

Joint Efforts Prevent Humanitarian Disaster in Liberia

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In July 2003, following a cease-fire in Liberia's devastating 23-year civil war, the U. S. Army Southern European Task Force (SETAF) was directed to establish a joint task force (JTF) and provide support to military forces of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as it led peace support operations in Monrovia, Liberia.

As an enabling force, SETAF and JTF Liberia's objective was to help the ECOWAS mission in Liberia (ECOMIL) prevent a humanitarian disaster and create a secure environment for humanitarian

organizations to resume operations in Liberia.

Activated on July 25, 2003, the SETAF staff formed the core of the JTF headquarters and received additional staff from the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps. At its height, JTF Liberia consisted of over 5,000 service members from the SETAF headquarters, the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, the three-ship Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group, 3rd Air Force's 398th Air Expeditionary Group, U. S. Army Europe's 21st Theater Support Command, and Army Special Forces.

In July, the two main Liberian rebel groups launched an all-out offensive to remove Charles Taylor as the president of Liberia. The fighting between rebel and government forces was often marked by roving bands of armed, drugged-up young men shooting indiscriminately and robbing defenseless civilians. Both sides employed thousands of child soldiers. Close quarters urban combat killed over a thousand civilians in the July fighting alone.

With the collapse of the security situation, humanitarian relief organizations were forced to abandon their operations. Thousands of frightened civilians streamed towards Monrovia in search of food and safety. With the cease-fire tenuous at best, the rapid deployment of properly equipped ECOMIL forces was essential to maintaining the cease-fire and paving the way for a follow-on U. N. peacekeeping force on October 1.

Though it led a force that was predominantly composed of Marine and Navy forces, SETAF's experience as a JTF in past humanitarian operations, its practiced JTF procedures and advanced communications made it well suited to lead U. S. military operations in Liberia.

JTF Liberia began deploying forces to Africa in late July. Realizing early that face-to-face coordination with the U. S. State Department and ECOMIL would be key to the JTF's situational awareness, Maj. Gen. Thomas Turner, the SETAF and JTF Liberia commander, directed the creation of a forward coordination element (FCE) to work with U.S. Ambassador to Liberia John Blaney and his country team at the embassy. Created out of the SETAF organic staff, the FCE would eventually be augmented with Marine and other personnel focused in the areas of operations, intelligence, logistics and communications. The FCE proved to be a critical link in coordinating the JTF's operations with the ambassador.

Also in late July, SETAF created and deployed an eight-member liaison team to Accra, Ghana, to interface with the ECOWAS political and military leadership and to conduct a handover from Special Operations Command Europe, who at that time had responsibility for a potential non-combatant evacuation operation in Liberia. This liaison team provided the JTF commander with crucial situational awareness concerning ECOMIL's plan for deployment and mission execution. As part of the JTF liaison team in Accra, the SETAF G-4 deployed a logistics planner who led a planning syndicate of ECOWAS staff officers, U.N. representatives and officials from Pacific Architects and Engineering (PA&E), a civilian firm contracted by the U.S. Department of State to provide logistical support to the ECOWAS forces.

On August 4, the JTF deployed a 45-member forward headquarters to the USS *Iwo Jima* positioned off the coast of Liberia. The forward headquarters, about 75 percent of which was composed of SETAF personnel, including Maj. Gen. Turner, was small by design and maximized use of SETAF's reachback capability. This forward headquarters performed command and control functions for JTF forces operating in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Senegal. It also interfaced with officials from the U. S. Embassy, U. S. Department of State, United Nations and private humanitarian organizations operating in Liberia.

SETAF's main headquarters facility, located near Vicenza, Italy, supported the forward headquarters with critical planning and logistical functions. Known as JTF main, this rear headquarters of about 300 SETAF and staff members from the other services, featured state-of-the-art electronic connectivity, advanced secure communications and interactive planning tools. This reachback capability enabled the JTF to minimize the forward footprint without compromising mission effectiveness. It also enabled worldwide coordination with various organizations. The JTF's advanced video-conferencing capability enabled the JTF forward staff to conduct simultaneous planning and live interface with the JTF main headquarters. Daily conference calls and battle update briefs also enabled the JTF forward and JTF main to communicate simultaneously, in real time, with JTF forces in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Senegal and subsequently, Nigeria.

JTF forces first went ashore on August 14. About 150 marines from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed to Roberts International Airport as a quick reaction force. Another 80 marines deployed to the free port of Monrovia to conduct engineering work needed to open the port to humanitarian relief. U.S. Marine Corps air provided close air support to the ECOWAS forces for their seizure of the port and Bushrod Island.

To facilitate communication between ECOMIL forces on the ground in Monrovia and the JTF forward headquarters aboard the USS *Iwo Jima*, the JTF established Marine liaison teams at the headquarters of the ECOMIL force commander, Nigerian Brig. Gen. Festus Okonkwo, and the initial two ECOMIL peacekeeping battalions.

Also commencing August 14 and lasting over the next few days, Navy SEALs from the Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group conducted a hydrographic survey of the port and surrounding waterways to identify and mark potential obstacles that could hinder the delivery of humanitarian relief supplies. The SETAF G-5 civil-military officer coordinated with U.N. officials and other humanitarian organizations to resume the delivery of relief supplies. The JTF ferried officials from the World Food Program to the port docks and showed them that the free port of Monrovia was indeed safe and secure for the delivery of humanitarian relief.

From August 14 through the end of September, JTF Liberia fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft conducted armed presence patrols over the skies of Monrovia and outlying areas to assure the Liberian people that the war was over and to reiterate to the former warring factions their responsibilities under the cease-fire.

The JTF provided Brig. Gen. Okonkwo with aerial imagery from these overflights that greatly

enhanced his understanding of the tactical situation and ability to confirm or deny media reports of sporadic fighting and refugee movements.

Two weeks after JTF forces deployed, the Liberian civil war formally ended with the comprehensive peace agreement signed in Accra on August 18. For the Liberian people, there were clearly other signs of progress: humanitarian relief was now flowing into the port, the security situation in Monrovia had improved greatly, the markets were open and a sense of normalcy had returned to the city.

Still, as the humanitarian crisis abated, ECOMIL's logistical situation grew tenuous. Deployment delays, equipment shortages and shortfalls in basic quality of life were combining to threaten ECOMIL's ability to create a secure environment for humanitarian organizations to operate outside of Monrovia. To improve coordination and situational awareness, the JTF commander directed a SETAF officer to serve as a liaison directly to the U.S. State Department in Washington, D.C. Working directly with State and PA&E officials, this logistical advisor helped develop a viable support plan to sustain the ECOMIL force through the arrival of the U.N. follow-on force.

In addition to facilitating logistical support, the JTF played a central role in information operations. Contending with reams of information, periodic outbreaks of fighting in the countryside, rumors and misinformation, the JTF had to aggressively conduct information operations or risk the mission unraveling. The information operations working group, located at the JTF main headquarters, developed plans and information products for the JTF forward staff to coordinate through the country team. These products included public service announcements, radio broadcasts, leaflets and newspaper advertisements. These products were critical to gaining public support for ECOMIL as well as shaping the environment for the arrival of U.N. forces.

The habitual relationship SETAF built with the other service components within the U. S. European Command (EUCOM) was another key to the JTF's success in Liberia. The only service component headquarters certified within EUCOM as a JTF, SETAF routinely conducts JTF training exercises with its sister components, enabling it to establish solid working relationships with the 3rd and 16th Air Forces, U. S. Naval Forces, Europe, Marine Forces, Europe and Special Operations Command, Europe.

During SETAF and JTF Liberia's two-month deployment to Liberia, a peace agreement was implemented; forces of the warring factions were separated; air and seaports were reopened; and the United Nations and private humanitarian organizations resumed delivery of badly needed relief. With a humanitarian catastrophe averted and the arrival of United Nations peace-keeping forces on October 1, the mission of JTF Liberia was accomplished. An unqualified success, this mission serves as a highly successful model for future support and stability operations.

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