



Two Canadian warships, HMCS *Toronto* and HMCS *Athabaskan*, restock their fuel supplies from the American tanker *Patoxtent*, 8 September 2005.

BY AIR, LAND, AND SEA: CANADA RESPONDS TO HURRICANE KATRINA

by Joseph Scanlon and Elizabeth Steele with Alex Hunsberger

Introduction

In September 2005, Canada sent a multi-service task force to help the United States recover from Hurricane *Katrina*. Operation *Unison*, as it was officially designated, included navy divers from CFB Shearwater (now CFB Halifax) and CFB Esquimalt, and army divers from CFB Gagetown, deployed initially to Pensacola, Florida. The force included supplies and equipment sent by road, as well as three Canadian warships and a Canadian Coast Guard light icebreaker. The entire operation was supported by formation logistics staff in Halifax, and an officer deployed to Pensacola to establish a Forward Logistics Site (FLS), and arrange for sustainment of the force, which was formally designated Canadian Forces Joint Task Group (CTJTG) 306.

The entire response was organized in a few days at the end of August through verbal orders and contracting arrangements at the same time as major organizational changes were being made at National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) in Ottawa. In fact, Joint Task Force Atlantic (JTFA) was the only element then ‘up and running’ in what is now Canada Command. The formation was also assembled despite legal concerns with respect to having coast guard members placed under navy direction. Further, many decisions were not sup-

ported by advance paper work; this had to catch up later. These initiatives were all aligned with the views of General Rick Hillier, then-Chief of the Defence Staff, that there was too little reliance upon verbal orders, and too much upon paper work. Operation *Unison* fitted his goal of a command-focused, mission-centric Canadian Forces (CF), melding air force, army, and navy elements in joint operations.

This article will describe the CF response to Hurricane *Katrina*. It will cover the creation and operation of the task force under Commodore Dean McFadden and his successors.¹

Response to Disaster

Katrina was not the first time Canada and the US have assisted each other in the wake of a disaster. After a fire destroyed much of Saint John, New Brunswick, on 20 June 1877, the US Revenue Cutter *Gallatin* sortied twice from Boston with relief supplies.² And after the massive 6 December 1917 Halifax explosion, the first outside-Canada response was embodied in two US Navy (USN) ships, the USS *Tacoma* and the USS *Von Steuben*.

In 1992, after Hurricane *Andrew*, Canada sent a team of airfield engineers to Florida, where they rebuilt two severely damaged schools in Dade County. Their supplies were deliv-

DND photo HS2005-0686-05 by Corporal Halima Fofitas

ered by HMCS *Protecteur*, a CF supply ship. Generators supplied by *Protecteur* were used to assist in creating temporary power, and her medics provided assistance to persons from the area.

CF personnel have also, over the years, responded to domestic incidents – the 1996 Saguenay floods, the 1997 Red River flood, the 1998 Eastern Canadian ice storm, the 1998 crash of Swissair 111, and, in 2003, Hurricane *Juan*.

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, legitimate Canada-US security concerns were raised with respect to air travel. The new security environment also demanded an examination of the threat to maritime security. In Canada in 2004, this resulted in new emphasis being placed upon maritime security in partnership with the United States, and the new policy broadened the definition of ‘security threats’ to include natural disasters.

Rear-Admiral Dan McNeil had worked on national security policy in the Privy Council Office before being sent to command Canada’s east coast naval forces in 2004. One concern was the split nature of Canada’s coastal capacity. Since search and rescue – which involves both the Canadian Coast Guard and the (Royal) Canadian Navy – was one of JTFA’s main missions, McNeil had coast guard staff deployed into his operations centre. He visited the US Naval Base at Norfolk, Virginia, and developed a close association with Admiral Mark Fitzgerald, Commander, USN 2nd Fleet. Fitzgerald strongly supported Commodore McFadden’s ongoing aim to ensure fleet interoperability with the USN. By way of example, during a US training exercise, McFadden and his staff on the US cruiser, USS *Cape St. George*, acted as if they were part of a multi-national operation. This assisted the Americans, and it also increased Canadian familiarity with the US approach to command and control. All this experience ultimately proved crucial to the success of Operation *Unison*.

When *Katrina* struck landfall, it appeared that it had missed New Orleans, but when it became known that the levees there had not held, discussion began with respect to a Canadian response. General Hillier called from Ottawa to say that military staffs should consider what they could contribute. The logical way to send supplies would be with *Preserver*, but she was just coming out of refit. The possibility of having the sister supply ship *Protecteur* deploy from Esquimalt via the Panama Canal was also discussed. Since planners could actually see the Canadian Coast Guard light icebreaker *Sir William Alexander* (SWA) docked across Halifax harbour, Commander Russell Stuart remarked that he wished that vessel could be employed to carry supplies.



The Canadian Coast Guard Ship *Sir William Alexander* sails out of Halifax harbour, 6 September 2005.

This raised legal questions: could a coast guard vessel – with its unionized civilian crew – operate as part of a navy task force, with its code of military discipline? Commodore McFadden discussed this issue with the District Commander of the Coast Guard and the question was settled when Larry Murray, a former admiral and then-Deputy Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, flew to Halifax. *SWA* could join the task force.

There were still concerns in Ottawa. Some argued that Canada had to place its commitments to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) first and foremost. Acting Chief of Defence Staff Vice-Admiral Ron Buck then called Admiral McNeil, since Admiral Buck had been advised that no response was possible. Was that true? Admiral McNeil then told him he had been in contact with Admiral Fitzgerald. Canada had three navy ships – the destroyer *Athabaskan*, and the frigates *Ville de Quebec* and *Toronto* available - and *SWA* could carry supplies. His staff had also identified navy and army divers and construction personnel as resources. McNeil told Vice-Admiral Buck that he had, in fact, told the Americans that Canada would respond. By then, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC) was supportive, as was Prime Minister Paul Martin. Legal concerns were pushed aside – at least, for the moment.

There were still problems. Personnel at CFB Gagetown questioned the legitimacy of a verbal order to report to Halifax because they had been expecting a series of written orders. However, they were promptly told that they must follow the verbal order, as it was binding. Normally, army units ‘hit the ground running.’ They do not, like navy personnel, who have more transit time for such activities, benefit from being able to do substantial planning en route. It was also not yet clear that *Katrina* had been officially declared an emergency, as was the case during the Manitoba floods, the ice storm, and the crash of Swissair 111. Another legal issue was raised when it was considered to send in the medically-trained Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to the area. Planners were told that medical personnel could not operate in the USA without the

permission of state licensing agencies. Ultimately, although the DART did not participate in *Unison per se*, sixteen medical personnel did deploy to service the task force.

When *SWA*, *Athabaskan*, *Toronto*, and *Ville de Québec* were assigned to the task force, their captains were told that their responsibility was to get their ships ready to depart Halifax by Tuesday morning. Acquiring extra supplies was the Formation Logistics Officer's concern. Two ships (*Athabaskan* and *Ville de Québec*) would carry CH-124 *Sea King* helicopters and the 57 Air Command personnel required to maintain them. *SWA* also carried a helicopter, although as it transpired, it was used only once during the response. The task force commander, Commodore McFadden, and staff officers – his CSO (Operations) and the fleet technical officer – would embark in *Athabaskan*. The Commander JTFA, Rear-Admiral McNeil, was assigned overall operational level responsibility for *Unison*; the commander CTJTG.306, Commodore McFadden, for the deployed task group; and the captain of *Athabaskan*, Captain David Gardam, for the naval ships.

Acquiring Supplies

At 0900 hours on Friday 2 September, the order was given to JTFA to prepare three naval ships with supplies for homeless victims, to support the preparation of the *SWA*, and to be ready for departure within 72 hours. They did not have long to contact civilian suppliers because outlets were scheduled to be closed that Sunday and Monday (Sunday due to Nova Scotia's Sunday shopping ban, and Monday because of the national Labour Day holiday). The team then contacted a variety of suppliers in the Halifax area. All of them cooperated superbly by extending working hours over the holiday weekend to provide the necessary supplies. The ships ultimately packed thousands of tents, toiletry kits, water containers, and other items for victims, as well as crew supplies, including chain saws, leather work gloves, and first aid kits.

Athabaskan was conducting sea trials when *Katrina* struck, and arrived at Halifax Thursday in a state of high readiness. *Ville de Québec* was also ready: she was just about to embark on a training mission. However, *Toronto* had just finished a Great Lakes cruise in August, and most of her crew was on delayed leave. They were recalled, but as it happened, she possessed extra bunk space. That was filled by naval construction personnel and the engineers from CFB Gagetown – the Engineering Support Element. They assembled light gear – small chain saws, light generators, shovel, picks, and so on – in packs so they would be able to operate immediately upon arrival. The ships also carried 20 rigid inflatable boats (RIBs) and some *Zodiacs*, as well as fuel, in case crews were required to land personnel and supplies.

The navy made arrangements for secure communications between all the ships, including *SWA*. Six navy personnel travelled with *SWA* to facilitate communication between that vessel and the other ships, while Commodore McFadden established

secure communication lines to both the US Navy and the wing at Shearwater. The ships talked to each other every day to ensure all were well-informed as to what was transpiring.

While warship crews possess useful skills for humanitarian assistance, neither destroyers nor frigates have much surplus room for supplies. However, because *Toronto* was not carrying a helicopter, her crew was able to store some supplies in the hangar area. *Ville de Québec* could not use her hangar because she was carrying a helicopter, but crew members jammed what they could into her torpedo lockers. She also boarded some nurses. Although *SWA* was the smallest of the four ships, she possessed the largest cargo capacity.

On Tuesday morning, Prime Minister Martin, General Hillier, and the US ambassador to Canada, David Wilkins, spoke at the official send-off for Operation *Unison*. General Hillier said the deployment was intended to help those in need, and "...it just happens that those who desperately need our help are our friends and our allies and our neighbours."³ Due to the media interest, *Toronto* also carried a public affairs officer, a combat camera team, and five embedded journalists.

By the time *SWA* sailed, the navy personnel had established a navy communications system in a cabin, including a linkage to the navy's command and control network. This allowed encrypted secure communications between the ship and Shearwater, and between *SWA* and the other ships in the task force. It also allowed the naval officer on board to contact the meteorological and oceanographic centre (METOC), and ask them to download weather maps (used to track the path of other hurricanes) to their web site. As it transpired, the question of naval operational control over a coast guard vessel never became an issue. When Commodore McFadden wanted *SWA* to do something, he would simply ask her captain, "Can you do that?" If the captain responded in the affirmative, then McFadden would simply advise him as to what was required.



DND photo CX2005-0096-328a by Private Vaughn Lightowler

Divers Go First

By the time the ships departed Halifax, deployed divers were already doing clean-up operations in Mississippi. As soon as their participation was discussed, the Commander of 12 Wing Shearwater had made contact with the navy diving unit at Esquimalt and the combat divers at CFB Gagetown, who agreed to provide some three dozen divers altogether.

Due to prior testing and training, the navy diving teams knew how much equipment they could fit on the CC-130 *Hercules* air transports, and they had everything ready to load by the time the aircraft landed in Esquimalt and Halifax. As soon as these transports arrived and were loaded, both flights proceeded directly to Pensacola where the teams assembled. Upon arrival, the Canadians were met by Canadian forward logistics personnel, and by an officer from the US diving unit. Canadian divers do routine annual training at Norfolk with the US Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit (MDSU), and thus they were able to be employed immediately. “[I]t wasn’t just that the organization worked. They knew each other on a first name basis, they knew who to call when they needed things,” said Commander Moors.⁴ Because the Canadian divers had full facial masks (due to the fact that they often dive in the polluted Halifax harbour), as well as decontamination equipment and training, whereas the Americans did not, Canadians were actually the first to dive in some specific areas.



Leading Seaman Timothy Topcliffe (right) checks on the status of diver Master Seaman Ghislain Pourier during a dive on a sunken sailboat on Bayou Caddy, Mississippi.

From Pascagoula Mississippi, the divers moved to a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) rocket assembly plant near New Orleans, where they slept on office floors. From there they did clearance work, helping to wire and raise overturned shrimp boats at several bayous. Some of the boats had been driven onto land: these the Canadians left for others. Once in New Orleans, they made do on existing supplies, as well as whatever they could find locally (such as food from a fast food outlet, which had already re-opened in spite of the recent devastation).

Planning en Route

As the four ships proceeded en route, Commodore McFadden and his staff had to decide specifically from where they were going to conduct operations, and what they were going to do upon arrival. The fact that those questions could be posed and answered en route is a strength of the naval response. They contacted Admiral Fitzgerald, who promised full cooperation: his staff provided contacts with the US Navy in Pensacola and to off-shore impacted areas. The US also sent a tanker to join the task force, so the ships could refuel at sea. McFadden and his chief of operations, Lieutenant-Commander Steve Paget, consulted with the various units involved, including the naval construction team and the army engineers. They asked them what tasks they could perform and reviewed what supplies were embarked on each particular ship. Crews then underwent training refreshers on key matters, such as first aid and critical incident stress.

While the ships were en route, Tropical Storm *Ophelia* developed into Hurricane *Ophelia*, and the ships had to monitor the storm’s progress every 30 minutes. Eventually, they decided the safest route was to remain close to the US coast, and thus passing the storm.⁵ That action generated a delay of about 24 hours. The SWA’s slower rate of travel relative to the navy ships (due to her design, combined with engine cooling problems in warm southern waters) meant that SWA was far enough behind to pass the hurricane without trouble.

Although the best port in terms of condition was located in Texas, Formation Logistics decided that this was too far away for the ships to steam for resupply. Further, it did not make sense to send them to devastated cities like Biloxi, Gulfport, or New Orleans. Pascagoula Mississippi was considered, but it was decided that the logical initial stopping place was Pensacola. It was estimated that this port would be sufficiently repaired by the time the CTG arrived to offload humanitarian assistance items. The decision to dock in Pensacola was made after the ships were en route, again, an example of the flexibility of an ocean-based response.

Pensacola possessed another advantage. It was where the US had established the Joint Force Maritime Component Command (JFMCC) under Rear Admiral Joseph Kilkenny. The JFMCC was tasked to oversee maritime coordination of rescue operations and delivery of relief supplies; operational support for the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); coordination of all US and foreign vessels (eventually including the four Canadian ships); coordination of all naval aircraft (including Canadian helicopters); and restoration of naval facilities along the Gulf Coast.



HMCS *Athabaskan* sails through rough seas generated by Tropical Storm *Ophelia*, 8 September 2005.

Ville de Quebec, then *Athabaskan* docked first, took about four hours to unload, then sailed on to Biloxi, Mississippi. *Toronto* then docked when the first two had departed. When *SWA* docked, her crew was given two welcome gifts arranged by the Navy liaison officer – cold beer and baseball caps! While *Athabaskan* was in Pensacola, Commodore McFadden and his staff flew by helicopter to USS *Bataan*. When McFadden entered the room where the video-link was operating, Admiral Fitzgerald immediately greeted McFadden by his first name and said, “Dean, thanks for coming.” At the time the Canadians arrived, the US Navy was readying for departure. Admiral Fitzgerald told the officers on *Bataan* they, in fact, were not going anywhere. “You will stay,” he told Admiral Kilkenny. “Whatever these guys need, you will give them.” (The next day, President George Bush announced that those US forces were remaining in the area.) At that meeting arrangements were made to have the Canadians established on the same command channel that the Americans were using, just as was the case at Norfolk.

After that meeting, Commodore McFadden met with the head of the Seabees, the construction element of the US Navy, and decided that the Canadian combined navy-army construction team would team up with the Seabees and work with them. Both these units have received common training, and they perform similar roles. Although *SWA*'s crew was not trained to offer humanitarian assistance, when McFadden asked if the US Coast Guard could use them, he was told they could. As it materialized, the US Coast Guard could put *SWA* to work immediately, helping to deal with pollution problems from damaged oil rigs. When *SWA* was asked if the ship could assist with recovery and restoration of buoys, her captain replied, “We are very good at that.” That proved to be an understatement. McFadden then agreed to put *SWA* under operational control of the US Coast Guard. The legality of this was never questioned, and that arrangement was approved by General Hillier during his visit.

At Pensacola, *SWA* was met by staff from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) concerned with respect to Oceanographic Data Acquisition (ODAS) buoys that had been damaged or forced out of position. They were astonished and impressed when the Canadians could not only tow the heavy buoys into position, but could deploy them on target. *SWA* had to drop a 10-ton buoy at the end of a cable extending down 600 metres. On the first try, they got it within less than ten metres of the target – an outstanding result.

Logistics in Florida

While the Canadians were deployed in the continental US and in American waters, there was a constant need for logistical support. One problem was getting

the supplies stored in a donated warehouse moved closer to New Orleans. Because no Canadian military vehicles were readily available, the forward logistics team had tried to contract commercial truckers to deliver the supplies to the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). However, when commercial truckers were unable to handle the job, the American military eventually assisted with transport vehicles.

Another issue centred around the needs of CF personnel in the area. *Athabaskan* and *Toronto* would return to Pensacola to pick up food and other supplies, and *SWA* required equipment to repair its bow thrusters. Personnel flying in and out of the area required accommodation. For example, the Canadians already present were joined by another 15 personnel flown in from 15 Wing at Greenwood, and that team included physicians' assistants (PAs), mental health workers, and a social worker.⁶

Some needs were requested from Formation Logistics in Shearwater and sent to Pensacola. For example, the parts for the bow thrusters were obtained in Canada and flown to Pensacola. They also acquired medical supplies to re-stock *SWA*. For some of those purchases, they needed cash. They also needed to supply petty cash as an advance on allowances to some outgoing personnel to ensure they had enough funds to cover incidental and emergency expenses on their way home. As it materialized, they eventually got a designated finance clerk to deploy to Pensacola to handle those transactions.

Although the forward logistics staff in Pensacola had established both Internet and secure communications with the four ships and with MSOC in Halifax, there were problems associated with keeping in touch with the divers and the construction engineers. However, both the engineers and the divers possessed Blackberries, and that was ultimately how the forward logistics personnel kept in touch with those personnel and arranged for needed supplies. By good fortune, Admiral

McNeil had previously equipped his people with Blackberries after finding them to be an excellent communication tool during his time working at the Privy Council Office in Ottawa.

Mississippi Coast Coliseum (a hockey rink) into a supply centre. At a particular FEMA supply centre, no-one from FEMA or a non-governmental organization (NGO) knew how to operate a forklift. The supply technicians from *Ville de Quebec* not only could do that, but they could also unload the tractor trailers and load supplies onto smaller vehicles faster than FEMA could move in supplies. An officer from *Athabaskan* described his arrival at Biloxi as follows: “As the craft (US troop transport unit) landed us on the beach, we were met, not only by our own ship’s crew but that of *HMCS Ville de Quebec* and US soldiers and marines from Mexico. Transportation was arranged to take us where we were most needed – clean-up and humanitarian shelters handing out food, water and much needed supplies.”⁷



USN photo 050911-N-0535P-089 by Photographer's Mate 3rd Class Jay C. Pugh

Canadian soldiers assigned to *HMCS Athabaskan* unload supplies destined for *Katrina* relief at Pensacola, Florida, 11 September 2005.

The Canadians also built small shelters for people lining up for supplies, and helped load those supplies into private vehicles. They also constructed some shelters in the outfield of a baseball stadium where victims could do laundry, and hooked up the washers and dryers that someone had donated. Captain Gardam of *Athabaskan* used his ship’s helicopter to get a view of the area: “In all honesty I have never seen anything like it in my life. I flew by helo over New Orleans, then Biloxi and Gulfport. Biloxi in particular looked like a third world nation. There was nothing standing.”⁸

The Canadians worked on public buildings to avoid conflict with the private contractors now pouring in. However, in the words of Commander Moors: “Once we got ashore and started working and saw the civilian horsepower of the United States come rolling in, it became apparent that the manpower force of our ships wouldn’t be required as long as we thought.” Since the US Navy was finalizing its own plans, the Canadians coordinated their own departure with that of the Americans. The final decision was made when a US contractor, loaded with supplies and equipment, stopped to ask the Canadian when they were leaving. Moors said those civilian firms had heavy equipment and an expertise the Canadians could not match: “So our immediate assistance was timely and was much appreciated, but you could sense after five or six days it was time for us to pull out.”⁹

At that point, there were five separate operations under the overall control of the task force commander: the three navy ships – *Athabaskan*, *Toronto*, and *Ville de Quebec*, anchored off Biloxi, Mississippi, sending work parties ashore each day; the composite dive team in New Orleans; the forward logistics team in Pensacola, Florida; the composite construction engineering group at Bay St. Louis, Mississippi; and the SWA assisting the US Coast Guard. In addition, there was the support team in Halifax continually responding to requests for supplies – such as the parts for the bow thrusters for *SWA* – and for personnel.

The forward logistics personnel also made arrangements for General Hillier during his visit. It was planned to move him and his staff around on a Canadian *Sea King*, as well as in staff cars, trucks, and jeeps. The Americans advance-checked every location General Hillier intended to visit, tasked a backup helicopter to shadow his *Sea King*, and had suitable ground transportation (usually a jeep) ready to move him when he landed. Commodore McFadden briefed the general on the arrangements he had made to date, including the creation of composite navy-army units of divers and engineers.

On to Biloxi

After leaving Pensacola, *Athabaskan* and *Ville de Quebec* moved towards Biloxi Mississippi, where *HMCS Toronto* joined them. Since the water in this port is very shallow, they had to anchor approximately 17 kilometres off-shore. After the meeting with Commodore McFadden, *Bataan* provided Landing Craft Air Cushion (LCAC), in effect, hovercraft, and some Landing Craft Utility (LCUs) so sailors could be ferried ashore. While the landing barges could accommodate as many as 200 persons, they could operate only in daylight. They would depart from *Bataan* at dawn, pick up crew members at the three Canadian ships, take them to shore, and then return them at dusk. The trip itself took close to two hours to complete. However, the RIBs and the *Zodiacs* would have been much slower, and they would have carried far fewer personnel.

Once on shore, the Canadians were directed by a US Navy beach master, and assigned to both hand out supplies and to assist in cleaning debris from a US military retirement centre: the entire first floor of the 34-storey building had been destroyed. The Canadians also helped clean up a church and a Vietnamese cultural centre; and also transformed the



HMCS *Ville de Québec*

The Return

When word came that Hurricane *Rita* might hit the same area as *Katrina*, Commodore McFadden, concerned for the welfare and safety of his personnel, decided *Ville de Québec* and *Toronto* would leave Biloxi on 18 September, with a stopover at the US naval base at Mayport, Florida, until it was known exactly where *Rita* would make landfall. *Athabaskan* would proceed to Norfolk where she was scheduled for degaussing, and then continue on to Halifax. To avoid *Rita*, the ships steamed south at 24 knots until they rounded Key West, the southern tip of the Florida Keys, then slowed to 18 to 20 knots as they headed north. They then stood by at Mayport until it was clear *Rita* would not impact the same area. Thereafter, the two frigates returned to Halifax. By that time, *SWA* had accepted a task far enough south in the area that she was not in danger from *Rita*.

Before leaving the Biloxi area, Admiral McFadden told his two senior staff officers that someone would have to remain in the area as task force commander. The divers would still be *in situ*, as would the navy and army engineers. Logistics personnel would also still be deployed at Pensacola,

“In addition to NOAA personnel, technicians from the National Data Buoy Center in Stennis, Mississippi joined *SWA* to do repair work.”

SWA, however, was still active. After a new captain and crew were flown in on September 22-23, she set out for Honduras to recover and tow a huge buoy – 30 metres wide – back to Pensacola. The trip took five-to-six days, and was by far the furthest south a Canadian Coast Guard ship had ever been operationally employed. On 28 September, with the agreement of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, *SWA* was assigned to repair buoys damaged, not only by *Katrina* and *Ophelia*, but also by *Rita*. The ship was further authorized to remain deployed until late-October.

In addition to NOAA personnel, technicians from the National Data Buoy Center in Stennis, Mississippi joined *SWA* to do repair work.¹¹ Many buoys were too large to be taken on board, and had to be towed to their proper locations. Because *SWA* was the only element of the task force remaining, Commander Gravel turned command over to Lieutenant-Commander Anderson, who had been with *SWA* during the entire deployment, and would eventually return with her to Halifax. He thus became the third and last commander of the task force (CTJTG 306), and presumably, the first lieutenant-commander to ever command a task force! En route back to Halifax, *SWA* restored three more buoys off the Carolina coast,¹² and thereafter disembarked NOAA personnel and equipment at Portland, Maine.

and *SWA* would continue assisting the US Coast Guard in the region. Commander Gravel, who was the fleet technical officer, volunteered for the job, thus becoming the second task force commander. He therefore assumed overall responsibility for the divers, the engineers, logistics, communications, and the Coast Guard response, and operated primarily from Keesler Air Force Base near Biloxi, with occasional visits to Pensacola. Before the ships departed, some communications personnel on *SWA* were transferred to *Toronto*, which resulted in an earlier return for some personnel no longer required in the area. It also gave those transferred a chance to travel on a warship, and provided exposure to its communications systems.

As mentioned, the army and navy engineers – working with the Seabees – stayed on when the three warships departed. The construction team, which included skilled trades such as carpenters and electricians, constructed and repaired buildings.¹⁰ Due to practical experience garnered in dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane *Juan* in 2003, the Canadians were better equipped to deal with destruction than the Americans. They had, for example, pipes for construction, small generators, and a lot of plywood. When the Canadians finally left, the Seabees asked if they could have some of their equipment and small generators, which the Canadian engineers generously decided to donate to their US colleagues. As the Canadian operation wound down, the divers and the construction teams were bussed to Pensacola, and then flown back to Canada.

DND photo VL2010-0125-22



Summary and Conclusions

In a classic monograph, social scientists and behaviorists C.E. Fritz and J.H. Mathewson argue that over-response – they labelled it “convergence” – is normal behavior in the wake of a disaster. They say it is caused by unwanted, unofficial response to an incident. They argue that this behavior is stimulated by media reports, and might be stopped if a short-term media blackout was enforced.¹³ In *Convergence Revisited*, Joseph Scanlon, using data from a tire fire that occurred in Southern Ontario, during which 14 million used rubber tires burned for 18 days, opined that even *official* convergence can be overwhelming.¹⁴ What appears to have happened in the wake of *Katrina* was a mix of responses. There was the *official* response, for example, by the US military. And there was the *invited* response of critical personnel, such as the Canadian Red Cross volunteers who had acquired previous US disaster experience.

But there was also what might be termed “invited convergence” – consisting of supplies and personnel which the US was reluctant to refuse. It did, however, ultimately reject aid from two countries for political reasons - even though the situation in and around New Orleans was fluid, and it was hard to determine just what type of material was needed ‘when and where.’ While this article has examined the flow of Canadian supplies and personnel into the system, it does not document what happened to those latter contributions. Distribution was left to FEMA, and the CF did not request any accounting from FEMA.

If the only value of Operation *Unison* had been to send supplies, it would have made sense to send only *SWA*, or a merchant ship. However, the provision of supplies proved to be only one aspect of the success of Operation *Unison*. The Canadian divers who teamed up with their American colleagues helped clear away underwater debris faster than would have been possible otherwise. They also worked in areas where the Americans initially were reluctant to go, due to concerns about contamination. The sailors from *Toronto*, *Ville de*

Quebec, and *Athabaskan* helped restore veterans’ housing, cleaned up a church and a Vietnamese cultural centre, built shelters, cleaned up a hockey rink so it could be used as a supply depot, and helped FEMA organize, unload, and load supplies. The navy and army engineers integrated with the Seabees so well that they stayed on when the three Canadian warships departed the area. *SWA* restored most of the dislocated weather buoys in the Gulf and along the Atlantic Coast, and she was so productive in her efforts that the Americans kept asking for her stay to be extended.

The Canadians deployed on shore were welcomed everywhere. One member of the Naval Construction Team, Master Warrant Officer André Boudreau, said the local people were surprised but

very appreciative to see the small team from Canada. People driving by would stop, he said, get out of their cars, and come over to shake their hands.¹⁵ Captain David Gardam, *Athabaskan*’s captain, said: “One thing I find that the Canadian task force brings to the table that no other organization in the Government of Canada does, is that we can go anywhere in the world fast, and when we deploy, we are a city, we have everything on our back. We need no support and that’s exactly how it was. We arrived and we were working within about six hours after we arrived; and we had ‘boots on the ground’ working.”¹⁶

Operation *Unison* proved to be more than just the sum of its parts. It was a cooperative response involving all three services. It led to teamwork between the navy and the coast guard. It involved not only intra-service cooperation among the Canadian services, but extensive cooperation between Canada and the United States. It was, in fact, the first real test for what General Hillier saw as the need for joint operations, and a first and very successful test for the about-to-be-created Canada Command. Further, *Unison* was carried out when the only integrated command was Joint Task Force Atlantic. It was, in the words of one of those involved, “better than 100 exercises.”

The navy, for example, transported not only its own personnel, but also Air Command maintenance personnel and army engineers. The air force transported civilians, government officials, and its own personnel, some of whom headed to Florida to link up with the navy. The army provided supplies, personnel, and transportation for its own personnel, and supplies for the navy. Its divers and engineers worked seamlessly with navy personnel. There was cooperation between the military and the civilian communities both in terms of acquisition of supplies, and with respect to delivery of personnel. Finally, there was cooperation between the coast guard and the navy. Operation *Unison*, as the title of this article suggests was truly a joint air-land-sea operation. Most importantly, it was cobbled together very quickly, and yet it run smoothly, with good communications demonstrated throughout.

Canada-US cooperation included arrangements to fuel the task force at sea, to unload supplies at a US base, teamwork between Canadian and US divers, teamwork between Seabees and Canadian engineering units, the provision of US transportation for Canadians moving from ship-to-shore, and the US agreement to waive some normal requirements, such as passports for Canadian Coast Guard personnel. It also involved the Canadian Coast Guard taking over some functions of the US Coast Guard, as well as coming under operational control of the US Coast Guard. In one sense, all the Canadian activity was being directed by the Americans. However, at the same time, the Canadians were free to refuse any given task, and free to leave when they believed it was appropriate to do so. It aptly demonstrated how two allies can work together sharing common goals, and it was the first step toward US Northern Command and Canada Command working together.

Smooth cooperation among the elements of the Canadian navy, army, air force, and coast guard was a major achievement; although cooperation with the US Navy was somewhat less successful on occasion. However, the Canadian Navy is continually running joint exercises and operations with the US Navy. Captain Gardam commented: "For us, because the Navy has been integrating...our [needed] ability to communicate, to understand the operations planning process, to work with our US counterpart is second to none. There is no other Navy that can be as seamless as us...with the US, so [the experience] was outstanding."¹⁷

The Canadian response to *Katrina* took place shortly after Canada declined to join the US attack on Iraq. Canada's quick response after 9/11 had faded from memory, but the integrated response with American forces after *Katrina* warmed relationships that had cooled somewhat. Finally, as experience with *Juan* made the Canadian Forces better prepared for *Katrina*, experience with *Katrina* made the CF better prepared for future incidents. When an earthquake struck Haiti in January 2010, the CF again responded.

A reconnaissance team and the Disaster Assistance Response Team went in by air, and two warships – *Athabaskan* and *Halifax* – followed by sea. Some of the equipment carried by those ships consisted of the provisions that had been assembled and preserved because of the lessons learned from the response to *Katrina*. In Haiti, in contrast to *Katrina*, the Canadian ships had to use their helicopters and boats to ferry personnel and equipment to shore, but, just as had occurred in the wake of *Katrina*, the Canadians asked the Haitians what they needed – then did what was asked of them.

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HMCS *Athabaskan* heads out of Halifax harbour in support of Operation *Unison*, 6 September 2005.

DND photo HS2005-0686-02 by Corporal Halina Follas

NOTES

- The ranks used in this article are the ranks these persons held at the time. Many have since been promoted.
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- Joseph Scanlon, *Convergence Revisited: A New Perspective on a Little Studied Topic* (Boulder, CO: The University of Colorado, 1992).
- Davis, p. 6.
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