

FORUM: HUMANITARIANISM AND THE MILITARY

# The U.S. Military: A Reluctant Humanitarian

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Since the end of the Second World War, the U.S. military has been among the most important providers of humanitarian assistance, particularly in the wake of natural disasters and conflict. Yet, aid organizations rarely consider the U.S. military a humanitarian actor, and military personnel do not identify primarily as humanitarians. Nevertheless, the logistics and manpower capacities of the U.S. military have often pushed it into humanitarian spheres. Once involved, however, the traditional humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence do not drive the military provision of humanitarian assistance. Instead, military personnel approach humanitarian assistance through their training, namely, moving items, building things, and managing people. They often pair a training-based framework with a general sense of helping those in need. The U.S. military is a humanitarian actor, but coming to grips with that requires reimagining humanitarianism. To explore the military as humanitarian, this essay first examines how the demands of logistics pushed the U.S. military into becoming a provider of refugee assistance in Albania during the 1999 Kosovo crisis. It then uses the 2021 evacuation and resettlement of Afghans to explore how the U.S. military's ready pool of manpower led it to become more deeply involved in humanitarian responses. Humanitarian crises are almost invariably complex and messy. The moral imperative to help those in need interacts with political and security priorities in often uncomfortable ways. That confluence helps explain why the U.S. military assists with some, but not other, crises.

## Military Logistics and Humanitarianism

Logistics often drives the involvement of the U.S. military in humanitarian crises, and many aid organizations rely on U.S. military logistics to deliver aid during emergencies. Providing logistical support is not without controversy, but cooperation between aid organizations and the U.S. military tends to be the most contentious when the crisis is linked to conflict. Cooperation is less controversial in responding to natural disasters. Civilian logistics chains are designed to be highly efficient in peacetime when there is well-developed infrastructure. In contrast, military logistics are designed to function under adverse conditions. As a result, the military can operate in the wake of a natural disaster that severely damages infrastructure or under conditions of insecurity and even open conflict.

This need for logistics support drove the involvement of the U.S. military in providing refugee assistance in Albania during the 1999 Kosovo crisis. Over 530,000 Kosovars fled into Albania, escaping Serbian ethnic cleansing. At the time, Albania was the poorest country in Europe and could only absorb such a large influx with support. Additionally, Albania's

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infrastructure was in tatters, impeding getting aid into the country. Only the U.S. military and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) could repair and expand Albania's infrastructure fast enough to deliver desperately needed assistance. In doing so, they came to control vital transportation nodes—and all the aid that came through them.

Airlift, airfield maintenance, and air traffic control are among the most significant assets the U.S. Air Force provides. In 1999, the Tirana Rinas Airport—Albania's only functional international airport—could manage six takeoffs and landings a day. On April 4, the 86th Contingency Response Group (CRG) arrived at Rinas, and “[i]n less than four hours, they set up airfield operations and had begun controlling relief flights into the airport,” according to their commander, Colonel Cliff Bray. In short order, the 86th CRG increased air traffic to over 450 movements a day.<sup>1</sup> Whether dealing with a country like Albania with limited infrastructure or responding to a hurricane that damaged local airports, the U.S. Air Force has a unique ability to operate. It deploys with civil engineers to repair and maintain airfields and personnel to set up and run air traffic control, creating conditions in which civilian aircraft can operate.

Airlift is the fastest option, but ocean shipping is more efficient in moving bulky items such as food, tents, and blankets. In Albania, only the Durrës Port could accommodate cargo ships. Yet it lacked basic infrastructure and capacity to support large transoceanic ships, quickly off-load cargo, or safely store that cargo. The U.S. military and NATO forces made repairs and improvements to port facilities, established a thirty-acre storage and marshaling area where supplies could be safely stored before they were transported to different locations within Albania, and took over port management. Soon port capacity increased from eight to twelve ships a day.<sup>2</sup> These improvements were critical as most humanitarian aid entered Albania through the Durrës Port. Beyond Albania, the ability of the U.S. Navy to bring its civil engineers to repair, maintain, and manage damaged ports is often on display in the aftermath of natural disasters.

Security is also a barrier to civilian logistics. Whether it is large numbers of desperate people who need to be kept away from marshaling areas, organized crime, corruption, paramilitaries, or even ongoing conflict, these security concerns pose barriers to civilian logistics. Notably, military logistics comes with security forces. At both Durrës and Tirana, U.S. and NATO forces secured the port and airport from local criminal organizations and corruption in the local government, for whom large stockpiles of humanitarian aid presented a target for the black market.

As Brian Drohan argues in his contribution to this forum, U.S. military logistics exist for more violent purposes than to provide humanitarian aid. Because the military must maintain these logistic capabilities regardless, these assets are available to respond to humanitarian disasters. Maintaining these assets is very expensive, as demonstrated by the Department of Defense's \$2.4 trillion budget. As uncomfortable as many humanitarians are with working with the U.S. military, developing equivalent capabilities does not make financial sense. Finally, this type of logistics-based humanitarianism is routine from a U.S. military perspective. Whether a C-17 airplane delivers pallets of Meals Ready-to-Eat (MREs) to soldiers or humanitarian rations to refugees, the basics of the job do not change. For the U.S. military, providing logistics is roughly consistent across peace, war, and humanitarian crises.

<sup>1</sup>Master Sgt. Louis A. Arana-Barradas and Staff Sgt Angela Stafford, “Shining Hope for Survival,” *Airman* (July 1999), 8–12.

<sup>2</sup>“Operation Allied Harbour,” Headquarters Allied Joint Force Command Naples, NATO, <http://jfcnaples.nato.int/page71975039.aspx> (accessed Nov. 6, 2013); Bruce R. Nardulli et al., *Disjointed War: Military Operations in Kosovo* (Santa Monica, CA, 2002), 78.

## Military Manpower and Humanitarianism

The U.S. military often finds itself involved more deeply in humanitarian responses than purely providing logistics support. The U.S. military brings another unique capacity: it has large numbers of readily available personnel. The Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines have units on standby, capable of deploying on short notice. This ability to deploy large numbers of military personnel around the world is designed to respond to threats to U.S. national security, as well as threats to U.S. partners and allies. That deployment capability can provide manpower for a humanitarian response. The 2021 evacuation and resettlement of Afghans provides a rich case to explore some of the dynamics that emerge when the U.S. military is more deeply involved in a humanitarian crisis.

The need for heavy military involvement was evident in the first phase, Operation Allies Rescue (OAR), the noncombatant evacuation out of Kabul. Due to the rapid deterioration of security at the Hamid Karzai International Airport, it became impossible for civilian airlines to operate evacuation flights. OAR became the largest noncombatant airlift in history. Over seventeen days, the U.S. military supported the evacuation of 124,334 civilians, involving over 2,000 American airlift sorties.<sup>3</sup> OAR was a straightforward case of logistics driving the involvement of the U.S. military.

As the airlift finished, OAR transitioned to Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) and the focus shifted from evacuating Afghans to resettling them in the United States. Even though the Department of Defense was not the lead federal agency, the U.S. military remained the primary executing agency in resettling an initial 65,000 Afghan evacuees.<sup>4</sup> As happened with earlier influxes of refugees and migrants from Haiti, Cuba, and Vietnam, the U.S. military was the easy and fast answer to the problem.<sup>5</sup> Unlike other federal agencies, the military can rapidly mobilize large numbers of personnel and has supplies on hand, authorities for contracting, and easily controllable spaces in the form of bases at home and abroad.

With over 65,000 Afghan evacuees needing immediate shelter, the U.S. government turned to the Department of Defense. The U.S. military identified eight bases that would shelter evacuees and mobilized units to run what amounted to refugee camps. As Army Chief Warrant Officer Robert Baugh described his work at Fort McCoy,

I like to say that we run the worst hotel in the world. And we have absolutely horrible service. But that's actually not true. We have pretty good service, given what we can do ... with a company size element of approximately 90 people we're expected to manage almost 1500 people and where they have to be on a daily basis, sometimes by the minute. And we're not, that's not what we do. You know? So we're, we're taking some soldiers and and NCOs and asking them to go way outside of what they've been trained to do.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>James C. Kitfiled, "Remembering the Largest Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation in US History," *Air & Space Forces Magazine* (Aug. 29, 2022), <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/remembering-the-largest-non-combatant-evacuation-operation-allies-refuge-in-u-s-history%EF%BF%BC/> (accessed Sept. 15, 2023); (CUI) Andrew Wackerfuss, "'Mobility Made the Play': 521 AMOW and the En Route Logistics System in Operation ALLIES REFUGE," 521 AMOW Annual Historical Archive (Apr. 13, 2022), 7. Information from the report is identified as (U) Unclassified.

<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Ferris, "The Evacuation of Afghan Refugees Is Over. Now What?," *Brookings*, Sept. 10, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/09/10/the-evacuation-of-afghan-refugees-is-over-now-what/> (accessed Sept. 20, 2021).

<sup>5</sup>For more on earlier crises, see Jana K. Lipman "A Refugee Camp in America: Fort Chaffee and Vietnamese and Cuban Refugees, 1975–1982," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 2 (2014): 57–87; Jenna M. Loyd and Alison Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases: Race, the Cold War, and the Rise of Migration Detention in the United States* (Berkeley, CA, 2018); and Carl Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ, 2015).

<sup>6</sup>Robert Baugh, oral history with Mary Elizabeth Walters, Oct. 13, 2021.

Baugh's comment about training is important. The military may be the easy choice, but it is not necessarily the best from a humanitarian or cost perspective.

Humanitarianism is not a primary or even a secondary mission of the U.S. military. Training cycles might include a humanitarian element, but it is not a central focus. Most officers are unfamiliar with humanitarianism's key concepts, norms, practices, or even terminology. Many officers lack exposure to interagency work within the U.S. government, much less experience with nongovernmental organizations. Thus, the military does not approach humanitarian crises from a humanitarian perspective. Instead, military units default to a more familiar activity similar to the humanitarian problem they face.

At Fort McCoy, the 88th Readiness Division (RD) viewed the challenge of hosting 12,000 evacuees from the framework of their day job—to accommodate Army Guard and Reserve units coming to Fort McCoy for training. The 88th RD set up barracks and support facilities. In establishing the chow halls, the 88th RD and the contractors it hired used the standard army formula (x amount of food serves y number of soldiers, and it takes them z amount of time to get through the line and eat). That formula is designed for soldiers—who are adults, used to lining up and following orders, and who often have somewhere to be after eating. The formula does not work well when dealing with families with young children who are unfamiliar with hamburgers. Moreover, providing culturally appropriate food was an even longer learning curve.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth contrasting Fort McCoy's initial response to that of Brigadier General Forrest Poole and the 2nd Marine Logistics Group, which ran Camp Upshur on Marine Corps Base Quantico. The Marines had four days between when their advanced party reached Quantico and when the first 300 Afghan evacuees arrived. Upshur is austere; reaching it requires driving through live-fire ranges. The Marines faced a monumental task in just getting the site physically ready. Nevertheless, from the first day he learned about OAW, General Poole insisted on referring to it as Upshur Village so the evacuees would have a sense of community and ownership. Upon arriving at Quantico, Poole immediately met with civil affairs and Afghan area studies experts to discuss cultural sensitivities the Marines needed to consider.<sup>8</sup> The Marines at Upshur Village still had a learning curve, but it was much shorter than at many other bases.

There is much more to these cases, but the contrast between the initial responses of the leadership at Fort McCoy and Upshur Village sheds light on what happens when the military takes a more active role in humanitarian responses. Without interagency guidance or equivalent support from civil affairs and topical experts, most military units default to solving a humanitarian problem by turning to their training. That solves the most pressing human needs, but over a longer period tends to require extensive and expensive reworking. However, if a General Poole or interagency support is present, the U.S. military can take a more sensitive humanitarian approach.

### The Military as a Humanitarian

The U.S. military can and does perform humanitarian actions to ameliorate human suffering. As the essays in this forum demonstrate, the U.S. military has partnered with humanitarian organizations to provide logistical support for the movement of people and resources. Further, the U.S. military's ability to rapidly mobilize units, capabilities, and resources makes it the easy—and sometimes the only—solution to large, fast-moving crises. Especially once exposed to those in need, military personnel want to help and volunteer for extra shifts and duties. For the duration of an operation, these military units transform into humanitarians.

<sup>7</sup>Micah Komp, oral history with Mary Elizabeth Walters and Ward Zischke, Oct. 12, 2021.

<sup>8</sup>Forrest Poole, oral history with Mary Elizabeth Walters, May 16, 2022.

Even so, the U.S. military is not a humanitarian actor in the same sense as an organization like the Red Cross. As Julia Irwin argues in the opening essay of this forum, U.S. military humanitarianism is “never purely altruistic”; instead, it serves U.S. policy and security interests. The U.S. military exists to defend the national interests of the United States of America through the use and threatened use of violence. Since the Second World War, and especially after the Vietnam War, the U.S. military has expanded its ability to conduct expeditionary operations. These capabilities have made it easier for successive presidential administrations to project power, from Operation El Dorado Canyon in Libya in 1986 to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The same capabilities that enabled these military adventures allowed the U.S. military to provide humanitarian assistance around the world. The increased ability to help those in need emerged as a secondary consequence of growing U.S. military power. For many military personnel, these are two sides of the same coin. Marine Sergeant Major Clifford Fincham reflected on the deeper meaning of his time in both Afghanistan and Upshur Village:

And, and you know that you were doing good, right? ... when you deploy, what I try to tell the Marines, you know that you're in Afghanistan for the greater good, right? Because that's what we're there to do is to try to clean that area out.... Now without a doubt, this is for the greater good, because five days ago, they didn't know if they were going to be alive or dead. And now we have them and they have that opportunity, right, that ticket.... And now ... we're gonna send them out to Hometown USA somewhere and they have a chance. Those kids have a chance.<sup>9</sup>

For Fincham and many others, using force and providing aid are both ways to make the United States and the world a better and safer place. Perhaps the best way to reconcile these two truths is to follow F. Scott Fitzgerald's test of first-rate intelligence, namely “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still have the ability to function.”<sup>10</sup> The U.S. military has the simultaneous ability to do great harm and great good.

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<sup>9</sup>Clifford Fincham, Bill Soucie, Jared Fanguie, Adam Taylor, and David Mills, oral history with Mary Elizabeth Walters, May 16, 2022.

<sup>10</sup>F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up,” *Esquire*, Feb. 1936, republished in *American Masters*, PBS (Aug. 31, 2005), <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/f-scott-fitzgerald-essay-the-crack-up/1028/>.