



Dealing with Hurricane

IRMA

Gary Sullivan analyses how Operation Ruman helped the humanitarian aid effort in the Caribbean after a natural disaster struck.



You may not have heard of the military operation codenamed Operation Ruman, but you would have seen it nightly on the TV news during September and October 2017 as Hurricane Irma ripped through the British Virgin Islands (BVI). The mainstream press would have you believe the Government was slow to act; but the facts are that the British armed forces were in the Caribbean on standby and on Thursday 7th September, after the eye of the storm had just passed, the Royal Logistic Corps (RLC) and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) ship *RFA Mounts Bay* began the rescue and recovery operation.

It was 17 Port and Maritime Regiment RLC, which operates out of the army's Sea Mounting Centre in Marchwood, Hampshire, that went ashore on the island of Anguilla, using its combat support boats to recce the beaches to find safe landing sites. At the same time, the Mexeflotes, landing rafts used in ship-to-shore operations, began their journey from *RFA Mounts Bay*, which sat just off the coast. The Mexeflotes are commanded by Junior NCOs. These young soldiers have significant responsibility operating in unpredictable seas as they begin transporting the specialist disaster relief team drawn from the RLC and the Royal Engineers, plus food, fuel and shelter, to the disaster-stricken island. Over the next 32 days, they visited the BVI, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and Dominica, delivering 4t of water, over 1t of food, 290 shelter kits, 25t of building material, two fire-engines and 600 passengers transfers (including a governor, multiple government officials, UK and Cayman police, Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development staff, armed forces personnel and civilians). Shore teams from *RFA Mounts Bay* worked tirelessly to clear wreckage to get ports and airports operational and using its marine engineers' skills to get the power station and desalination plant up and running.

Meanwhile, back in the UK, Operation Ruman was gearing up for the next phase. With HMS *Ocean* en route and the RAF beginning the airlift, Deputy Commander of the Joint Task Force Brigadier John Ridge started pulling in other resources



from other units across the army, one of which was the Engineer and Logistic Staff Corps (Staff Corps), a Volunteer Reserve Unit staffed with senior industry executives. The Staff Corps formed in the Crimean War. It is now part of the 77th Brigade, and this influential army unit was able to call upon subject matter experts to support the humanitarian aid effort.

Lt Col Tim Brent, Head of Logistics, international professional services firm Jacobs Engineering, was deployed to the Caribbean to assist Brigadier Ridge and the BVI Government with the programme management and to manage the reach-back element of Operation Ruman. The logistics of humanitarian aid are often complex, with government(s), NGOs and the military all competing for resources. The Staff Corps was also able to use its network to obtain equipment and expertise from Vodafone and BT. The BT team were able to deploy significant satellite receiving equipment to get mobile and internet communications up and running. In addition, advice and guidance was provided on temporary power and water supply.

Getting the infrastructure to a point where ports and airports were able to be used by the military was vital, as it would be some weeks before civilian aircraft and ships would be able to be used. The increase in logistics capability enabled the operation to increase the speed of delivery. At one point, the pace of the logistics operation outstripped that of Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is not all boats, planes and automobiles. You will have seen a coffee mug printed with the phrase: *Keep calm and carry on*. Well, the military would add to that: *adapt and overcome*. The military team in the Caribbean was increasing in size and the RLC had deployed chefs and catering teams; but with buildings either wrecked or left unsafe, how do you set up catering facilities for the troops? It was an unusual solution, perhaps, but a circus tent was found, a deal done and voilà, the cookhouse was operational.

In a world where everything is about joint operations and the whole force approach, Operation Ruman was an example of how that model can work. The support came from all three services, from regular units and reserves and the private sector. The speed of assembly was impressive and a logistics chain that stretched over 4,000 miles enabled lives to be saved and the rebuilding to begin at the earliest possible moment: a timely reminder that without a skilled and resourced logistics capability, operations – civilian or military – will not succeed.

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