

P-3s Support Tsunami Relief

By Lt. Alexander Abess and Lt. Brian Nichols

The countries affected by the disastrous 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami are seemingly a world away from the cold Maine winter. However, within hours of the 26 December tragedy, a squadron based at NAS Brunswick, Maine, and forward deployed in the western Pacific, began to help in what would become an immense multinational effort. Patrol Squadron (VP) 8, with assistance from VP-4 (based at MCAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii), repositioned nine P-3C Orion aircraft from air bases in Japan and Bahrain to Utapao, Thailand, and Diego Garcia, B.I.O.T. The VP-8 Fighting Tigers and VP-4 Skinny Dragons immediately began to fly humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) missions. By 30 December four 11-member VP-8 aircrews, 28 maintenance personnel, and the VP-8 CO had flown into Utapao, while three VP-8 and two VP-4 aircrews, 26 maintenance personnel, and the XO of both squadrons



PH3 Shannon R. Smith

Above, AW1 Gomez, front, and AW1 King man sensor stations in a P-3C Orion during a mission in Thailand. Below, the P-3s captured images that allowed support personnel to see the extent of the damage caused by the tsunami.

made the 14-hour trip to Diego Garcia. In three days, the squadrons had essentially completed a deployment within a deployment, and this was just the beginning.

Aircrews flew their first missions out of Utapao on 28 December and from Diego Garcia on 30 December. The 8- to 10-hour missions involved looking for survivors and surveying damaged areas. The P-3C Orion is particularly well suited for these HA/DR missions because of special optical equipment as well as its ability to fly over long distances. A camera turret in the aircraft enables large areas to be viewed in detail under a variety of conditions. These images can then be relayed as still photos or live video to personnel assisting in the relief efforts on the ground.

The U.S. Department of Defense embarked on Operation Unified Assistance to provide critical



Right, members of VP-8 on the tarmac in Thailand are representative of the nine P-3 aircrews of VP-8 and VP-4 that repositioned to the Indian Ocean to support tsunami recovery efforts.



command and control structure to facilitate aid efforts, and more than 18,000 U.S.

military personnel were mobilized. In order to effectively combine the international and joint U.S. efforts, Combined Support Force (CSF-536) was established to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief support to the governments of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, and other affected nations. Members of CSF-536 included commands from all branches of the U.S. military as well as Australian, Japanese, Thai, British, French, and German military personnel. Also included in the CSF were the United Nations emergency services, United States Agency for International Development, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, Disaster Assistance Response Teams, World Health Organization, and multiple nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Through cooperative efforts of VP-4 and VP-8 aircrews, critical information was delivered to the CSF. By providing specific information regarding locations of survivors and damaged communities, as well as possible landing zones for helicopters and cargo planes, Fighting Tiger and Skinny Dragon aircrews played an instrumental role in effectively directing the relief effort. Within days of the tragedy, helicopters loaded with supplies from the *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) carrier strike group and the *Bonhomme Richard* (LHD 6) expeditionary strike group were able to provide relief to those in need. Soon, cargo planes began delivering even more supplies.

From the city of Galle in southern Sri Lanka to Point Pedro at the northern tip, Fighting Tiger and Skinny Dragon aircrews relayed information on the damage wrought by the tsunami along the country's eastern coast. Dozens of capsized, grounded, and sunken ships ranging in size from small fishing boats to large commercial freighters were strewn along the shore. Destroyed roads and bridges, demolished homes and villages, and flooded fields were discovered over 2 miles inland from the coast.

The destruction observed in Thailand and Sumatra was even more widespread. On the Indonesian island of

Sumatra, close to the epicenter of the earthquake, aircrews observed whole villages wiped away. Apparently, the quake had leveled the villages, and the tsunami washed them into the ocean. Boats, vehicles, and other debris were strewn about like toys. In Thailand, resorts were transformed into tragic morgues for vacationing tourists and local residents. These images were immediately sent to support centers, which enabled analysts to direct rapid relief efforts.

Fighting Tiger and Skinny Dragon aircrews provided essentially all of the early information regarding areas of need for the multinational humanitarian mission. The information was so valuable that multiple high-ranking officials flew with VP-8 aircrews on some of their missions.

In one week, aircrews flying out of Diego Garcia took pictures of every atoll in the Maldives and over 400nm of coastline in Sri Lanka. That same week, aircrews flying out of Utapao observed all of the affected regions of Indonesia and Thailand. On New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, when most Americans were enjoying the holiday season and watching football, VP-4 and VP-8 aircrews flew eight missions totaling 66 flight hours out of Diego Garcia and Utapao. Maintenance teams forward deployed with the aircraft performed brilliantly, working around the clock in order to keep the planes flying.

The time-critical information that Fighting Tiger and Skinny Dragon aircrews provided allowed other military units, governmental aid agencies, and NGOs to provide much needed food, medical supplies, and shelter to those in dire need. The missions were long and the operational tempo arduous, but the squadron members' knowledge that they were participating in a noble cause made it worthwhile. ✈️

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