

Operation Unified Assistance: Naval Aviation's Swift Response to the Tsunami Disaster



PH3 Tyler J. Clements

On 26 December 2004 one of the largest earthquakes in recorded history occurred under the Indian Ocean near the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The massive tsunami that resulted killed over 150,000 people and destroyed property from Africa to Thailand, leaving millions of people homeless. The Navy and many Naval Aviation assets immediately sprang into action, playing a key role in what would become Operation Unified Assistance.

The *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) carrier strike group, including *Shoup* (DDG 86), *Shiloh* (CG 67), *Benford* (DDG 65), and *Rainer* (T-AOE 7), arrived on 1 January off the coast of Sumatra. Sailors began moving boxes of fresh water, protein drinks, and bags of rice to helicopters to fly into areas where people were most in need. Helicopters from HS-2 and HSL-47 aboard *Lincoln* as well as those embarked aboard the group's other ships immediately began relief flights.

The *Bonhomme Richard* (LHD 6) expeditionary strike group including *Rushmore* (LSD 47), *Duluth* (LPD 6), *Milius* (DDG 69), *Bunker Hill* (CG 52), *Thach* (FFG 43), and the Coast Guard cutter *Munro* (WHEC 724) arrived a few days later to help with the humanitarian relief. In addition to contributing pallets of food, medicine, and bottled water, *Bonhomme Richard* used its desalinization

plants to produce more than 30,000 gallons of fresh water each day, which sailors and Marines from the *Bonhomme Richard's* 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) put into 1,000 five-gallon containers to distribute to tsunami victims. MH-60S helicopters transported supplies directly from *Bonhomme Richard* to isolated areas. Helicopters from the 15th MEU's air combat element and Navy Helicopter Combat Support Squadron (HC) 11 Det 4 also helped carry supplies ashore.

As the days progressed, so did the Navy's response. *Lincoln* later departed the region, and the *Essex* (LHD 2) expeditionary strike group relieved *Bonhomme Richard* on 18 January. With the air combat element of *Essex's* 31st MEU engaged in Iraq, the ship needed to gather other helo detachments to support the mission. Four Bahrain-based MH-53E Sea Dragons, six CH-46E Sea Knights from Okinawa, Japan, and two MH-60S helicopters from *Niagara Falls* (T-AFS 3) augmented *Essex's* embarked HC-5 detachment to continue humanitarian relief operations.

The images on the following pages illustrate how, in the midst of a great tragedy, Naval Aviation provided the immediate response in force that was so desperately needed.

Compiled by JO3 Brandy Lewis



Facing page, top, the tsunami leveled the coastline of Sumatra. In the aftermath, medical teams from *Abraham Lincoln*, Carrier Air Wing 2 and the International Organization for Migration set up a triage site at Sultan Iskandar Muda Air Force Base, Sumatra. Left, Lt. Mark Banks, Medical Service Corps, cares for a patient flown in by Navy helicopter to the triage site. Above, two aircrewmembers from HS-2 carry an injured woman to a helicopter at Banda Aceh, Sumatra, for transport to a medical facility. Below, an Indonesian mother and child look back at an SH-60B after arriving in Banda Aceh for medical attention.





PH3 Gabriel Piper

PH3 Benjamin D. Glass



Below left, *Lincoln* steams off the coast of Sumatra on 2 January. The carrier strike group arrived in the region just days after the deadly tsunami struck. Below, Commander Carrier Strike Group 9 RAdm. Doug Crowder speaks with members of the Australian Royal Army in Sumatra on 3 January. Left, two HS-2 aircrewmembers prepare a stretcher in a village near Banda Aceh, Sumatra, on 3 January. Above, local children cheer Navy helicopters and personnel who are delivering water and other relief supplies in Sumatra.



AWC Jeffrey Gareis



PH2 Seth C. Peterson



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Above, on the carrier's first day on scene, *Lincoln* sailors and Indonesian and Australian personnel work together to load a Seahawk with supplies to be distributed throughout the island. Below, an HS-2 SH-60F prepares to leave the village of Lamno, Sumatra, after transporting Indonesian military members to assist with humanitarian efforts on 2 January. Left, sailors from *Lincoln*'s reactor department and repair division fill jugs with purified water for transportation to remote regions of Sumatra on 4 January.



AWC Jeffrey Gareis



PH1 Bart A. Bauer



PH1 Renee Martinez



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Top, an air cushioned landing craft and CH-60 Sea Knight helicopters from *Bonhomme Richard* and Expeditionary Strike Group 5 deliver supplies to the city of Meulaboh, Sumatra, on 10 January. The following day, supplies are offloaded from an LCAC, above, and all hands pitch in, including 15th MEU CO Col. Tom Greenwood, left.





PH3 Travis M. Burns

Above, sailors board an HM-15 MH-53E Sea Dragon aboard Essex on 19 January to be transferred ashore to support Operation Unified Assistance. Below, an SH-60B Seahawk of HSL-47 hovers over a growing group of Indonesian citizens and drops food, water, and relief supplies in a Sumatran village.

PH3 Jacob J. Kirk



PHAN Christian Hansen

Expeditionary Strike Group 5 CO RAdm. Christopher Ames hands out candy to Indonesian children at a medical facility in Meulaboh, Sumatra, on 13 January.

