

Relief.4

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The officers aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln were just finishing dinner on January 7 when Captain Kendall Card came on the loudspeaker to announce that the rumors were true: the ship's "Tiger cruise" – the traditional last five days of a long deployment, during which family members are invited aboard – was officially cancelled so the ship could remain off the coast of Sumatra to fly supplies to victims of the tsunami. The young officers, some in blue coveralls, some in green flight suits, stopped talking. "Many of you are wondering, have we been extended," Card said in a folksy Texas drawl. "No." The wardroom held its collective breath. "But it's a distinct possibility," Card went on, to much table slapping and groaning. "Many of you have gone ashore to help the people who have

suffered this terrible tragedy,” Card said. “I’d like you to stay focused on this mission with me. Keep smiling.”<sup>1</sup>

About the only ones smiling on the Lincoln were the helicopter pilots, who usually play second banana to the F-18 jet jockeys. Now, for the first time in their careers, the helicopter pilots were what this gigantic ship was all about, while the jet pilots were reduced to such demeaning tasks as escorting reporters around the ship. At five o’clock the morning after Captain Card’s announcement, four helicopter pilots were in the wardroom happily eating Frosted Flakes, peanut butter sandwiches, and, coincidentally, Starbucks Sumatra coffee before heading up to the flight deck. None minded missing the Tiger cruise. “This is the culmination of my career, absolutely,” said Lt. David Moffat, who looks about fifteen years old. “If I serve another twenty years, this is the one I’m going to look back on.”<sup>2</sup> “It’s everything we trained for,” said Lt. Eric Danielsen. “Land navigation, landing at unprepared sites, touch-and-go. Usually we’re just flying over water, and waiting to do search and rescue for the jet pilots.”<sup>3</sup> The first half of every day, they said, they were flying missions based on intelligence of what was needed where. In the afternoons they freelanced, roaming

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<sup>1</sup> This and all details about the Abraham Lincoln can be verified with Navy Lt. John Daniels, the ship’s PAO, pao@lincoln.navy.mil

<sup>2</sup> Lt. David Moffat, david.moffat@navy.mil

<sup>3</sup> Lt. Eric Danielsen, eric.danielsen@navy.mil

at will and looking for pockets of people needing help. "You should see their faces when we touch down," said Moffat. "I actually feel sorry for them," he continued, speaking of the jet pilots. "They want to help, but they can't."<sup>4</sup>

An F-18 pilot was stuck in the air traffic office, a cramped steel cubicle off the flight deck, struggling to organize flight manifests under the barking direction of a chief petty officer several grades his junior. Thirty-two year old Lt. Shane Lansford had none of the clamp-jawed swagger of fighter pilots in the movies; he was modest and relaxed, and said he was happy to be helping any way he could. Fighter pilots take nicknames that are used as their radio call signals. Lansford said people sometimes choose their own, and sometimes their nicknames are chosen for them. Anybody who chooses a hot-dog name for himself like "Maverick" or "Iceman," like in the movie "Top Gun," he said, would be considered very uncool. A couple of years ago, Lansford muffed a mid-air refueling and snapped off the tip of the tanker probe. His call sign since then has been "The Mohel." It says so beneath the name on his coveralls.<sup>5</sup> A television in the ATO alternated between silent black and white video of the flight deck, apparently captured by cameras mounted high on the ship, and the Armed Forces Network,

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<sup>4</sup> Lt. David Moffat, david.moffat@navy.mil

<sup>5</sup> Navy Lt. Shane Lansford, [Shane.lansford@navy.mil](mailto:Shane.lansford@navy.mil)

which happened to be airing a public service announcement reminding servicepeople that they may qualify for the earned-income tax credit, a not-so-subtle reminder to the troops that they're underpaid. Then AFN returned to Fox News, which had this chiron on the screen: The Stingy Americans: You Won't Believe What the Liberals Are Calling America."

Lansford draped a complicated life vest around my neck, shouted some terrifying instructions about not inflating it before leaving the helicopter ("The helicopter is top heavy and will turn over; inflate this too soon and you'll get pinned to the floor") and clamped a sweaty crash helmet on my head. The flight deck was a hellish maelstrom – helicopters rising or idling noisily, forklifts racing about, men pulling pallets of rice and communicating in the searing heat with complicated arm gestures. The F-18s were pushed aside, sitting ignored like girls too pretty to be asked to dance. A sailor in white shoved me up into a CH-60, the Navy's version of the Blackhawk, full of 10-gallon water jugs. I was barely seated beside the open door when the helicopter leapt off the deck and banked toward shore. The crash helmet seemed to be getting tighter; it felt like my head was being slowly devoured by a giant mollusk.

We flew fifty feet above the water at about 150 miles an hour, watching the water color change from sapphire to jade to egg cream to

egg cream churned up with bits of wood, cloth, root balls, overturned boats, and paper. It was two weeks since the tsunami and any bodies had either been fished out, sunk, or carried to sea. Then we skimmed over the coastal mud flats, which extended inland about half a mile. But they weren't mud flats. Faint squares showed through the shiny slime – the fleeting footprints of houses. As the angle changed the ghosts of streets faded in and out of view. This had been a town. Here and there the remains of a concrete building still stood, shattered into pieces the size of dinner plates and strewn in a pattern inland. Regiments of oil palms lay identically on their sides. All this destruction had happened in ten minutes. At a quarter to nine on the morning of the twenty-sixth, life was normal. By five after, the world had ended.

The helicopter banked suddenly, leveled, and plunged. On a piece of shattered highway stood a small group of people waving their arms. We landed, and crew chief Xipe Brooks began handing out water jugs as fast as he could as the engine raced overhead. The people, thin and brown as cinders and grimacing against the noise and rotor wash, pressed their hands together in a prayerful gesture and patted their hearts in thanks. After ninety seconds on the ground we shot skyward again. Brooks, sitting with his legs dangling out the open

door, smiled sadly behind his fly-eye goggles and gave a thumbs up.<sup>6</sup> Ten minutes later we set down at the military airport at Banda Aceh, the staging area for the relief effort. The American helicopters were using the old soccer field as a landing zone; it was ringed with tent hospitals from Spain and France that danced crazily in the rotor wash. It had rained hard a few minutes earlier, which only made the heat heavier and the earth oozy. A few concrete buildings and a small mosque separated the soccer field from the apron and runways, which were strewn with roaring C-130 and Tupolev cargo planes representing the air forces of Russia, Norway, Malaysia, Thailand, Australia, Singapore, Japan, France, Indonesia, and the United States, plus several unmarked charter planes. Europeans ran in every direction with clipboards or suitcases or television cameras, screaming above the engine roar and slick with gelatinous sweat, while refugees waiting for planes to anywhere huddled against the buildings with their hands over their ears. Boxes and crates rose in small buttes alongside the apron: rice from Thailand, canned fowl medamas from Saudi Arabia, boxed rations from France, bottled water from Norway, portable

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<sup>6</sup> I didn't get either Brooks's rank or email address; it was far too loud in the helicopter for discussion, and I was holding on with both hands because the damned door was open, so couldn't pass him my notebook. But one could verify his existence and check his rank with Navy Lt. John Daniels, the ship's PAO, pao@lincoln.navy.mil

generators from Japan, rice and more rice. From here, the American helicopters carried it into the hinterland.<sup>7</sup>

[line break]

The U.S. military has a long and bitter history of being constrained by the countries that host its overseas bases. Thailand in 1975 didn't allow American air force planes based on its soil to attack Cambodia in response to the seizing of the American freighter Mayaguez. In 1979, Costa Rica ejected an American Air Force unit that was preparing to evacuate Americans from Nicaragua. And in 1986, Spain and France refused to let American bombers based in Britain fly over their territory on their way to bomb Libya.<sup>8</sup> When the government of Turkey refused in early 2003 to allow American forces based on Turkish soil to participate in the war against Iraq, Pentagon planners got serious about making American power truly unilateral and finally freeing the United States from having to worry about the sensitivities of allies. The technology already existed to resupply warships on the high seas. Reorganizing the Navy to do so as a matter of routine could mean never having to use foreign bases at all.<sup>9</sup> As naval officers like to put it, "sea-basing" means the United States can project its power

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<sup>7</sup> these are my observations.

<sup>8</sup> File "base access constraints"

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this concept, which comes under Sea Power 21, see <http://www.usni.org/Proceedings/Articles02/proCNO10.htm#ourvision>

anywhere in the world “without a permission slip.”<sup>10</sup> The Navy in the past two years also began organizing what it calls Expeditionary Strike Groups – small fleets built around amphibious assault ships stuffed with Marines and helicopters. The Navy plans to have twelve such groups patrol international waters,<sup>11</sup> “like a cop on the beat,” as Marines like to put it,<sup>12</sup> ready on a few days notice not only to put Marines ashore anywhere in the world but support them for as long as they need to be there. Enabling the United States to be a cop on the beat without a permission slip is the essence of “Sea Power 21,” the Navy’s broad plan to respond to the post-9/11 era of small wars and uncertain alliances.<sup>13</sup> It is, in short, a military policy ready for the day America neither has nor needs allies.

Rear Admiral Christopher Ames commands Expeditionary Strike Group Five, seven Navy and Coast Guard ships plus a submarine,

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<sup>10</sup> Two naval officers who used that term with me are Capt. Stephen Green, executive officer of the USS Bonhomme-Richard, and Admiral Christopher Ames, commander of Expeditionary Strike Group Five. Both can be reached through the public affairs officer for ESG5, Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil.

<sup>11</sup> Files “Expeditionary Strike Groups in general,” “Expeditionary Strike Group concept,” and “ESGs in general”

<sup>12</sup> again, this is something you hear a lot. You can ask Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa at delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of this concept, which comes under Sea Power 21, see <http://www.usni.org/Proceedings/Articles02/proCNO10.htm#ourvision>

carrying among them some twenty-two hundred Marines.<sup>14</sup> He's no crusty old salt; at fifty, he has an eager, open manner more executive than warrior, and has a masters degree in public administration from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.<sup>15</sup> He learned about the Asian tsunami the way most of us did, from television. He and his Strike Group had recently left their home port of San Diego for a nine-month deployment, a departure marred only by the refusal of one sailor, Fire Controlman 3rd Class Pablo Paredes, to board because he opposed the Iraq War.<sup>16</sup> The Group was a couple of days from Guam, where it was scheduled to enjoy a few days of shore leave before heading for the Persian Gulf. The Group's Marines were the closest to the disaster scene, so in anticipation of an order Ames ordered his officers to begin planning to provide help to the tsunami victims.

The formal order came by classified email on December 28 to stop at Guam for supplies and then "proceed at best speed" to Banda Aceh, Indonesia, the city closest to the earthquake's epicenter. "Proceed at best speed" aren't words you often hear; we're very fuel conscious," Ames told me in his windowless beige stateroom aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme-Richard, to which I'd flown by helicopter from Banda Aceh. "An order like that is not given

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<sup>14</sup> Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

<sup>15</sup> File "Ames bio."

<sup>16</sup> File "sailor refuses to deploy"

without considerable forethought." As the Group pulled into Guam, Ames could see trucks loaded with humanitarian supplies lined up on the docks "as far as you could see." Shore leave was cancelled. Ames sent a party to the Ace Hardware near the port to buy just about everything in the store – shovels, lumber, hammers, nails – and within seven hours was underway again. At the same time, orders rippled through the Navy to begin buying supplies and loading them aboard support ships, to meet Ames's group for resupply at sea. The day before he and I spoke, the boxy USNS Concord, steaming from Singapore, had pulled alongside the Bonhomme-Richard where it was stationed alongside the Sumatra coast about a hundred miles south of the Abraham Lincoln, and in several hours of feverish and noisy activity moved tons of rice, water, and other supplies by repeated helicopter trips into the Bonhomme-Richard's hold – the kind of resupply, independent of a host nation's good graces, envisioned by Sea Power 21. "The unsung heroes are the logisticians," Ames said. "Within two weeks they they put out bids to vendors, got the bids, cut the checks, told them where to deliver, collected the goods, flew them to Singapore, loaded them onto ships, figured out where we'd be, and met us out here in the middle of the ocean."<sup>17</sup> He paused while the

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<sup>17</sup> Admiral Christopher Ames, reachable through Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

ship's chaplain came on the intercom with the evening prayer: First Samuel 30:24, which the chaplain artfully interpreted as, "For as his share is that goes down to the battle, so shall his share be that stays with the supplies: they shall share alike."<sup>18</sup>

Expeditionary Strike Group Five was in many ways the perfect response to a tsunami. Even its biggest ship, the Bonhomme Richard – a kind of mini-aircraft carrier loaded with helicopters – draws only twenty-six feet of water so can get close to shore. The ships are able to desalinate unlimited quantities of water. Twenty-three helicopters and five huge air-cushion landing craft were available for moving supplies to shore, and forty high-riding seven-ton trucks waited to master Sumatra's ruined coastal roads. The ships' holds contained backhoes, bulldozers, generators, and portable floodlights. Among the Marines are combat engineers who could rebuild bridges and restore electricity, medical corpsmen to treat the sick and injured, and plenty of healthy young muscle.<sup>19</sup> No other agency responding to the disaster had anywhere near the Marines' capabilities. As the group steamed south from Guam on January 3, one of its ships peeled off for Sri Lanka, but first it sent seventy of its Marines to the Bonhomme-

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<sup>18</sup> file "Samuel 30:24

<sup>19</sup> Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa at delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil

Richard for the expected big operation in Sumatra.<sup>20</sup> Ames told an Associated Press reporter that he looked forward to having “boots on the ground” to build shelters, clear roads, and operate water-purification equipment.<sup>21</sup>

It didn't work out that way. Before the American ships even reached the Sumatran coast they were receiving word that the Indonesians wanted few, if any, Marine boots on the ground. No reasons were transmitted to the Marines at sea, but they could imagine. Indonesia is the most populous Moslem country in the world, and it wouldn't do, in light of the Iraq War, to have swarms of Marines charging ashore. The U.S. and Indonesia have been unfriendly since the early nineties, when the U.S. began curbing its prodigious arms sales to Indonesia in protest of human rights abuses in East Timor.<sup>22</sup> And the Indonesians, having shaken off three hundred and sixty three years of Dutch colonization in 1949, did not want it to appear that only foreign powers could respond to the tsunami.<sup>23</sup> Expeditionary Strike

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<sup>20</sup> this was told to me by Marine Sgt. Arthur Anthony, one of the seventy. ([anthonya@duluth.usmc.mil](mailto:anthonya@duluth.usmc.mil)) but could also be confirmed with Capt. Jay Delarosa, the Marine PAO, at [delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil](mailto:delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil)

<sup>21</sup> file “Boots on the Ground”

<sup>22</sup> file “arms sales.doc”

<sup>23</sup> these are the explanations given by the American diplomatic representative in Medan, Paul Berg, 011-62-61-415-2200 or [paulberg2002@yahoo.com](mailto:paulberg2002@yahoo.com)

Group Five arrived off the coast of Sumatra on January 4<sup>24</sup>, and there it sat, bursting with Marines itching to get on shore.

Inactivity is harder on Marines than combat. They're like border collies – if you have something for them to do they're terrific, but if you don't, they end up chewing your slippers. The Marines on the Bonhomme-Richard milled around the ship's narrow steel halls, hung out in the enlisted mess with the big-screen TV, cleaned and re-cleaned their weapons, and got on each other's nerves. "It's frustrating; we're good to go," said Sergeant Arthur Anthony<sup>25</sup> as the television behind him blared Fox News with this chiron on the screen: The Cost of Freedom: Why Social Security Benefits Must Be Cut! Sea duty is uncomfortable. Unlike officers, who eat off china, the enlisted eat off sectioned beige plastic trays. Their food looks worse – garlic bread made of hot dog rolls, thick squares of pizza beribboned with orange cheese -- though their salad bar for some reason is much more extensive than the officers.' The enlisted mess is very large and low-ceilinged, with the chairs attached to the tables, and thick with a heavy rank odor like steam table water left too long. It is as chaotic as a freshman dorm cafeteria, with lots of yelling and grab-ass. Surveying the room, Lance Corporal Jordan Coleman said, alarmingly, that he

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<sup>24</sup> Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa, delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil

<sup>25</sup> Sgt. Arthur Anthony [anthonya@duluth.usmc.mil](mailto:anthonya@duluth.usmc.mil)

wished he had a jagerbomb. Turns out he didn't want to attack the Indonesians or kill his fellow Marines. He just wanted his favorite cocktail: the sweet herbal liqueur Jagermeister mixed with Red Bull energy drink.<sup>26</sup> An aircraft carrier is often compared to a floating city, but with its stale air, pasty-faced men in coveralls threading around poorly lit corridors, and the incessant clanging of heavy steel doors, it feels more like a floating prison. Among the many hardships of shipboard life is the lack of anyplace to find a moment's peace. Nobody is allowed on the flight deck without good reason, so the only glimpse of the outdoors most sailors and Marines get is from the vast hangar bay one deck down, when the huge elevator hatches, through which aircraft are pushed onto moving platforms, are left open to the sea. Many sailors on the Bonhomme-Richard see as little of the sun as they would if they were serving on a submarine. Off-duty officers can sit in the wardroom which, while not luxurious, is at least quiet. The only place for enlisted sailors and Marines to take refuge from the noise and commotion is their bunks, or "racks," which are slots in a stack of beds ten feet high, with the bunk above so close to the one above that sitting up to read is impossible. To say that enlisted Marines' comfort is the least of the Corps's concerns would be to wildly overstate the

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<sup>26</sup> Lance Corporal Jordan Coleman, [jordan.coleman@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil](mailto:jordan.coleman@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil)

priority it is given. It's a tribute to the allure of the services that so many sailors and Marines reenlist. And it explains why they're in such magnificent physical condition; they burn up their bottled energy by working out endlessly in the ship's stuffy but well-equipped gym. As I was passing through one evening three Marines with superhero physiques were watching Armed Forces Network News while running on treadmills. The lawyer for Army Corporal Charles Granier, who is accused of abusing prisoners at Abu Ghraib, was telling the camera that forcing prisoners to make a pyramid with their bodies isn't abuse because American cheerleaders make pyramids all the time. "They're not wasting too much time defending this guy if they got him a lawyer that dumb," one of the treadmilling Marines said. "You're going to Leavenworth, dude."<sup>27</sup>

[line break]

A lot more than peoples' lives were at stake in Sumatra. Everybody on the Bonhomme-Richard down to the lowliest lance corporal seemed aware that the United States had a rare opportunity to make a grand gesture of friendship to the Islamic world at a time that many Moslems were viewing the war in Iraq, and the broader War on Terror, as cover for a war on Islam. Marines tend to be idealistic. They know the United States is righteous, and they seemed genuinely

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<sup>27</sup> I don't have their names, alas.

eager to get out there and prove it. The Navy also had something to prove – that in an era of small infantry wars a big blue-water force is still relevant. A few months earlier I’d visited a retired two-star Army general named Robert Scales who had succinctly summarized a view often heard from the men in green: “They haven’t fought a blue-water sea battle since Leyte Gulf” in 1944, Scales said. “If you believe, as I do, that the wars of the conceivable future are going to look like Iraq, why do we have so many men, and so much money, floating around the ocean?”<sup>28</sup> When I told Admiral Ames about this conversation he sighed as though he’d heard it many times before and said the tsunami relief effort is a chance for the Navy to answer that question. “We’ve talked about this idea of sea-basing for several years. What we’re doing here validates the beauty of it.”<sup>29</sup>

The ship woke on January 10 to the electrifying news that the Marines were finally going ashore. What’s more, they were going in the miraculous vehicle that has replaced the landing craft of yore: the Landing Craft Air Cushion, whose acronym is pronounced “elkack.” The elkack is essentially a gigantic everglades boat, a platform eighty feet long and forty feet wide that rides on a inflatable rubber skirt, with two

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<sup>28</sup> Major General (retired) Robert Scales, 410-531-5345 home, 410-843-6821 office, or roberthscales@colgen.net

<sup>29</sup> Admiral Christopher Ames, reachable through Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

twelve-foot fans on the back for propulsion. It can transport a sixty-ton tank, or a hundred Marines, or four humvees, across the waves at forty-five miles an hour and zoom right up onto the dry sand.<sup>30</sup> The Bonhomme-Richard carried three of them in massive garage at the back of the ship. The Marines haven't made a landing under fire since Inchon, in 1950, but hitting the beach lies at the core of their mythology. They train for it endlessly and organize their Expeditionary Units around the Battalion Landing Team. As they tell it, only the Marines can execute this dashing and dangerous maneuver; it's what sets them apart. (And they don't appreciate mention of D-Day, which was an Army operation.) Marines differentiate themselves from the Army in other ways. They've adopted strange, digital camouflage uniforms dotted with little pixilated squares that make them look like icons in a video game. Unlike soldiers, Marines don't wear unit patches or awards on their uniforms. "It's nobody's business," Major Donald Wright explained. "The first thing we do when we kill an enemy soldier, if we're fighting a uniformed enemy, is to go up to the body and read his patches. You can learn a lot – what units you're up against, what their qualifications are, and then you know how well fed and equipped those units are. I even take off my rank in combat. My

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<sup>30</sup> see paper files

soldiers know who I am.”<sup>31</sup> The Marine ethic also says every Marine, man or woman, is a rifleman; even cooks and typists have to be able hit consistently a man-sized target half a kilometer away with their M-16s, and be trained and ready to go into combat a moment’s notice. So even cooks and typists have their rifles close to hand while on shore. As they chant in boot camp, “this is my rifle. Without it I am useless. Without me, it is useless.”

But the order on January 10 was “no weapons.” The Indonesians were finally letting a few Marines come ashore, but they had to come unarmed. The Marines were appalled. The consensus among the enlisted men was that sending Marines ashore without guns – in a Moslem nation, and in a province that is home to a violent separatist movement – was “fucked up.” “Man, I’ll bet this island is crawling with folks who’d love to kill a Marine if they could get the chance,” one lance corporal said.<sup>32</sup> A ripple of hope went through the ship when Fox News reported that some shots had been fired in Banda Aceh, perhaps by the rebels who have been trying to gain independence from Indonesia for half a century. Then a helicopter from the Abraham Lincoln rolled over in a rice patty when one of its wheels sunk in

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<sup>31</sup> Major Donald Wright, WrightDR@15meu.usmc.mil

<sup>32</sup> Lance Corporal Jordan Coleman, [jordan.coleman@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil](mailto:jordan.coleman@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil), but we can’t quote him criticizing Marine policy, and especially not the Indonesians; he’d get keel-hauled.

unexpectedly soft mud, and the Marine pilots on the Bonhomme-Richard began carrying sidearms – but with the magazines removed. Thirty-six year old Major Robert Salasko, who may be the only person from New Jersey ever known as “Bubba,” sat down for a breakfast on January 10 with six hard boiled eggs and a sweet roll as the loudspeaker announced, “urinalysis now being held in ship’s brig and will secure at sixteen hundred.” “Going ashore!” Salasko boomed happily to Major Keith Parry, who commands an elite combat team but who was staying on the ship to check helicopter manifests and was gloomily stirring his cream of wheat. “Don’t shoot anybody,” Parry said mumbled to Salasko, who responded, “can’t take my weapon.” He patted the size of his high-and-tight cranium. “Except this.”

“That’s a hindrance,” Parry said.

“You’re jealous.”

“Got that right.”<sup>33</sup>

The beach landing was a public-relations event non-pareil. “What I’m going to do is this,” the strike group’s public affairs officer, Lt. Billy Ray Davis, told an Associated Press television crew. “I’m going to have the elcack back out of the ship with a helicopter overhead.” He held his hands out, palm down, to show their relative position. “Then I’m going

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<sup>33</sup> Major Robert Salasko, [salaskorp@15meu.bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil](mailto:salaskorp@15meu.bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil) and Major Keith Parry, [keith.parry@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil](mailto:keith.parry@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil)

have you in another helicopter up here” – he raised one hand to shoulder height – “so you can get the helicopter, the elkack, and the ship all in one shot.” He turned to a Fox News cameraman. “There are two extra seats in the pilot house. You and the AP reporter have them.”<sup>34</sup> We passed through the cavernous hangar deck to get to the elkack. Sailors and Marines were driving scooting about in forklifts amidst an exquisitely mixed soundtrack of helicopter engines, the beep-beep of backing vehicles, aa-ooo-gah klaxons, loudspeaker announcements, and shouting. Everywhere stood pallets of Gitangkim rice from Thailand, Ice Cool brand bottled water from Malaysia, and bags of US-bagged rice reading Whole Grain White Rice, Origin: Vietnam.

In the event, the landing wasn’t much for anybody but AP and Fox; the rest of us were sealed in a windowless steel compartment. Even when Marine infantry is taken ashore in the elkack, they’re seated in modular compartments, and not standing out in the sea spray, because anybody standing on deck would be sucked into the giant fans and chopped to bits. The twelve nautical-mile trip<sup>35</sup> into shore took about fifteen minutes; when we emerged from the compartment, we faced a phalanx of cameramen and photographers,

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<sup>34</sup> Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

<sup>35</sup> Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa, delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil

and behind them, Meulloboh, a town of [tk] that had been home to small Indonesian Army base. The noise was intense; three Navy helicopters, with a television or still cameraman in the door of each, circled above. The Army base, and the town behind it, were now a disasterscape of mud-smearred broken cement buildings, uprooted trees, overturned cars, beached boats, sheared-off roofs, and vast jumbles of timber, rubbish, and rubble. From the skeletons of a few surviving house, the wave was about one story high here, strong enough to tear huge holes in concrete walls. Marine Colonel Thomas Greenwood, commander of the 15<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit aboard the Strike Group, stepped off the helicopter with Navy Captain Michelle Howard, commanding officer of the three amphibious vessels in the group. Then they turned, walked back onto the helicopter, and stepped off it again. Photographers pressed in around them. Meanwhile, beyond the beach and across a broad trench of water and mud, a small group of Indonesian soldiers and civilians watched quietly. A massive forklift, brought ashore on the helicopter, began unloading what was said to be sixty-four thousand pounds of rice and bottled water onto the debris-strewn beach. Three trips of the Navy's big helicopters could have brought the same quantity of supplies to a dry spot inland<sup>36</sup>, where the

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<sup>36</sup> the Navy's biggest helicopter, the CH-53, can carry up to about 26,000 pounds, according to the booklet in the paper files I sent

Indonesians' small trucks could have reached it. The Singaporean Army had been directing international relief efforts in this area, and when Lieutenant Colonel Sao Ho Chin walked by I asked why the Americans hadn't used helicopters instead of the elkack. "I have the same question because this is waterlogged," he said, indicating the large wet area beyond the beach. "The trucks can't get through."<sup>37</sup>

Colonel Greenwood marched past, shaking hands. "I wish you'd been here earlier," he shouted above the roar of the helicopters. "We helo'ed in French medical supplies and you had Frenchmen and Americans working together, happy, well, not happy because of the circumstances, but working together!" He was called away, and Captain Howard stepped up to shake hands and introduce herself as Michelle. She is an African-American woman of high rank in a service that traditionally has not been easy for either women or blacks. Though short, she is powerfully built, palpably smart and dynamic, with beautiful large features she keeps highly animated. Had her life taken a different turn, she'd have been excellent on Sesame Street. She was wearing blotchy desert fatigues and a boonie hat. "We have a stovepipe vision of what we can do, but we'd spoken with the

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<sup>37</sup> Singaporean Lt. Col. Sao Ho Chin is the public affairs officer for the Singapore Army in this region, but I do not have contact information for him. He probably appears in a great many news clips with the dateline Meulloboh, if you want to verify his existence.

Singaporeans first," she said, enunciating with exaggerated clarity and gesturing with her arms with every word. "The Singaporeans have very good relations with the Indonesians, and they're advice was 'go slow.'" Here she gave her body a funky ripple, bobbing her head and pushing down with her palms. "In the Navy we command by negation. I communicate up what I want to do, and my superiors say, 'yeah,' 'yeah,' 'yeah,' 'stop!'" She wouldn't say what the Marines were prevented from doing, either by the Indonesians or her superiors, and the harder I pressed the more she fell back on platitudes about cooperation and respect. The torpid sky finally tore open as it has been threatening to do all day, drenching us in a sudden downpour. She didn't register it. "I will tell you this," she said as the rain poured off the brim of her hat. "Everybody down to the lance corporal understood that this is a Moslem country, and you should have seen them going through the MREs pulling out all the ones with pork in them."<sup>38</sup> Finally we walked back to the elcack and got out the rain. Fox News and the AP reporter were returning to the ship in Colonel Greenwood's helicopter, so I got to sit in the pilot house. The sixty-four thousand pounds of rice and water were still sitting on the beach as we backed into the surf, looking forlorn and forgotten in the rain.

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<sup>38</sup> Capt. Michelle Howard is reachable through PAO Lt. Bill Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

[line break]

The next evening I asked Colonel Greenwood, as we sat in his tiny windowless stateroom, if he'd specifically negotiated permission to use the elkack so the Marines could have a beach-hitting event. He chuckled and waved away the question. "There are four words we use every day with Colonel Geerhan," the Indonesian commander at Meulloboh. "How. Can. We. Help. We don't say, 'why don't you use my trucks?' If we did that, we'd be putting him on the defensive. The Indonesians definitely want to control the size of the footprint. It's mutually understood, for example, that everybody goes home at night. If my Marines live in what's left of the town, it's a burden to the infrastructure." Also, he said, the Indonesians "don't want to feel like a charity case."

On his coffee table was a copy of Foreign Affairs and several issues of Harvard's alumni magazine. Greenwood has a folksy air but, at forty-nine, a sterling pedigree, with a chestful of medals – were he to pin them on his uniform – and stints at the Kennedy School and the National Security Council.<sup>39</sup>

Greenwood again wonderingly recounted the incident on shore with the Frenchmen, as though France and the United States had recently been at war. "The only time Colonel Geerhan specifically said

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<sup>39</sup> Greenwood bio in the 15<sup>th</sup> MEU booklet in the paper files.

'no' was when we were going to bring ashore a ten man working party yesterday," he said. "The word we got back was, that might be excessive. It wasn't that they dislike Americans or Marines. The nuance was, if you can do it with less people we'd appreciate it." He said the idea that the Marines always have to be in charge is a stereotype he hopes this operation will dispel. "I think the biggest challenge is figuring out how to be useful in a way that doesn't in the long term alienate people," he said. "It's easy to come into a place and think you have all the answers." I asked if the same could be said of Iraq, which was probably this ship's next stop. "We haven't always been good at expeditionary intelligence, that's true," he said. He pulled out a folding laminated pocket card for Marines to carry in Iraq, filled not only with Arabic phrases but little icons that Marines could use to communicate with Iraqis. "Ten, fifteen years ago we wouldn't have had this. The Marines have learned the hard way. We continue learning."

Iraq was the great unmentionable aboard the Bonhomme-Richard. En route, I'd met a young Marine lance corporal in Thailand named Joel Abshier, who right off said, "I'm eager to get to Iraq. That's where the fight is." I must have looked disbelieving, because he went on. "I mean it. Nobody joins the Marines for the college money. You join the Army for college money. You join the Marines because

you want to fight wars.”<sup>40</sup> On the Bonhomme-Richard, though, I found no Marines eager to go. The Marines now divide the Iraq war into OIF I – Operation Iraqi Freedom I, the “kinetic” phase that ended with the delcaration of “mission accomplished” – and OIF II: the messy insurgency thereafter. Some are even starting to identify OIF III, the intensely violent period leading up to the elections. Aboard the Bonhomme-Richard were many veterans of OIF I and even some of OIF II. Twenty-three year old Lance Corporal Jeremy Harris was a breacher during OIF I; he opened doors, sometimes with a sledgehammer, sometimes with a shotgun blast, sometimes with C4 explosive. He was scared every time, he said, and used words I heard many Marines use about their return trip. “No I don’t want to go back, fuck no,” he said. “But nobody made me sign up. It’s what I have to do so that other people don’t have to. I’m ready.”<sup>41</sup>

The Marines of Expeditionary Strike Group Five have no firm orders to return to Iraq; so they’re merely slated to pass from Pacific Command to Central Command, or Centcom, which overseas the Iraq War. Most I spoke to, though, believe that with the war going as it is, they’ll be called in. It was sometimes hard to look at them, so vibrant and fit and whole. There were times when, thinking about the roadside

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<sup>40</sup> Lance Cpl. Joel Abshier, [abshierjw@mcbbutler.usmc.mil](mailto:abshierjw@mcbbutler.usmc.mil)

<sup>41</sup> Lance Cpl. Jeremy Harris, [harrisjr@duluth.usmc.mil](mailto:harrisjr@duluth.usmc.mil)

bombs that have become the insurgents' primary weapon, I couldn't take my eyes off the Marines' springy young legs. My last evening on board I sat in the enlisted mess and found myself trying to read as many names on breast pockets as I could and commit them to memory, against the day I might find them in that sad little box in the Times.

My last full day on the Bonhomme-Richard I got to fly a "target of opportunity" mission aboard a CH-46, a lovely little helicopter shaped like a banana that was a mainstay during Vietnam – this one, in fact, had a little brass plate saying it entered service in 1969, well before either of its pilots were born. A group of Marines feverishly loaded about forty twenty-five kilogram bags of rice at my feet, and for all the geopolitics involved, it was undeniably touching to see young kids from the midwest sweating and heaving to help brown people they'd very likely never heard of three weeks before. Our crew chief was Marine Corporal Eric Hutchinson, a big ruddy, twenty-three year-old from Portland, Oregon, who was wearing a pistol with no clip; that he kept in his pocket. "You remember Apolcalyse Now when the woman jumps into the helicopter with a grenade?" he shouted over the engines as he strapped me in. "I'm not down with that." The Marines are as obsessed with their reflection in the Hollywood mirror as the characters on the Sopranos.

Hutchinson was delighted to set me up with an audio helmet on which I could hear the pilots talking to each other. Suddenly an electric guitar intruded, and I was listening to Linkin Park's, "Nobody's Business." Hutchinson gave me a big toothy thumbs up and waved his iPod at me; he danced in place as the helicopter leapt upward. In a box at our feet was a box full of little green cloth parachutes from which dangled rolls of lifesafers. The equipment maintenance crew, which takes care of the life jackets and crash helmets used on the helicopters, had made them during their off hours to drop from helicopters to delight children. We flew about fifteen minutes and set down at a tiny airfield at which a group of Indonesian soldiers and civilians waited. Very rapidly, we made a bucket brigade line and handed out the rice, then each of us had to shake hands with each of the Indonesians, who touched their hearts and pressed their hands together. Then we lifted off and swung back toward the ship for another load just as Guns n' Roses came on the headset singing "Knocking on Heaven's Door." One advantage to listening to rock and roll on a Marine helicopter is you can sing along as loud as you like.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cpl. Eric Hutchinson, who is probably [eric.hutchinson@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil](mailto:eric.hutchinson@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil). But if not, he can be reached through Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa, [delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil](mailto:delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil)

