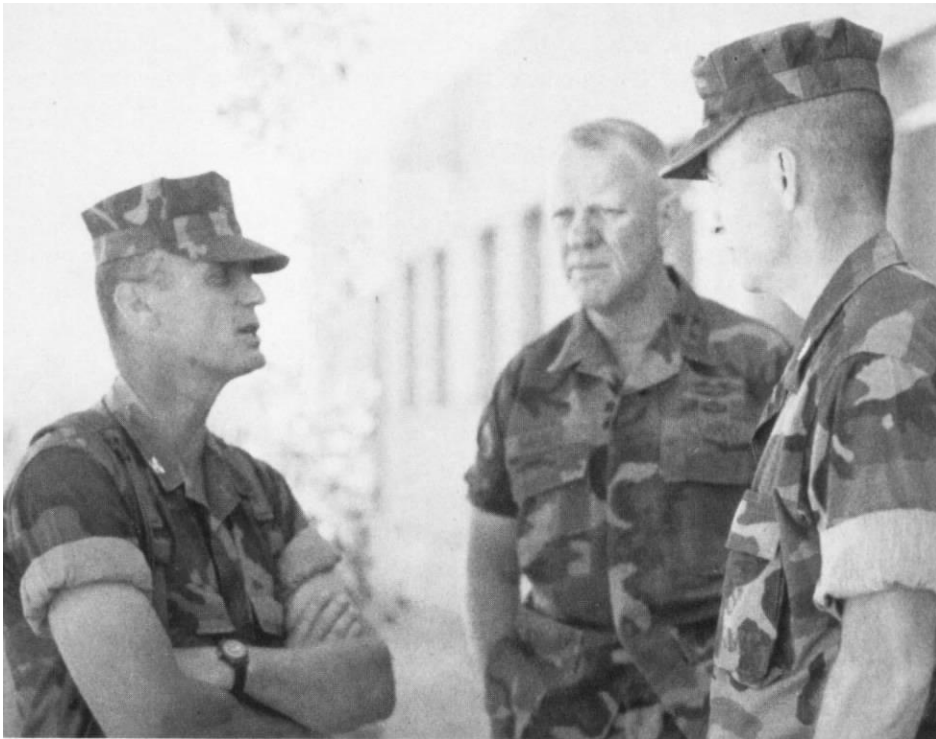
There were many tasks implicit in JTF-A's mission. A census of the displaced civilians living in the area had to be made so that their sustenance needs could be assessed. A more efficient forward resupply system had to be

implemented. The camps had to be organized, distribution points established, basic medical care provided, and lines of communication opened. Humanitarian service support bases were needed, ideally ones that could be supplied by trucks, transport airplanes, or railway instead of helicopters. Combat search and rescue had to be available to support aerial operations. Finally, the entire system had to be ready to be handed over to civilian agencies as quickly as possible.<sup>9</sup>

Major General Jay M. Garner, USA, formerly Deputy Commander, V Corps, and once an enlisted Marine, was named to lead Task Force Encourage Hope, later redesignated Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-B). Colonel John O. Easton, a Marine reservist, was transferred from his duties as commanding officer of the 4th CAG and appointed General Garner's chief of staff on 23 April. Easton, a lawyer from Fairfax, Virginia, had been a Marine platoon leader in Vietnam in 1967-68, made a Mediterranean cruise in 1969 with the Sixth Fleet's Marine landing force, then served as a recruiter and instructor before leaving active duty. A graduate of Baylor University, Easton then attended law school at George Mason University before beginning to practice law in the Washington, D.C. area. He had just returned from duty with the I Marine Expeditionary Force in Saudi Arabia before joining Provide Comfort.

Joint Task Force Bravo's missions were to establish temporary camps inside northern Iraq and to provide security for the returning refugees. The tasks implicit in this mission were to select and secure likely camp sites, to deploy construction personnel and materials, and to develop water points and sanitation





Photograph courtesy of MajGen Jay M. Garner, USA  
*Marine Cols James L. Jones, Jr., and John O. Easton meet with MajGen Jay M. Garner at JTF-Bravo Headquarters in Zakho. Col Easton, a Marine Reservist, was commanding officer of the 4th Civil Affairs Group before becoming JTF-B Chief of Staff.*

areas. An important function was to involve the Kurdish leaders in the selection and development of the camps.

The initial ground force assigned to JTF-B was the 24th MEU (SOC). Its mission was to build the resettlement camps while providing security and relief assistance. It did not take the Marines long to go into action. A platoon from Company E, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines was flown to Silopi and became the Marine forward security element on 16 April. The rest of Company E, as well as a combat engineer platoon, a combat service support detachment (CSSD), and additional aviation support personnel were bused to Silopi the same day, but did not arrive for almost 36 hours. On 17 April, MEU Service Support Group (MSSG) 24 began unloading the ships of Amphibious Squadron 8 at Iskenderun Harbor while moving combat power inland as rapidly as possible. By 19 April 1991, most of the 24th MEU (SOC) had moved to Silopi and the Marines prepared for the next phase of Operation Provide Comfort, the movement into Kurdistan.<sup>10</sup>



Painting by Col Peter M. "Mike" Gish, USMCR  
*The color, pattern, and style of this Kurd's jama dama turban, tight-fitting jacket, pester sash, and baggy trousers indicate tribal and territorial associations.*

*International Relief Efforts*

Operation Provide Comfort was a unique international effort responding to the tremendous suffering of innocent people. Countries around the world sent military forces, civilian volunteers, government workers, and relief supplies. Thirty-nine civilian relief agencies supported Operation Provide Comfort, 12 countries sent military forces, and 36 countries sent money, supplies, or relief aid. More than two dozen ships carrying relief supplies landed every week. Tents, blankets, clothing, and medicine flooded into Turkey where much of it might have remained to spoil had it not been for the immediate availability of management, labor, and transportation supplied by international military forces and civilian relief agencies.

Although reluctant to permanently admit stateless refugees, Turkish President Tugrut Ozal consented to provide limited assistance to dislocated Iraqi civilians. By mid-April, Turkey was swamped with fleeing refugees and both sides of the border were crowded with starving people who overwhelmed Turkey's capacity to assist. With a humanitarian crisis on his hands, President Ozal approved a United Nations plan to move the refugees back into northern Iraq. Turkey provided operating locations at Incirlik, Mersin, Iskenderun, Diyarbakir, Batman, Silopi, and Yuksekova. It dedicated aircraft and railway lines to send relief supplies forward. Turkish security forces maintained order and provided medical care in the temporary mountain camps. Fuel, building materials, food stuffs, and clothing were provided by Turkey. Individual Turks provided carpentry, sanitation, and transportation services. Operation Provide Comfort could not have been conducted had it not been for Turkish support.

On 12 April, the government of Turkey approved an increased flow of materials to the refugees and cut the "red tape" for incoming relief supplies. Materials arrived by air at Incirlik and Diyarbakir, and by sea at Iskenderun and Mersin. These much-needed supplies were sent forward by ground transportation to humanitarian service support bases (HSSBs). These bases were remote staging areas for receiving, preparing, and transloading goods destined for refugee relief by air or land. Two bases were planned, one at Silopi near the tri-border confluence and another at Yuksekova near the Iran-Iraq border.<sup>11</sup>

Civilian relief agencies participating in Provide Comfort included the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Program, the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Red Cross, the Turkish Red Crescent, the League of the Red Crescent, the American Red Cross, the Italian Red Cross, the Red Cross of Malta, Medical Volunteers International, Doctors Without Borders, the International Medical Corps, Doctors of the World, Catholic Relief Services, the World Council of Churches, the Mideast Church Council, the World Relief Foundation, Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE), the United Kingdom Tear Fund, the International Rescue Committee, Samaritan's Pulse, Swiss Disaster Relief, the Jordanian Red Crescent, World Vision, Direct Relief International, Christian Outreach, Save the Children Foundation, Irish Concern, International Action

Against Hunger, a Swiss Charity Team, Equilibre, Oxfam, German Bergwacht, the Swiss National Rescue Team, European Helo Mission, the German Red Cross, Concern International, Danish/Norwegian Church Aid, and Hospitaldienst Souveraender.<sup>12</sup>

### *A New Mission*

Three months after entering the Mediterranean the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) [MEU (SOC)], was bogged down in the mud on the island of Sardinia. Amphibious Exercise Sardinia 1-91 commenced at 0518 on 7 April. A short time later, the initial landing waves of BLT 2/8 were on the shore slowly crawling through the mire toward their assigned objectives. Company F crossed the beach in assault amphibian vehicles, Company G conducted an air assault, and Company E landed using motorized rafts. Lurking in the hills, Company H played the role of defending threat forces. At sea "on call" landing waves were preparing to debark when the communications center on board Amphibious Squadron 8's (PhibRon 8) flagship, the helicopter assault ship *Guadalcanal* (LPH 7), received an urgent dispatch.

Mediterranean Amphibious Ready Group 1-91 (MARG 1-91) was ordered to stop the exercise, to reembark Landing Force Sixth Fleet (LF6F) immediately,



Photograph courtesy of MajGen Jay M. Garner, USA  
*MajGen Jay M. Garner, USA, CG, JTF-B, discusses Operation Provide Comfort with the leaders of the 24th MEU (SOC) on board the USS Guadalcanal (LPH 7). The Marines are, from left, Col James L. Jones, Jr. (CO, 24th MEU [SOC]), LtCol Tony L. Corwin (CO, BLT 2/8), and LtCol Joseph A. Byrtus, Jr. (CO, HMM-264).*

then proceed to the Turkish port of Iskenderun in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup> The 24th MEU (SOC) had been ordered to support Operation Provide Comfort. Phibron 8 was slated to remain on station just off shore. The signal to halt the exercise was greeted with skepticism at first, but eventually the backbreaking job of cleaning and reloading equipment began. The Marines worked through the night and into the next morning. On 10 April 1991, MARG 1-91 set sail for Iskenderun. A common training exercise had unexpectedly become a complex "real world" operation.<sup>14</sup>

### *The 24th MEU (SOC)*

Marine units are organized, trained, and equipped to provide combined arms forces to the fleet. In order to do this best, tactical units are united to form Marine air-ground task forces (MAGTFs). These MAGTFs are self-sufficient combat teams that unite combat, combat support, combat service support, and aviation units under a single commander. They are powerful, flexible, amphibious, expeditionary forces capable of independent (single service), joint (multiservice), or combined (multinational) operations. They are prepared to strike anywhere in the world, ready to fight on land, at sea, or in the air.

In 1991, every MAGTF, regardless of size, had a common structure that included four elements: a command element, a ground combat element, an air combat element, and a combat service support element. The three most common MAGTFs were the Marine expeditionary force (MEF), the Marine expeditionary brigade (MEB), and the Marine expeditionary unit (MEU). Contingency Marine air-ground task forces (CMAGTFs) were sometimes created to accomplish special missions.<sup>15, 16</sup>

The MAGTFs most commonly deployed to forward areas were MEUs. There were six permanent MEUs, three on the U.S. east coast and three on the west coast. At any given time, two MEUs were forward deployed, two others were in training, and the remaining two were either standing up, standing down, or in transit. While MEU headquarters were permanent organizations, the units assigned to them rotated on a 15-month cycle (nine months stateside and six months deployed). A normal deployment included the "work up," a six-month training and familiarization program that welded separate MAGTF units into a unified combat-ready force; a six-month deployment, known as a "pump"; and the return trip which included the turnover, wash down, and homebound transit.

The Landing Force Sixth Fleet (LF6F) in April 1991 was the 24th MEU (SOC). The designation "Special Operations Capable" was never granted until a unit successfully completed a special training syllabus, had been rigorously tested, and was certified to perform 18 special missions: amphibious raids, limited objective attacks, non-combatant evacuations, show of force, reinforcement operations, security operations, training foreign military, civil action, deception operations, fire support coordination, counter-intelligence, initial terminal guidance, signal intelligence-electronic warfare, tactical recovery





*A CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter of HMM-264 takes off from the flight deck of the amphibious assault ship Guadalcanal (LPH 7) as another Sea Knight remains on the deck during vertical replenishment operations during Operation Provide Comfort.*

of personnel and aircraft (TRAP), clandestine reconnaissance, military operations in urban terrain (MOUT), special demolitions operations, and in-extremis hostage rescues.

Marine expeditionary units sailed on board the ships of U.S. Navy amphibious squadrons which were designated "amphibious ready groups" (ARGs) when deployed to forward areas with Marines embarked. Most ARGs consisted of four or five ships, usually including an amphibious assault ship (LHA or LPH), amphibious dock landing ships (LPD or LSD), and some tank landing ships (LSTs).<sup>17</sup> However, the demands of the crisis in the Persian Gulf changed that. In January 1991, the 4th MEB, the 5th MEB, and the 13th MEU (SOC) were in the Persian Gulf on board more than three dozen amphibious ships. This caused a "ship crunch," so Mediterranean Amphibious Ready Group 1-91 (MARG 1-91) had to sail shorthanded.

Commodore (Captain, USN) Dean Turner's three-ship Amphibious Squadron 8 (Phibron 8) included the amphibious assault ship *Guadalcanal* (LPH 7), the amphibious transport dock *Austin* (LPD 4), and the amphibious cargo ship *Charleston* (LKA 113).<sup>18</sup> The ship shortage forced careful planning, detailed loading, and use of surge quartering, but still vital equipment and personnel had to be left behind.<sup>19</sup> The 24th MEU (SOC) was forced to sail without tanks. Motor transport assets were restricted. MSSG-24 had to leave critical support items and equipment behind. No fixed-wing aircraft were in the aviation package. Only one ship could conduct a traditional amphibious assault using amphibian tractors and surface landing craft. The lack of LSTs meant there was no over-the-beach unloading capability for vehicles or other heavy equipment and logistics over the shore (LOTS) operations would strain an already short-handed combat service support element.

### *The Command Element*

The 24th MEU (SOC) consisted of the 24th MEU Headquarters, Battalion Landing Team 2/8 (BLT 2/8), Composite Helicopter Squadron 264 (HMM-264), and MEU Service Support Group 24 (MSSG-24). The commanding officer was Colonel James L. Jones, Jr. Colonel Jones had strong Marine Corps roots, as the son of a legendary World War II Marine Reservist who retired as a brigadier general, and the nephew of a retired Marine lieutenant general.<sup>20</sup> He graduated from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., in 1967, served in Vietnam as a rifle platoon leader and company commander, then commanded Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines on Okinawa when that unit was one of the contingency forces for non-combatant evacuation operations in Southeast Asia. This experience came in handy during Operation Provide Comfort. Later in his career, Jones commanded the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. His staff duties included five years as a Senate liaison officer and a tour as senior aide to the Commandant of the Marine Corps.<sup>21</sup> His partially European upbringing and mastery of foreign languages made him an appropriate choice as the commander of 24th MEU (SOC) during Operation Provide Comfort.

The command element included the executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph C. Morse; the personnel officer, Captain Dewey G. "Guy" Jordan; the intelligence officer, Major Richard J. "Rick" Raftery; the operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas C. "Tom" Linn; the logistics officer, Major Michael D. "Mike" Boyd; and Sergeant Major William E. Hatcher.

The existing 24th MEU headquarters was reinforced by detachments from 2d Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (2d ANGLICO), 2d Force Reconnaissance Company, 2d Radio Battalion, 8th Communications Battalion, a force imagery interpretation unit (FIU), and a sensor control and management platoon (SCAMP). There were also counter-intelligence, interpreter-interrogator, and terrain analysis support teams. In Iraq, an unmanned aerial vehicle detachment was attached to the 24th MEU (SOC) and additional ANGLICO firepower control teams were attached to allied units.

### *BLT 2/8*

Battalion Landing Team 2/8 was the MEU's ground combat element (GCE). It was composed of the 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, reinforced by antitank, reconnaissance, artillery, combat engineer, assault amphibian, and light armored infantry units. The battalion included a headquarters and service company, four rifle companies, and a weapons company. These organic components and their attached units gave the landing team a lot of fire power: 8 M29E1 81mm mortars (range 4,500 meters); 12 M224 60mm mortars (range 1,500 meters); 8 M270A1 tube-launched, optically tracked, wire command link, guided antitank missiles (range 3,000 meters); 24 M-47 Dragon man-portable antiarmor weapons (range 1,000 meters); 31 SMAW shoulder-launched multi-purpose assault weapons (range 250 meters); 10 40mm machine guns (range 500 meters); 4 M101A1

105mm towed howitzers (range 11,000 meters); 4 M198 155mm towed howitzers (range 23,000 meters); 13 assault amphibious vehicles; and 8 light armored vehicles (LAVs).<sup>22</sup>

The commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel Tony L. Corwin, a veteran infantry officer. He had been with BLT 2/8 for more than a year and had been executive officer during its 1989 Mediterranean cruise. Colonel Corwin assumed command of the 2d Battalion, 8th Marines at Camp Lejeune on 12 January 1990. The executive officer was Lieutenant Colonel John J. Hogan III. The senior enlisted Marine was Sergeant Major William G. Creech. The personnel officer was First Lieutenant James W. Bierman, the intelligence officer was Captain Peter H. Devlin, the operations officer was Captain Dennis M. McNulty, and the logistics officer was Captain Raymond B. Joseph. Headquarters and Service Company was initially commanded by First Lieutenant Demetrius Bellizaire, then later by Captain Charles J. Lesko, Jr. Company E was commanded by Captain Peter J. Streng, Company F by Captain William F. McEvoy, Company G by Captain Christopher U. Mulholland, and Company H by First Lieutenant Allie A. Hutchinson, Jr. The BLT artillery was Battery H, 3d Battalion, 10th Marines (Reinforced), commanded by Captain William P. Holowecki; the 3d Platoon, Company D, 2d Assault Amphibian Battalion was commanded by First Lieutenant Michael L. Kuhn; Detachment 24, 2d Light Armored Infantry Battalion was led by First Lieutenant James F. Desy; the 2d Platoon, Company C, 2d Combat Engineer Battalion was led by First Lieutenant Joel B. Baker; and the 1st Platoon, Company C, 2d Reconnaissance Battalion was commanded by Captain Peter F. Owen.

### *The Black Knights of HMM-264*

The aviation combat element, appropriately called the ACE, was Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 264 (Reinforced), known as HMM-264. The squadron was nicknamed the Black Knights, its emblem was a black chess piece superimposed on a red and gold checkerboard, its motto was "Checkmate," and its mascot was a cartoon horse--a spinoff of the squadron's chess knight symbol--called "Mr. Ed."

The squadron deployed as a composite unit, merging organic and outside assets under a single commander. This task organization allowed HMM-264 to best utilize its aircraft and enhanced its ability to perform a wide variety of missions. In July 1990, the squadron joined utility, attack, heavy-lift, and ground support assets to become the aviation combat element for Landing Force Sixth Fleet Deployment 1-91. In addition to the assets of HMM-264, the composite squadron also incorporated Marines and equipment from Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 461 (HMH-461), Marine Light/Attack Helicopter Squadron 167 (HMLA-167), Marine Air Control Group 28 (MACG-28), 2d Low Altitude Antiaircraft Defense Battalion (2d LAAD), and Marine Wing Service Support Squadron 272 (MWSS-272).



*This is the insignia of HMM-264, the helicopter squadron assigned to 24th MEU (SOC), during Operation Provide Comfort. The squadron nickname is "Black Knights" and the motto is "Checkmate."*

The commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel Joseph A. Byrtus, Jr. He had been commissioned in 1972 and earned the gold wings of a naval aviator in 1973. Colonel Byrtus had spent most of his flying career with East Coast units. He also served as a maintenance officer, attended Forward Air Controller School and Jump School during a tour with 2d ANGLICO, and familiarized himself with Soviet tactics and weapons during a staff tour with U.S. Central Command. In 1988 he became the executive officer of HMLA-167, then assumed command of HMM-264 on 16 March 1990.

The squadron had 61 officers, 289 enlisted Marines, and 8 Navy personnel. The executive officer was Lieutenant Colonel David L. Ramsey. The squadron staff was: operations officer, Major Richard J. Crush; intelligence officer, Captain George Taber; maintenance officer, Major John W. Cowan; logistics officer, Captain Richard T. McFadden; administrative officer, Major Richard A. Mehaffey; and safety officer, Major David T. Kerrick. The Black Knights' top enlisted man was Sergeant Major Francisco Deleon.

As a composite squadron, HMM-264 used a variety of aircraft to accomplish different tasks. It included heavy-lift cargo helicopters, medium-lift transport helicopters, attack helicopters, and light utility helicopters. These aircraft displayed some of the finest nose art in the Marine Corps and were given names like "American Pie," "Saddam's Revenge," or "Warlock." Composite squadrons often included a detachment of fixed-wing McDonnell Douglas AV-8B Harrier II "jump jets," but ship space limitations prohibited this on this Mediterranean cruise. Lieutenant Colonel Byrtus had operational control over AV-8Bs (VMA-542), KC-130s (VMGR-252), and OV-10s (VMO-1) during the training cycle, however, during the deployment fixed-wing air support was provided by Navy Carrier Air Wing 8's McDonnell Douglas F-14 Tomcats, McDonnell Douglas

F/A-18 Hornets, Grumman A-6 Intruders, EA-6 Prowlers, Lockheed S-3 Vikings, and Grumman E-2 Hawkeyes on board the *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71). Another source of air support was the U.S. Navy's Mediterranean-based Combat Support Helicopter Squadron 4 (HC-4) from Sigonella, Italy, which flew Sikorsky CH-53E Super Stallion heavy-lift cargo helicopters.

The mainstay of HMM-264 was the Boeing Vertol CH-46E Sea Knight. It was a shipborne, twin-engine, tandem-rotor, medium-lift transport helicopter. Although the CH-46 was officially named the Sea Knight, most Marines called these aircraft "Frogs" because of the dark green paint and squatty appearing high-nose/low-tail posture on the ground. In tactical situations the crew consisted of two pilots, a crew chief, and a door gunner. A Sea Knight was supposed to fly at a cruising speed of 158 miles per hour with a ceiling of about 9,000 feet and a combat radius of about 75 nautical miles, but age had taken a toll. Safety factors, terrain, and weather, and extended use, severely limited the performance of these old work horses during Operation Provide Comfort. So many of HMM-246's Frogs had patches covering combat scars from Vietnam, it was a squadron joke that a pilot couldn't fly a "Forty-six" unless the aircraft was older than he was.<sup>23</sup> Service-life extension programs added years of operational usefulness and marginally increased capabilities, but the CH-46s were ready for replacement by more capable aircraft in 1991.<sup>24</sup>



Two Marine CH-53E Super Stallion heavy-lift cargo helicopters prepare to lift off the deck of the Guadalcanal (LPH 7) in Iskenderun Harbor. An AH-1T Bell Sea Cobra attack helicopter sits in the left foreground.



Photograph by the author

*"Leroy Three Two" was a UH-1N two-pilot, twin-engine, utility helicopter. Although officially named "Iroquois," UH-1s were always called "Hueys," a nickname first used during the Vietnam conflict.*

Sikorsky CH-53E Super Stallions were the most capable heavy-lift cargo helicopters in the free world. They had three jet engines, a single main rotor, and a four-man crew. They could carry 55 Marines internally and sling a 16-ton external load. These workhorses were able to recover any airframe in the Navy-Marine Corps inventory. They flew 172 miles per hour, had a practical operational ceiling of 10,000 feet, and a ferry range of 1,000 nautical miles. Nose-mounted aerial refueling probes made the Super Stallions valuable as long-range transports and cargo carriers. Commonly called "Echoes" or "Fifty-threes," they provided the only helicopter lift for M198 howitzers and light armored vehicles. The four Super Stallions assigned to HMM-264 came from Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 461 (HMH-461) at New River, North Carolina. Although notorious for leaking fluid, these rugged birds were dependable cargo haulers that carried heavy loads over long distances. During a flight from Silopi to Incirlik on board a U.S. Navy CH-53, an alarmed civilian passenger alerted the crew chief to a hydraulic leak. The Marines on board burst into laughter at the veteran flier's unconcerned reply: "Be glad, lady! It means there's some fluid still in there."

Two Bell-made aircraft comprised the squadron's light aircraft contingent. The Bell UH-1N Iroquois, familiar to most Americans as the "Huey," was a twin-engine, single-rotor utility helicopter. Two pilots flew it at a cruise speed of 125 miles per hour, with a ceiling of 10,000 feet, and a range of about 200 nautical miles. The Huey was primarily used for passenger transport, command and control, and reconnaissance missions, but flew medical evacuation flights when needed. The squadron's other light helicopters were among the stars of

Marine aviation, AH-1T Bell Sea Cobra gunships, frequently called "Snakes" because of their menacing appearance, narrow silhouettes, and long profiles. Sea Cobras were two-seat, twin-engine, single-main rotor, attack aircraft. They mounted a wide variety of ordnance, including a three-barrel 20mm M197 chin-mounted rotating cannon, TOW antitank missiles, and sidewinder antiaircraft missiles. The three UH-1Ns and four AH-1Ts assigned to the Black Knights came from HMLA-167, stationed at New River, North Carolina.

A detachment from MACG-28 gave the squadron and its associated amphibious task force the ability to command, control, and coordinate air operations. This unit provided vital air traffic control systems and personnel. MWSS-272 provided a detachment of aircraft specialists and ancillary equipment, including a Helicopter Expeditionary Refueling System (HERS). This refueling system was a collection of rubber bladders that looked like gigantic black waterbed mattresses. The associated hoses, pumps, connectors, and generators enabled the Marines to refuel rotary wing aircraft at a forward area rearming/refueling point (FARP). The HERS was fully transportable by air or ground mode and made the squadron a truly mobile expeditionary force. Air defense was furnished by a detachment from the 2d LAAD armed with hand-held Stinger missiles. The major drawback for HMM-264 was that it had no Harrier "jump jets" to provide fixed wing close air support attached.

#### *MSSG-24*

MEU Service Support Group (MSSG) 24 provided the MEU's "beans, bullets, and band aids." This logistics unit was formed by uniting service



Photograph by the author

*An AH-1T Bell Sea Cobra attack helicopter was assigned to HMM-264. Four such two-pilot, twin-engine, armed rotary wing aircraft provided close-in fire support for the 24th MEU in northern Iraq.*

support detachments from the 2d FSSG at Camp Lejeune. It contained the equipment and trained personnel to support an amphibious assault or to become the MEU's lifeblood on shore. Marine Corps doctrine dictated that MSSG-24 be organized and equipped to operate using sea-based logistics. Briefly, this meant MSSG-24 relied on shipborne facilities for maintenance and supply, rather than bases on the shore. Doctrine anticipated an amphibious campaign conducted close to the beach, so equipment needed for inland operations or extended periods on shore was limited. Bulk supplies had to be transported ashore from amphibious shipping by helicopters or landed from surface craft. The MEU brought only enough supplies for 15 days of operations on shore, a package called Landing Force Operational Readiness Material (LFORM). Although this period could be marginally extended by careful management or reduced demand, any extended stay on shore required outside support.

The MSSG-24 commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel Richard T. Kohl. Kohl was a logistics specialist with many years of experience. Originally an infantry officer, he became a rifle battalion logistics officer (S-4) after being wounded in Vietnam. He became a logistician full time in 1978. Kohl had experience with logistics units ranging in size from small combat service support detachments to Fleet Marine Force level. Lieutenant Colonel Kohl had nine continuous years of service in the Fleet Marine Force. He was assisted by Major Charles V. Mugno, MSSG-24's executive officer. Mugno knew the ins and outs of logistics well, and had an excellent eye for detail.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately for MSSG-24, Mugno would be obliged to attend to other duties during Operation Provide Comfort. Luckily, Kohl could count on the services of a proficient staff which



*Marine engineers from MSSG 24 are busy constructing a water distribution point on the banks of the Khabur River in Central Zakho. Clearly visible are a portable electrical generator, the Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Units (ROWPU) holding tanks, and a field antenna. The compound is protected by a single strand of barbed wire. The Khabur River is a tributary of the famous Tigris River which runs from the Taurus Mountains through Iraq to the Persian Gulf.*



included: adjutant, First Lieutenant Thomas M. Buehner; intelligence officer, First Lieutenant Robert W. Pavlicin; operations officer, Captain Kevin L. Foley; logistics officer, Captain Kenneth E. Jacobsen; embarkation officer, First Lieutenant Matthew J. Connors; supply operations officer, First Lieutenant Todd L. Eggers; disbursing officer, First Lieutenant Gavin R. Reardon; medical officer Lieutenant Ronald Buckley, USN; and dental officers Lieutenant Donald R. Ratliff, USN, and Lieutenant Kenneth P. Nogacek, USN. The senior enlisted personnel were First Sergeant Donald A. Delgado and Master Sergeant Ross E. Lewellen.

The MSSG was composed of a headquarters platoon and detachments from 8th Engineer Support Battalion; 2d Landing Support Battalion; 2d Maintenance Battalion; 2d Medical Battalion; 2d Dental Battalion; 2d Supply Battalion; 8th Motor Transport Battalion; 2d Support Battalion; and administrative, military police, and communications personnel from Headquarters and Service Battalion, 2d FSSG. Its diverse equipment list included radio sets, fork lifts, portable electric generators, water purification units, cargo trucks, ambulances, medical



Photograph courtesy of MajGen Anthony C. Zinni, USMC  
*BGen Anthony C. Zinni makes friends with Kurdish youngsters in northern Iraq. Gen Zinni was the highest-ranking Marine assigned to CTF Provide Comfort.*

supplies, and battery chargers. The MSSG enabled the 24th MEU (SOC) to "shoot and scoot," feed itself, repair broken equipment, get paid, heal the sick, and send mail. If one imagined the 24th MEU (SOC) as a mobile village, MSSG-24 provided all the civic services for its population.

### *24th MEU Forward Command Element*

After receiving the warning order for movement to Turkey, Colonel Jones formed the 24th MEU (SOC) Forward Command Element (FCE), composed of Lieutenant Colonel John J. Hogan III (BLT 2/8), Major Charles V. Mugno (MSSG-24), and Major David T. Kerrick (HMM-264). This team departed the Naval Air Station Sigonella, Italy, for Incirlik on 10 April. At Incirlik, the FCE reported to Combined Task Force (CTF) Provide Comfort Headquarters and met with Brigadier General Anthony C. Zinni, USMC. Zinni was the senior Marine assigned to Operation Provide Comfort. He had been Deputy J-3, United States European Command (USEUCOM), but was detached to become Deputy Commander, JTF Provide Comfort on 6 April. He was later named chief of staff when Provide Comfort expanded and became a combined task force. A stocky ex-football player from Villanova University, Zinni's credentials included the U.S. Army Special Warfare School, the Naval War College, and two master's degrees. He was a veteran of two combat tours in Vietnam, where he had commanded the 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and the 9th Marines. His staff duties



Photograph courtesy of MajGen Anthony C. Zinni, USMC  
*BGen Anthony C. Zinni, CTF Provide Comfort chief of staff, poses with Marines assigned to CTF Headquarters at Incirlik Air Base, Adana, Turkey.*



Photograph by the author  
*Helicopters of HMM-264 arrayed in "LZ Leatherneck" on the southeast side of HSSB Silopi. HMM-264 established the Silopi base in April 1991. A detachment from MACG-28 operated the landing zones for the first month of Operation Provide Comfort.*

included two teaching stints at Quantico, a headquarters tour in Washington, D.C., and joint-service duty with the USEUCOM.<sup>26</sup>

Joint Task Force Provide Comfort was to conduct multinational humanitarian relief operations in northern Iraq until international relief agencies and private voluntary organizations could assume overall supervision of such operations. The basic concept of operations included the following tenets: 1) meet life-sustaining requirements immediately; 2) establish a manageable relief process that could be easily transferred; 3) promote the role of non-military organizations and maximize the participation of international agencies; 4) seek active refugee participation during site development operations; and 5) ensure security of allied troops and dislocated civilians. The priorities established were: 1) to stop the dying and the suffering; 2) to resettle the population at temporary sites while establishing a stable, secure, sustainable environment in northern Iraq; and 3) to return the displaced civilians to their former homes.<sup>27</sup>

The MEU FCE carefully read and dissected the operations order, flew a relief supply mission, discussed the situation, then sent a staff estimate to Colonel Jones. His highest priority was to get aircraft ashore and into operation as soon as possible. The rest of the MEU was scheduled remain on board ship. Phibron 8 would remain near the coast at a modified offshore deployment location to provide logistic support.

This concept changed on 14 April when Combined Task Force Provide Comfort received a message from the American Ambassador to Turkey, Morton I. Abramowitz, that outlined a plan for the return of dislocated Iraqi citizens

from Turkey and Iran. It envisioned a series of relay points along major routes leading from the refugee camps to locations in northern Iraq. Later that same day, the American Consulate at Adana announced that President Ozal had agreed to establish a humanitarian service support base near the Turkish town of Silopi. The military unit sent to Silopi was assigned to the Haj facility used by pilgrims making their way to the holy shrines of Islam. A newer facility would be used for refugees in urgent need of medical care. Permission was also granted to send humanitarian service support detachments (HSSDs) to the towns of Diyarbakir and Isikveren.<sup>28</sup>

This mission would not be easy. Kurdistan was located far from existing bases in some of the region's most forbidding terrain and weather. The political climate was uncertain. The Turks and Iranians had a long history of problems with the Kurds and were lukewarm about providing assistance at first. Peshmerga guerrillas and the Iraqi Army were still fighting, so the Americans had to avoid taking sides in a historical civil conflict.

### *24th MEU Forward*

Phibron 8 made landfall at Iskenderun Harbor on the evening of 13 April.<sup>29</sup> The next morning, operational control of the 24th MEU (SOC) was transferred to Combined Task Force Provide Comfort. General Jamerson told Colonel Jones to establish a forward supply base and a forward area rearming/refueling point at Silopi, an agricultural village located about 450 miles east of Iskenderun in the Taurus Mountains. To best accomplish this task, Colonel Jones created a special purpose force, the 24th MEU Forward, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Joe Byrtus from HMM-264.

This ad hoc unit was to fly to Silopi, establish a command post, set up an air control system, and put a helicopter expeditionary refueling system into operation. The 24th MEU Forward included personnel from HMM-264, MACG-28, MWSS-272, and MSSG-24. Follow-on elements included command, ground security, aviation, and logistics personnel. A convoy of buses and trucks departed Iskenderun but did not arrive at Silopi for almost 36 hours.<sup>30</sup>

Silopi was a sleepy farming village in Turkey's isolated Hakkari Province, located about eight miles from the Habur Bridge, the gateway to northern Iraq. Silopi was so small and unimportant it did not appear on most maps of the area. There was no airfield, no railhead, and a poor road network. Only a single hard-surface highway ran through the mountains to reach this small town in eastern Anatolia. Silopi was an agricultural trade center for local wheat farmers. Visiting there was like traveling far back in time. Its people lived in mud brick huts with straw roofs and had no electricity. Cultivation was done by hand instead of by machine. Skinny mules pulled wooden plows to break the ground. Entire families took to the fields with scythes in hand when it was time to harvest the grain. However, life in Silopi changed radically after the helicopters of HMM-264 dropped from the sky. The local peasants, unaware of the world situation that



Photograph by the author

*An HMM-264 CH-46E on board the amphibious assault ship Guadalcanal (LPH 7) in Iskenderun Harbor. The ships of MARG 1-91 served as an afloat logistics base supporting a Marine landing force more than 500 miles inland.*

brought these strangers to their isolated valley, stared at the new arrivals with unsettled curiosity.

The 24th MEU Forward was placed under the operational control of General Potter's Task Force Express Care (redesignated Joint Task Force Alpha on 17 April). Its mission was to support Express Care by providing helicopter support, air traffic control, air space coordination, and refueling capability at a forward support base. Colonel Byrtus, the MEU Forward's commanding officer, attended joint task force meetings and acted as Marine liaison between the forward base and the forces afloat.

The 24th MEU Forward moved its lead elements to Silopi on 15 April. The Black Knights used three CH-53E helicopters to deploy the advance party consisting of helicopter expeditionary refueling system personnel and air traffic controllers. The difficult five-hour flight required aerial refueling while flying only a few hundred feet above the undulating terrain to reach an undeveloped wheatfield earmarked to become the main landing zone at Silopi. Within two hours of their arrival, the Marines had refueled their helicopters and established an air traffic control station. A primitive landing zone was in operation that afternoon.

However, the long day was not over. From Silopi, the Black Knights flew food to Drop Zone One at Isikveren, Turkey. The heavily laden CH-53s followed the Hazil River as it meandered along the Turkish-Iraqi border, then flew over a narrow valley dotted by small refugee camps. It was a rough flight because the helicopters were often buffeted by cold, swirling gusts of wind rising off the snow-streaked ridges. Eventually, a colorful patchwork of tan, olive, orange, blue, and white tents came into view. Isikveren was one of the largest refugee

camps, housing more than 80,000 Kurds. It was located above the 5,000-foot mark on the slopes of snow-capped mountains.

At first glance, every square foot of level ground seemed to be occupied. A careful search located an area that was relatively uninhabited, uncluttered by refuse, fairly flat, and free of flight obstacles. Purple smoke from a landing marker pinpointed the exact spot. Unfortunately, there was only room for one helicopter to land at a time. The first Super Stallion to arrive at this minuscule landing zone parted what was described as "a sea of refugees" who ran from the winds created by its rotor wash. A great cloud of dust billowed up and pelted the waiting crowd with pebbles, sand, and broken twigs, causing them to move back. Blankets, an assortment of loose items, and even a few tents were picked up by the whirlwind and blown across the camp. The pilot alertly used this temporary opening to set down. The aircrew hustled to unload the cargo quickly, however, the impatient crowd swarmed the landing zone. Ignoring the pleas of relief workers and oblivious to the danger of the whirling rotor blades, refugees charged toward the idling helicopter. The hungry, thirsty crowd rushed forward to get desperately needed food and water. Afraid for the safety of those on the ground, the aircraft commander popped up into a low hover and began to taxi forward very slowly. This tactic worked. The rotor wash cleared away the mob and created a lane so the remaining pallets could be shoved off the rear ramp. The other two aircraft followed this procedure as well.<sup>31</sup>

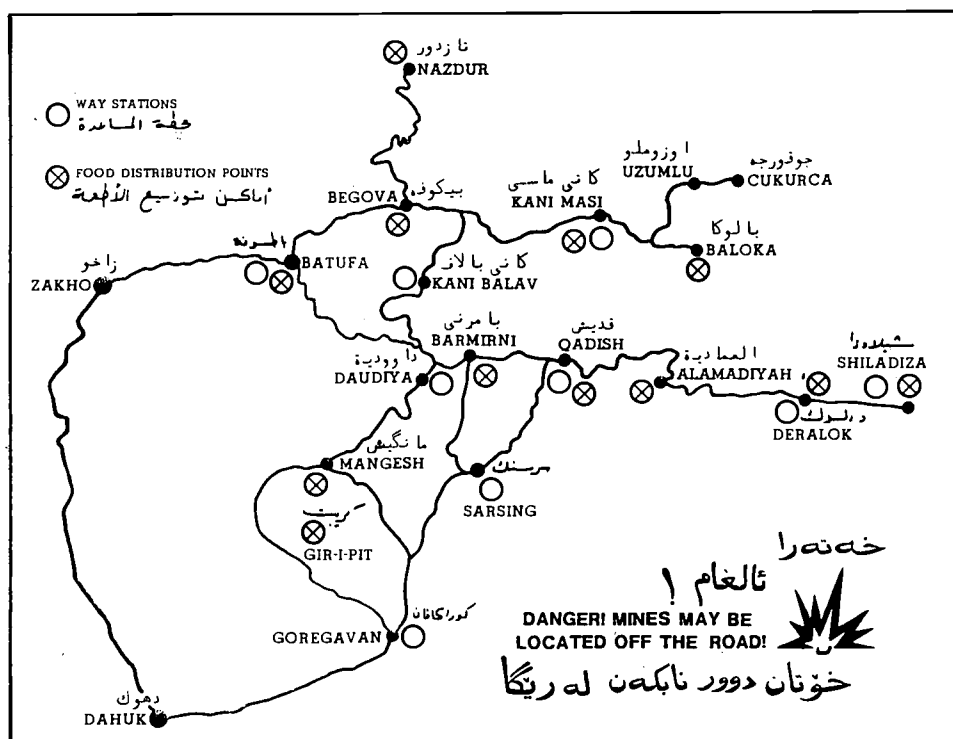
After the drop the helicopters departed the refugee camp for Silopi to pick up Lieutenant Colonel Byrtus for the return flight to the *Guadalcanal*, which



*Harried Marines try to bring order from chaos as starving Kurds charge a CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter carrying food. LtCol Joseph A. Byrtus, Jr., HMM-264 commander, described these initial relief flights as "trying to land into a sea of refugees."*

was at anchor in Iskenderun Harbor, but the flight was diverted to Incirlik for the evening because reduced visibility precluded safe return to the ship. The first day's operation had been successful and it provided some important lessons for future operations. General Jamerson credited the Black Knights with pioneering low-altitude drop techniques that expedited safe delivery of food and water. The increased flow of supplies resulted in more subdued crowd reactions. However, better ground control and a more orderly distribution system were still needed. The number of needy people vastly outnumbered those being assisted. More Marines were needed, and a prolonged sustainment effort was required. The forward base at Silopi needed to be expanded to adequately support large-scale, long-term operations.

On the other hand, the Marines achieved several important milestones. The Black Knights delivered 1,290 MREs and 18 boxes of bottled water to the refugees. The first forward Humanitarian Service Support Base was operating. An interesting sidelight was that the Marines were being used as a true expeditionary force, rather than an amphibious force, operating far from the nearest sea base. No MEU in Marine Corps history had ever been deployed so far inland.<sup>32</sup>



The following day, 16 April, most of the squadron moved to Silopi. Three CH-53s, nine CH-46s, and two UH-1s arrived at approximately 1500 in the afternoon. They used the newly installed HERS to refuel, then immediately launched a supply run to the distant mountain camps. The FARP site was manned by eight Marines from MWSS-272 (Corporal Charles G. Trainor) and a 45-man Shore Party Platoon, MSSG-24 (First Lieutenant Chris A. Arantz) worked the loading zone. The first day the FARP refueled 319 helicopters, then settled down to an average of about 220 per day, distributing about 55,000 gallons of fuel each day. The fuel bladders on the ground were pumped full of gas at the rate of 2,600 gallons per minute from military and civilian fuel trucks. Silopi was beginning its transition from an unimproved landing zone to a major support base.<sup>33</sup>

For the next few days HMM-264 devoted its air assets to Joint Task Force Alpha. Many Kurdish camps couldn't be reached by truck, so the Marines loaded more than 100 tons of supplies per day on the helicopters. The squadron usually flew from sunrise to sunset. Between 15 and 18 April HMM-264 delivered 137 tons of relief supplies to the Kurdish refugees. On one day 170,000 pounds of food were delivered. On several different days, HMM-264 logged more than 90 flight hours. During the first two weeks the squadron delivered more than one million pounds of relief supplies and flew more than 1,000 accident-free flight hours. Distribution operations were turned over to the Kurds as soon as possible to encourage them to help themselves. However, the rapid pace of events made it very clear that the entire MEU would soon be required on shore.<sup>34</sup>

### *Humanitarian Service Support Concept of Operations*

Logistics planning for Provide Comfort was kept fairly simple. There were three overlapping phases. At first, the military handled the movement of all supplies. Emergency support was delivered directly to refugee camps in Turkey and Iraq by airdrop or helicopter. As the distribution system developed, civilian agencies assumed responsibility for operation of the camps, while the military provided security and some logistics support. By the time Combined Task Force Provide Comfort departed, all supply and security missions in northern Iraq were handled by civilian agencies or the United Nations. As the Kurds began to move south, a series of way stations along major travel arteries were established in northern Iraq. Inside the exclusion zone temporary resettlement camps were built with the intention of turning them over to civilian agencies as quickly as possible.<sup>35</sup>

A supply "ladder" was established with three "rungs": reception, movement, and distribution. There were three main supply and personnel delivery points in Turkey. Incirlik was the aerial entry port. Mersin and Iskenderun were the sea entry ports. A three-day supply reserve was established at each entry site. Aircraft landing at Incirlik were quickly unloaded. All arriving goods were inspected by customs officials. At first the Turks used an expedited inspection



**Food will be distributed ONE time each week.  
Bring this card with you each week to receive your FOOD RATIONS.**

يوزع الصوام مرة واحدة في الأسبوع .  
 أجلب هذه البطاقة مرة في كل اسبوع لكي تحصل على نصيبك .  
 ثم رزاقه ر ئ ننه نه قلك دي ده نه ده .  
 هو ر ئ ينه نه نه ده نه نه له كل خوبينه دا نه رزاقه نه  
 به ده نه .

*Kurdish families were issued ration cards when they registered at one of the three refugee camps in the Zakho area. Food supplies were originally U.S. "Meals Ready to Eat" combat rations, but these were quickly replaced by bulk foods more suited to Kurdish tastes.*

system, but as time passed this procedure became more complex and later took up to eight days for goods and equipment to pass through customs. Supplies were then either rigged for airdrop, palletized for helicopter transport, or loaded onto trucks for the trip forward. Similar procedures were used at Mersin and Iskenderun. Sea-land containers were unloaded, opened, their contents inspected, the goods were separated and packaged, then loaded onto trucks or trains for movement forward.

The second phase was movement of relief supplies and personnel from their port of entry to a forward humanitarian service support base. At first, there were two, HSSB-1 (Silopi) and HSSB-2 (Yuksekoa). Later HSSB-3 was opened at Sirsenk, Iraq. Sirsenk quickly replaced Yuksekova when the refugees left their mountain camps and moved south. At the HSSBs, every attempt was made to expedite the movement of supplies forward to the humanitarian service support detachments (HSSDs). At the HSSBs, trucks were directed forward after the drivers made only brief stops for food and fuel. If necessary, supplies were divided into truck-transportable and air transportable-loads. A two-day supply reserve was maintained at each HSSB. Other supplies were sent forward as quickly as possible.

The final rung on the supply ladder was distribution. A typical HSSD included a command element, a helicopter support team, an engineer support team, civil affairs representatives, and a communications section. These teams, usually about a dozen people, occupied one or two tents near the landing zone.

A "mayor's" tent, the civilian relief workers' tents, a medical center, a water point, and a supply dump were almost always nearby. The detachment directed airdrops, received the trucks, pumped potable water, manned delivery points, and coordinated services. The actual distribution was left up to civilian relief workers or the Kurds. American influence in the camps was obvious when visiting dignitaries were greeted by children singing "Old MacDonald Had A Farm" or little hands flashed a "vee" accompanied by the refrain "Kowabunga Dude!"<sup>36</sup>

### *Incirlik Air Base*

Combined Task Force Provide Comfort Headquarters was located at Incirlik Air Base near Adana, Turkey. Incirlik was a large, modern NATO base. The airfield supported a multitude of air operations including fighter, bomber, reconnaissance, and transport aircraft. A stretch of taxiway and some reinforced



Photograph by the author  
*Maj (now LtCol) Charles V. Mugno, executive officer of MSSG 24, was assigned to the 24th MEU forward command element and flew one of the initial relief missions into northern Iraq.*



Photograph by the author

*1stLt Frank W. Vido and Col Peter M. "Mike" Gish wait for a flight to Silopi at Incirlik's India Loop. Col Gish, a well-known painter, was the oldest Marine on active duty in 1991. He was a naval aviator during World War II and commanded a reserve helicopter squadron before serving as a combat artist in Vietnam, northern Iraq and Somalia.*

concrete hangars known as "India Loop" became the home base for the U.S. Navy's HC-4 and supported Marine helicopter operations as well. Billeting was at a premium because on-base quarters and all of the local hotels were filled, so a tent camp was erected along the main roadway. The primitive facilities led to crowded, sometimes uncomfortable conditions. However, for those who had just arrived from the harsh desert environment of Operation Desert Storm, any place with a swimming pool, a well-stocked post exchange, and fast food eateries seemed almost like heaven. The post exchange was often filled with smiling

service people wearing desert cammies enjoying their first pizza and beer in many months.

Fleet Marine Force Europe (FMFEur) was the conduit between Provide Comfort Marines and the United States. Both joint and combined task forces included Marines in staff and liaison positions. Fleet Marine Force Europe (Designate) in London functioned as the single point of contact for U.S. Marine matters in Europe. Operation Provide Comfort required FMFEur (Designate) to shift its focus from Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf to Turkey and northern Iraq.

Colonel Donald A. Gressly, the chief of staff, sent a liaison team to Incirlik on 11 April. This team, collocated with a team for Navy Forces Europe (NavEur), was designated Navy-Marine Liaison Team 10, Combined Task Force Provide Comfort. Fleet Marine Force Europe (Designate) coordinated material and personnel movements from Europe, conducted hospital liaison support, and assisted special logistics support in Europe. The FMFEur G-1 and G-4 sections provided administrative and logistics support to include fiscal, administrative, transportation and billeting, and postal services. The G-3 section prepared daily situation reports, worked on planning issues, and relayed intelligence (especially threat conditions) to CTF Provide Comfort.<sup>37</sup>



Photograph by the author  
*Humanitarian Service Support Base Silopi (HSSB 1) was the site of the Combined Support Command (CSC). The CSC coordinated logistics efforts for Operation Provide Comfort.*

Navy-Marine Liaison Team 10 worked out of a converted warehouse across the street from the CTF headquarters. On 20 April, 20 additional Marines were transferred to Headquarters, CTF Provide Comfort from FMF Europe (Designate). Colonel Robert M. Hansen was the senior Marine. Major Mugno (MSSG-24) was the MEU liaison officer and acted as executive officer, supervising administrative matters and arranging transportation for incoming and departing personnel. The team also included one air liaison officer, three watch officers, a staff sergeant, and three administrative clerks.

The Joint Operations Center, called the "Jock," was manned by members of all services. The Joint Operations Center at Incirlik included eight Marines: one in the personnel section (C-1), two in the operations section (C-3), one in the plans section (C-5), a protocol officer, a linguist, and two public affairs officers.<sup>38</sup>

Colonel Peter M. "Mike" Gish, a Marine combat artist in Vietnam and an internationally famous watercolorist, covered the activities of Combined Task Force Provide Comfort at Incirlik and Silopi in Turkey, in northern Iraq, and with Phibron 8 afloat.<sup>39</sup> The Marine historical team worked with Senior Master Sergeant Thomas L. Robb, USAF; Staff Sergeant Thomas A. Traynor, USAF; and Sergeant Marie Y. Herrera, USAF, of the Combined Task Force History Office. Lieutenant Colonel Gordon W. Rudd, USA, an instructor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, later joined the History Office.

### *Combined Support Command*

General Shalikashvili formed the Combined Support Command (CSC) to administer the logistics needs of Combined Task Force Provide Comfort. The CSC was based at Silopi and was commanded by Colonel (soon to become Brigadier General) Harold E. "Hal" Burch, USA. In Europe, Burch had been the deputy commander of the 21st Theater Army Area Command (21st TAACOM) at Kaiserslautern, Germany. Although the CSC eventually became the logistics focal point, the 7th Special Operations Support Command (7th SOSOC) initially provided planning and support coordination for the U.S. Army forces involved in Provide Comfort. The expansion of Operation Provide Comfort required more support than the 7th SOSOC could provide, so the 29th Area Support Group assumed this role. The Combined Support Command was primarily an Army organization. It served as the principal gateway for theater logistics support for United States forces in Turkey. Requisitions flowed from the originating unit through its parent task force, either JTF-A or JTF-B, to the CSC. The Combined Task Force logistics section (C-4) coordinated support not available through U.S. sources (commercial cargo and fuel trucks, for example). The CSC directed its requests to the 200th Theater Army Material Management Command in Europe for action. Supplies coming from Europe were usually routed from the General Support Center in Germany. They arrived at Incirlik, Mersin, or Iskenderun. From there, they were shipped to Silopi, Yuksekova, or Sirsenk, then moved to a forward humanitarian or combat service support detachment for distribution.

The CSC was organized into three sections. A helicopter support base provided refueling, minor repair, and loading and packaging. It was manned by a joint air component. There was also a joint ground support component to provide supply, maintenance, engineer, transportation, medical, and personnel services. The third component was Contingency Marine Air-Ground Task Force 1-91. This unit provided terminal air control and helicopter landing support at forward areas.

The Combined Support Command Headquarters was located in an abandoned warehouse that once served Muslims making pilgrimages to the holy city of Mecca or other Muslim shrines. The Contingency MAGTF 1-91 Command Element and the International Red Cross Center were collocated with the CSC Headquarters. A hard-surface helicopter pad was located in front of the CSC Operations Center (CSCOC), several dirt landing zones were across the road;



Photograph by the author

*The author prepared to ride "shotgun" on a supply convoy from HSSB Silopi to 24th MEU (SOC) headquarters at Zakho. Silopi was the home of MSSG 24, HMM-264, and CMAGTF 1-91. Its 2,400 tents housed more than 10,000 personnel from 14 different nations.*

MACG-28 monitored air traffic and MWSS-272 ran the FARP. The U.S. Army's 51st and 66th Maintenance Battalions provided repair services and the 14th Transportation Battalion coordinated overland movement. The primary medical care facility at Silopi was the USAF 39th Air Transportable Hospital, a 50-bed facility capable of emergency surgery and limited post-operative care. The French, Dutch, British, Italians, and Canadians set up military field hospitals. Numerous civilian-run medical facilities were scattered around northern Iraq. Medical evacuation was provided by the U.S. Army's 149th Aviation Company. Military personnel requiring additional treatment were evacuated to Diyarbakir, then were flown to the 39th Tactical Air Control Hospital at Incirlik.<sup>40</sup>

### *HSSB Silopi*

The humanitarian service support base at Silopi was located in a wheatfield adjacent to Turkish Route 24, the main road that ran east from the town of Silopi to the Iraqi border. At the border, the road became Iraqi Route 6 leading to the city of Zakho. Silopi was nestled in the shadows of snow-capped Taurus Mountain peaks on the fertile plain that eventually became the Zakho Corridor. The Silopi site was selected by an advance party on 12 April because it was level, free of obstacles, located near a river, large enough to support helicopter operations, and only eight miles from the Iraqi border.

On 13 April, a convoy of support vehicles and equipment departed Incirlik for Silopi and arrived at mid-day on 15 April. Base development proceeded rapidly. More than 200 airmen from the 564th Civil Engineer Squadron (Ramstein, Germany) and the 36th Civil Engineer Squadron (Bitburg, Germany) began constructing a 450-tent "city" large enough to accommodate 1,800 Allied personnel. Base camp materials were provided by USAF Harvest Eagle comfort kits, were installed by USAF "Prime Beef" teams, and were administered by USAF "Prime Rib" teams.<sup>41</sup> Items like tents, chairs, tables, and cots were included in the Harvest Eagle package. Soon, more than 300 tents lined the main road of HSSB Silopi. The first camp commander was Colonel William P. Tangney, USA, who was also the commanding officer of the 10th Special Forces Group from Fort Devens, Massachusetts.<sup>42</sup>

Within weeks the base held more than 3,000 military and civilian workers. More than 600 tons of supplies were used at Silopi each day. The sprawling base soon extended several miles along both sides of the road. When Silopi became the home of the Combined Support Command, that organization assumed responsibility for base operations and Colonel Burch became camp commander.

Silopi was a focal point for Marine activity. Colonel Kohl established the MSSG-24 headquarters and a Combat Service Support Operations Center (CSSOC) in the center of the main camp, across the road from the Combined Support Command headquarters. The Marine motor pool was placed south of town in a gravel pit, and the supply center was located just southeast of the Combined Support Command supply dumps. Colonel Byrtus placed HMM-264's operations center at the northwest corner of the main camp adjoining the



Photograph by the author

*A unit designator tree quickly sprouted in front of the Silopi mess hall. Identified units include the U.S. 24th MEU (SOC) and CMAGTF 1-91, the British 3d Commando Brigade, the Dutch 1st Amphibious Combat Group, the U.S. 1/10 Special Forces Group, and the French Cougar team.*

wheatfield landing zone and Marine operated FARP that serviced allied helicopters.

The Silopi landing zone was a busy place. In addition to HMM-264's three UH-1Ns, four AH-1Ts, four CH-53Es, and a dozen CH-46Es, virtually every other type of NATO helicopter was also using the airstrip. The U.S. Army was supported by a medium transport squadron flying CH-47 Chinooks, the 149th



Aerial Ambulance Company flying UH-60 Blackhawks, and the 4th (Aviation) Battalion, 3d Infantry Division with UH-60 Blackhawks, UH-1 Hueys, AH-64 Apaches, OH-58 Kiowas, and EH-60 Nighthawks. The British had three squadrons: the Royal Air Force Chinook Squadron flying CH-47s, 846th Naval Air Squadron flying HC.4 Westland Sea King transports and HAS.3 Westland Lynx attack helicopters, and the 3d Commando Brigade Air Squadron flying Aerospatiale SA-341/HCC.4 Gazelle utility helicopters. The French Combat Helicopter Regiment used SA-342 Gazelle light attack and AS-332 Super Puma transport helicopters. The Dutch Composite Squadron (with several female pilots) used Chinooks, Gazelles, and SA-361 Alouette III helicopters. The Italians and Spanish used Hueys and Chinooks. Although the skies of northern Iraq were crowded, no major air incidents or crashes resulted in Marine deaths during Provide Comfort.

As time passed, Silopi's main base not only increased in size but became more comfortable as well. Engineers dug a 400-foot well to enrich the water supply. Showers were set up with 32 water points for the men and 8 for women. Portable covered latrine facilities with running water were set up. The mess hall was centrally located. It handled 6,000 people twice each day for pre-packaged "T" ration hot meals and provided home-made soup, fresh-baked bread, and cold drinks at noon. The chow lines were sprinkled with soldiers and Marines from many nations. British, French, Italian, and Spanish servicemen joined the Americans waiting for chow each day. The obligatory signpost showing unit home bases was placed in front of the mess hall. Its more than 20 arrows pointed to Europe, North America, South America, and the Pacific Rim. The international population was so diverse, Silopi had to be declared a "no saluting area" because almost no one could correctly identify rank insignia from so many different nations.<sup>43</sup>

There was a busy post office (although postage stamps were not required on letters, many people mailed packages home). The Mediterranean edition of the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper was distributed daily by the joint public affairs office. The Army and Air Force operated a joint disbursing office, unofficially called the "First International Bank of Silopi." The U.S. Army 9th Finance Group provided \$60 "health and comfort" pay advances, cashed checks, and disbursed emergency funds.<sup>44</sup>

A post exchange and other morale, welfare, and recreation facilities were opened for the military and civilian relief workers. At first, the exchange was caught short because it brought only enough items to cater to the needs of 1,000 people, and an international crowd estimated at more than 4,000 people began to visit the busy exchange each week. The store had little to offer until supplies were sent from Saudi Arabia and its shelves were stocked with snack food, cameras, film, cassette tapes, tape players, and assorted health and comfort items. There were two recreation tents, one had two television sets and another had a game room and a library. Volleyball, soccer, and touch football games were frequently played.

Another source of diversion was the street market or "souk." Up and down the roadway Turkish vendors--called "Meester, Meesters" because of their calls to passing soldiers--hawked a wide variety of goods including cold sodas, oriental rugs, and Iraqi money with Saddam's picture on it.<sup>45</sup> In all likelihood, however, the major form of recreation was story-telling. Soldiers from around the world swapped tall tales about faraway places and exciting adventures or showed off wounds from previous conflicts. The atmosphere at Silopi was a friendly one where all nationalities, races, creeds, colors, and both sexes were united by the desire to assist the Kurdish refugees, and many veteran campaigners felt Provide Comfort was among the most rewarding experiences of long military careers.

### *CMAGTF 1-91*

Contingency MAGTF 1-91 was formed from elements of the III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) stationed on the Japanese island of Okinawa in the western Pacific. The CMAGTF's command element came from the 3rd Force



Painting by Col Peter M. "Mike" Gish, USMCR  
*The air control tower at Sirsenk was manned by an arriving/departing air control group from Okinawa-based CMAGTF 1-91. The Sirsenk airfield had been badly damaged during Desert Storm, but was repaired by Seabees from Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 133.*

Service Support Group (3d FSSG); the ground combat element was from the 3d Marine Division; the aviation combat element was from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing; the combat service support element was Company B, 3d Landing Support Battalion, 3d FSSG. Company B was reinforced by service support detachments from the 3d FSSG. Detachments came from the 3d Supply Battalion, two dump-site sections and repair personnel out of the 3d Maintenance Battalion, administrative personnel from Headquarters and Service Battalion, and a detachment from the 9th Engineer Support Battalion. The commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Bailey. Major Robert E. "Bob" Milstead, Jr., doubled as executive officer and air officer. The personnel chief was Gunnery Sergeant Michael J. Campbell, the intelligence officer was Captain Charles R. Sontag, the operations officer was Captain Gregory M. Ferketish, and the logistics officer was Captain Bruce G. Montgomery.<sup>46</sup>

Contingency MAGTF 1-91 formed very quickly. The 3d FSSG was alerted on 25 April. Lieutenant Colonel Bailey was notified on 26 April that he would command the unit. He quickly formed a staff and began analyzing the unit's mission. Bailey contacted the Marine liaison at Incirlik to find out details, then briefed Major General Henry C. Stackpole III (Commanding General, III MEF) about possible courses of action.

Combined Task Force Provide Comfort wanted two support companies or their equivalent. Bailey suggested that one reinforced support company could do the job. This concept was approved on 27 April. Contingency MAGTF 1-91 built up from zero strength to 186 Marines in less than 72 hours. At 0140 on 30 April, CMAGTF 1-91 was at the airhead with all its equipment and cargo. However, because of problems with aircraft assignment the unit didn't depart Okinawa until 6 May. That interval was used to complete follow-on training, to do additional maintenance for equipment and vehicles, and to publish Operation Order 1-91.

The CMAGTF departed Kadena Air Base in Military Airlift Command heavy-lift Lockheed C-5A Galaxy transports, but it took more than two and a half days to get to Incirlik. The specified route went from Okinawa to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippine Islands; however, some aircraft were rerouted to Utapao, Thailand, due to bad weather. From Thailand, they flew to the U.S. base at Diego Garcia island in the Indian Ocean. The airfield at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, was the final stop before arriving at Incirlik. This change of plans resulted in a two-day echelon of arrival, 7 to 9 May 1991. The first plane to arrive at Incirlik carried the CMAGTF command element and Company B's advance party.

Lieutenant Colonel Bailey reported to Combined Task Force Provide Comfort Headquarters. The original plan was for CMAGTF 1-91 to operate two forward cargo transition shipment points, one at Silopi and the other at Yuksekova. An Arriving-Departing Air Control Group (A/DACG) was needed at Yuksekova because C-130 transports were using the airstrip. The CMAGTF's specified tasks were to maintain command and control of widely scattered support teams, provide landing support (helicopter support teams and A/DACG), manage

on-site commodity dumps, provide local security, and provide landing zone communications support at six HSSDs.<sup>47</sup>

After arriving in Turkey, Lieutenant Colonel Bailey discovered Silopi was well-developed and Yuksekova had almost completed its mission. The CMAGTF was attached to the CSC on 8 May, then was immediately assigned to support Joint Task Forces Alpha and Bravo. The CMAGTF deployed over a wide area, much of it in rugged terrain, in appearance reminiscent of the Grand Canyon. Forward support teams were assigned to way stations, formally titled Displaced Civilian Movement Centers (DCMCs). Displaced civilian support teams (DCSTs) consisted of one officer and about 20 enlisted Marines. There were six of them, all located in northern Iraq: Kanimasi (Captain Michael K. McClanahan), Baloka (Captain Charles R. Sontag), Kanibalav (First Lieutenant Kevin S. Brooks), Nazdur (First Lieutenant Byron J. Paez), Singee (First Lieutenant James A. Herzberg), and Chimaju (Captain Montgomery). An A/DACG was placed at Sirsenk. The CMAGTF command element operated from Silopi.<sup>48</sup> At Incirlik, the CMAGTF's gear was impounded for five days. Although the entire unit couldn't go to the field, an advance party moved to Silopi on 10 May.

Lieutenant Colonel Bailey's first task was to formulate a new plan. He and his staff wrote Operation Order 2-91 which changed the mission and assigned new tasks to CMAGTF 1-91. Lieutenant Colonel Bailey also initiated an internal reorganization because officers were needed in the field to command displaced civilian movement centers. The parachute riggers from 1st FSSG joined the CMAGTF on 7 May. These additional Marines gave CMAGTF 1-91 a total strength of 205 people.<sup>49</sup>

The DCSTs moved to six different locations in northern Iraq, using U.S. Army CH-47 Chinooks and UH-60 Blackhawks. On the ground they quickly established communications with Silopi. The biggest DCMC team was located at Kanimasi. It mustered 33 people to provide helicopter support teams (HSTs) and a Class I supply dump (fuel, water, dry cargo, bread, and foodstuffs). During the first two weeks of operation, Kanimasi changed from a way station to a resettlement area. The Nazdur DCMC displaced to the city of Begova, again changing from a way station to a resettlement camp. The Chimaju and Singee DCMCs and their associated DCSTs moved south of Sirsenk on 24 and 26 May to support the movement of displaced civilians to Zakho and Dohuk.

One of the highlights of the CMAGTF tour in northern Iraq occurred on 18 May. At about 2100, a six-month old Kurdish girl was diagnosed as having pneumonia in both lungs and a temperature of 103 degrees. The medic reported that without advanced treatment, the child would be dead by morning. The Marines requested a helicopter. Chemical illumination markers were placed around the landing zone and an infrared strobe marked the touchdown spot. Using night vision goggles borrowed from the Special Forces, the Marine helicopter support team directed an Army helicopter safely into the zone. The helicopter pilot had such a smooth approach and such good landing instructions that he congratulated the Special Forces for a job well done. After being told it



*Cpl Darryl F. Fuller of MSSG 24 mans a rig-mounted M-2 .50-caliber heavy machine gun atop a M-934 five-ton truck. This convoy carried bulk foods, building materials, and medical supplies to Refugee Camp 1 at Zakho.*

was the Marines who brought him down, he shouted a loud "ARRUUGGAHH!" "into the speaker, then gave the Marines an "outstanding" rating. This almost certainly was the first time night vision goggles and an infrared strobe light were used for Marine air control.<sup>50</sup>

The harsh landscape and long distances created communications problems. The CMAGTF brought enough satellite communications (SatCom) equipment to accomplish its original mission, but found it impossible to communicate from deep valleys more than 60 miles from the receiving station at Silopi. The four terminals were quickly overwhelmed. This problem was overcome by "workarounds" using Air Force and Army communications systems. Three of the four SatCom units eventually needed repairs. Every time repairs were needed, Army and Air Force technicians had the equipment operating within a matter of hours. The addition of three SatCom units and four high-gain antennas alleviated some of the communications problems. Despite technical problems and the wide dispersal of its units, CMAGTF 1-91 was a key to the efficient movement and supply of the Kurdish return.

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\* This guttural yell of unknown origin was a distinctive Marine battle cry.