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A REPORTER AT LARGE

MISSION TO SUMATRA

by DAN BAUM

The marines of Expeditionary Strike Group Five take on the tsunami.

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The United States military has a long and bitter history of being constrained by the countries that host its overseas military bases. Thailand in 1975 objected to U.S. Marines using Thai bases to stage their response to the seizing of the American freighter *Mayagüez* by the Khmer Rouge. Costa Rica in 1979 ejected a U.S. Air Force unit that was preparing to evacuate Americans from Nicaragua. And Spain and France in 1986 refused to let U.S. planes based in Britain fly over their territory on their way to bomb Libya. When the government of Turkey refused, in early 2003, to allow American forces to invade Iraq across the Turkish border, Pentagon planners got serious about freeing the United States from 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. As naval officers like to put it, “sea-basing” allows the United States to project its power anywhere in the world “without a permission slip.” In the past two years, the Navy has also begun organizing what it calls Expeditionary Strike Groups—small fleets built around amphibious assault ships stuffed with marines and helicopters. The Navy has four such groups afloat now; it plans to have more patrolling international waters—“like a cop on the beat”—ready on a few days’ notice not only to put marines ashore anywhere in the world but to support them for as long as they need to be there. Sea Power 21, the Navy’s broad plan to respond to the post-9/11 era of small wars and uncertain alliances, is a military policy for a day when America might find itself without allies.

Rear Admiral Christopher Ames, the commander of Expeditionary Strike Group Five, learned about the Asian tsunami on December 26th the way most of us did: from television. He and his strike group—seven Navy and Coast Guard ships plus a submarine, carrying among them more than two thousand marines—had just left their home port of San Diego for a six-month deployment. The group was a couple of days from Guam, where it was scheduled to stop before heading for the Persian Gulf. The group’s marines were the closest to the disaster scene, so, in anticipation of an order, Ames told his officers to begin planning to provide help to tsunami victims. “I had a feeling,” he told me, as we talked in his cramped stateroom aboard the U.S.S. *Bonhomme Richard*.

Ames is no crusty old salt; at fifty, he has an eager, open manner that seems more executive than warrior, and a master’s degree in public administration from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. The formal order came by classified e-mail on December 28th to stop at Guam for supplies and then “proceed at best speed” to Sri Lanka. “‘Proceed at best speed’ aren’t words you often hear,” Ames said. “We’re very fuel conscious. An order like that is not given without considerable forethought.” A few days later, the group was redirected to Banda Aceh, in Sumatra, the city closest to the earthquake’s epicenter. As they pulled into Guam, trucks loaded with humanitarian supplies were lined up on the docks “as far as you could see,” Ames said. He sent a party to the Ace hardware store near the port to buy just about everything in stock—shovels, lumber, hammers, nails—and within ten hours the group was under way again.

Expeditionary Strike Group Five was in many ways the perfect response to the tsunami. No other agency responding to the disaster had anywhere near its capabilities. The *Bonhomme Richard* alone would have been a godsend to the people of Sumatra. Commissioned in 1998 and named for John Paul Jones’s privateer, she was designed to be the Marine Corps’s dream boat. Her entire stern opens to release the high-speed air-cushion landing craft necessary for the Marines’ rare but signature beach assaults. From the outside, she resembles a small aircraft carrier, though she lacks the catapult for throwing planes into the air. Instead, her flight deck is given over to six vertical-lift Harrier jump jets as well as a wide selection of helicopters, big and small. In addition to being a seaborne platform from which to launch land assaults, the ship could serve as a floating emergency room and thus free the Marines of having to treat their wounded in rudimentary and vulnerable field hospitals. Immediately off the flight deck are three large triage rooms equipped with X-ray readers, oxygen tanks, a decontamination chamber, and other medical

equipment; a large elevator descends from here to the hospital belowdecks. Off to the side hangs a discreet blue curtain, behind which wait twelve stainless-steel morgue drawers. For such a large ship, the Bonhomme Richard draws shallow—only twenty-six feet—so she can move close to shore. The Bonhomme Richard and the other ships in Expeditionary Strike Group Five were carrying twenty-two helicopters; five landing craft, each with a sixty-ton capacity; desalinators capable of making unlimited quantities of fresh water; and forty high-riding seven-ton trucks to master the island's ruined coastal roads. The ships carried backhoes, bulldozers, generators, portable floodlights, and twenty-two hundred marines to rebuild bridges, treat the injured, restore electricity, and provide plenty of healthy young muscle. As the ships approached Indonesian waters, Ames told a reporter on board that he looked forward to putting "boots on the ground."

It didn't work out that way. As the American ships approached the Sumatran coast, they received word that the Indonesians wanted few, if any, Marine boots on the ground. Nobody gave reasons for this, but the Marines, bobbing in calm waters almost within earshot of shore, could imagine. Relations between the U.S. and Indonesia have been cooling since the nineteen-nineties, when the U.S. began curbing prodigious arms sales to the government in protest of human-rights abuses in East Timor. Aceh Province is home to a separatist movement that the Indonesian Army has been trying, sometimes brutally, to quell. (Before the tsunami, the province was largely off limits to foreigners.) The Indonesians, having shaken off, in 1949, three centuries of Dutch rule, did not, in any case, want to appear dependent on foreign powers in responding to the tsunami. Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim population in the world, and in light of the Iraq war it wouldn't do to have swarms of marines charging ashore. So here sat the marines, waiting for their permission slip and itching to get to the beaches.

I reached the Bonhomme Richard by helicopter on January 8th. The next day, a huge boxy supply ship, the U.S.N.S. Concord, arrived from Singapore and drew alongside. The Bonhomme Richard's helicopters roared off the deck and buzzed around the Concord like flies; in several hours of feverish and noisy activity, they moved tons of rice, water, and other goods into the Bonhomme Richard's hold—the kind of oceangoing resupply, independent of a host nation, envisioned by Sea Power 21. "The heroes are the logisticians," Ames told me. "Within two weeks of the tsunami, 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." He paused while the ship's chaplain came on the intercom with the evening prayer, I Samuel 30:24, which the chaplain artfully interpreted: "For as his share is who goes down into the battle, so shall his share be who stays by the supplies: they shall share alike."

Inactivity is hard on marines. Those on the Bonhomme Richard milled around the ship's narrow steel halls, hung out in the enlisted mess watching Fox News and war movies on a big-screen TV, cleaned and re-cleaned their weapons, and got on one another's nerves. "It's frustrating—we're good to go," Sergeant Arthur Anthony said. Sea duty is uncomfortable. The enlisted mess is vast, low-ceilinged, and as chaotic as a high-school cafeteria, with lots of shouting and grab-ass. The din is maddening, and the air suffused with a heavy, rank odor, like steam-table water left too long. Unlike officers, who eat off crockery, enlisted sailors and marines are served on sectional plastic trays. Their salad bar is more extensive than the officers', but otherwise their food is worse—garlic bread made of hot-dog rolls, thick squares of pizza beribboned with orange cheese, soggy spaghetti. A lance corporal said it made him pine for a Jäger Bomb—the herbal liqueur Jägermeister mixed with Red Bull.

An aircraft carrier is often compared to a floating city, but, with its stale air, the incessant clang of heavy steel doors, and pasty-faced men in coveralls threading poorly lit corridors, it feels more like a floating prison. Nobody is allowed on the flight deck without good reason, so the only glimpse of the outdoors that most sailors and marines get is from a vast hangar bay one deck down, and only when the huge elevator hatches—through which aircraft are pushed onto moving platforms—are left open to the sea. Many crew members on the Bonhomme Richard see as little of the sun as they would if they were serving on a submarine. Off-duty officers wanting a moment's peace can sit in the wardroom, which, though not luxurious, is at least quiet, but the enlisted people's only refuge from noise and commotion is their bunk, or "rack"—a slot in a stack of beds ten feet high, with the bunk above so close that it's impossible to read in bed. It's a tribute to the allure of the services that so many marines re-enlist. Their discomfort helps explain why they're in such magnificent physical condition: they burn off bottled-up 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 American Forces Network News while running on treadmills. The lawyer for Army Specialist Charles Graner, who was on trial for 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."

People's lives were at stake in Sumatra, but everybody on the Bonhomme Richard, down to the newest private, seemed aware that something else hung in the balance as well. The United States had a rare opportunity to make a grand gesture of friendship to the Islamic world at a time when many Muslims were viewing the war in Iraq, and the broader war on terror, as a cover for a war on Islam. Marines tend to be idealistic. They believe that the United States is righteous, and those on the Bonhomme Richard were genuinely eager to get out there and prove it. The Navy, too, had something to prove—that, in an era of small infantry wars, a big blue-water force remains relevant. A few months ago, a retired two-star Army general named Robert Scales, a former commandant of the Army War College, summarized a view often heard from the men in green. He told me, “They haven’t fought a blue-water sea battle since Leyte Gulf,” in 1944. “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?” When I repeated this to Admiral Ames, he sighed as though he’d heard it too often. The tsunami-relief effort was, for Ames and his branch, a chance to answer that question. “We’ve talked about this idea of sea-basing for several years, of being able to project power anywhere in the world without asking permission,” he said. “What we’re doing here validates the beauty of it.”

The ship woke on January 10th to the news that the Marines were finally going ashore in force. What’s more, they were going in the miraculous vehicle that has replaced the landing craft of yore: the Landing Craft Air Cushion, or LCAC (pronounced “EL-kack”). The LCAC is essentially a gigantic everglades boat, a platform eighty-eight feet long and forty-four feet wide that rides on an inflatable rubber skirt, with two twelve-foot fans on the back for propulsion. It can transport a tank, or a hundred marines, or twelve Humvees across the waves at more than forty-five m.p.h. and zoom up onto the sand. The Marines haven’t made a landing under significant 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, dangerous maneuver today; it’s what sets them apart.

The Marines differentiate themselves from the Army in other ways, too. They were the first to adopt strange, digital-camouflage uniforms dotted with tiny, pixillated squares that make the men and women wearing 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,” one landing-team major told me. “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 marines know who I am.” The Marine ethic also dictates that every marine is a rifleman; even cooks and typists are trained and ready to go into combat at a moment’s notice, their rifles always nearby.

But the order on January 10th was “No weapons.” The Indonesians were finally letting the marines come ashore, but they had to come unarmed. The marines were appalled. “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. A ripple of hope went through the ship when Fox News reported that shots had been fired in Banda Aceh, perhaps by the rebels who have been trying for a quarter of a century to gain independence from Indonesia. Then an American helicopter rolled over in a rice paddy, leaving its injured crew momentarily stranded, and the Marine pilots on the Bonhomme Richard began carrying sidearms—though with the magazines removed. Major Robert Salasko, who is thirty-six, and is known as Bubba, sat down on January 10th for a breakfast of six hard-boiled eggs and a sweet roll, as the loudspeaker announced a random drug screening (“Urinalysis now being held in ship’s brig and will secure at sixteen hundred”). “Going ashore,” Salasko boomed happily to Major Keith Parry. Gloomily stirring his Cream of Wheat, Major Parry, who commands an elite combat team but had orders to stay aboard and check helicopter manifests, mumbled, “Don’t shoot anybody.” Salasko responded, “Can’t take my weapon.” He patted the sides of his close-cropped cranium. “Except this.”

“That’s a hindrance,” Parry said.

“You’re jealous.”

“Got that right.”

No aspect of the beach landing was left to chance. “What I’m going to do is this,” the strike group’s public-affairs officer, Lieutenant Billy Ray Davis, told an Associated Press television crew. “I’m going to have the LCAC back out of the ship with a helicopter overhead.” He held his hands out, palms down, to show their relative positions. “Then

I'm going to have you in another helicopter up here"—he raised one hand to shoulder height—"so you can get the helicopter, the LCAC, 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 A.P. reporter have them."

We passed through the cavernous hangar deck to get to the LCAC. Sailors and marines were scooting about in forklifts to an exquisitely mixed soundtrack of helicopter engines, beep-beeps of backing vehicles, shouts, *ah-ooo-gah* klaxons, and loudspeaker announcements. Everywhere stood pallets loaded with Gitangkim rice from Thailand, Ice Cool bottled water from Malaysia, and U.S.-bagged rice labelled "Whole Grain White Rice, Origin: Vietnam."

When Marine infantry go ashore in the LCAC, they're seated in windowless steel compartments, not al fresco with sea spray in their faces, because anybody on deck could be sucked into the giant fans. The twelve-nautical-mile trip to shore took about fifteen minutes; when we emerged from the compartment, we faced a phalanx of cameramen and photographers who had been helicoptered to shore ahead of us and, behind them, Meulaboh, an utterly destroyed town that had recently been home to thousands of people and a small Indonesian Army base. The Singaporean Army was running relief here—its biggest foreign-aid deployment ever—and its smartly dressed soldiers stood in a semicircle behind the photographers. The noise was intense; three helicopters, with a television cameraman or a still photographer in the door of each, circled above. The Army base and the town behind it were a disaster-scape of mud-smearred, ruined concrete buildings, uprooted trees, overturned cars, beached boats, sheared-off roofs, and vast jumbles of timber, rubbish, and rubble. People picked through the wreckage or just sat, staring. From the skeletons of a few surviving houses, we could see that the wave had been about one story high here, and fierce enough to tear huge holes in the strongest of the town's concrete walls. Marine Colonel Thomas Greenwood, the commander of the strike group's marines, stepped off the LCAC with Navy Captain Michelle Howard, the commodore of the three amphibious vessels in the group. They turned, walked back onto the LCAC, and stepped off it again. Photographers pressed in around them. Beyond the beach and across a broad trench of water and mud, a small group of Indonesian soldiers and civilians watched. A massive forklift, brought ashore on the LCAC, began unloading onto the debris-strewn beach what was said to be sixty-four thousand pounds of rice and bottled water. Three trips by the ship's big helicopters could have brought the same quantity of supplies to a dry spot inland, where the Indonesians' small trucks could have reached them, so when a Singaporean military officer walked by I asked why the Americans hadn't done that instead. "I have the same question, because this is waterlogged," he said. He waved a hand at the large flooded area beyond the beach. "The trucks can't get through."

Colonel Greenwood marched past, shaking hands. "I wish you'd been here earlier," he shouted to me 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 Commodore Howard stepped up to shake hands and introduce herself. "Michelle," she said, pumping my hand. Howard, an African-American woman of high rank in a service that has not always been easy for women, is short and powerfully built, palpably smart and dynamic, with prominent, highly animated features. She was wearing blotchy desert fatigues and a flat, soft-brimmed boonie hat. "We have a stovepipe vision of what we can do, but we'd spoken with the Singaporeans first," she said, enunciating with exaggerated clarity and gesturing broadly with her arms. "The Singaporeans have very good relations with the Indonesians, and their advice was"—here she executed a funky body ripple, bobbing her head and pushing down with her palms—"go slow."

The torpid sky tore open, as it had been threatening to do all day, drenching us in a sudden downpour. Howard didn't register the rain. "In the Navy, we command by negation. I communicate up what I want to do, and my superiors say, 'Yeah,' 'Yeah,' 'Yeah,' 'Stop!'" She spoke emphatically of cooperation and respect. "I will tell you this," she said as rain poured off the brim of her hat. "Everybody down to the lance corporal understood that this is a Muslim country, and you should have seen them going through the M.R.E.s"—meals ready to eat—"pulling out all the ones with pork in them." Finally, we walked back to the LCAC and got out of the rain. This time, I sat in the pilot house. As we backed into the surf, I looked upon sixty-four thousand pounds of rice and bottled water resting on the beach.

The next evening, I asked Colonel Greenwood, as we sat in his windowless stateroom, if he'd specifically negotiated permission to use the LCAC so that the Marines could have a televised beach-hitting event. He chuckled and waved away the question. Then he said, "There are four words we use every day with Colonel Geerhan," the Indonesian commander at Meulaboh. "'How. Can. We. Help.' I don't say, 'Why don't you use my trucks?' If I did that, I'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, at forty-nine, has a folksy air but a sterling pedigree—including stints at the Kennedy School and the National Security Council—and a chestful of medals that he wasn't wearing. He again recounted the incident on shore with the Frenchmen, as though France and the United States had recently been at war, and he emphasized his respect for the sensibilities of the Indonesians. "The only time Colonel Geerhan specifically said 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 notion that the Marines always have to be in charge is a stereotype that 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, unofficially, this ship's likely next stop. "We haven't always been good at expeditionary intelligence, that's true," he said. He pulled out a Smart Card, a folding laminated pocket card for marines to carry in Iraq, covered with transliterated Arabic phrases ("Can you get us out of here safely?"), communications tips ("Quick upward head snap with tongue click means no"), and thumbnail cultural sketches of Arabs, both Shia and Sunni, Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Turkoman ("As a religious and ethnic minority, the Chaldeans distrust both Kurdish and Arab intentions. They have peaceful relations with Turkoman"). "Ten, fifteen years ago, we wouldn't have had this," Greenwood said of the Iraq Culture Smart Card. "The Marines have learned the hard way. We continue learning."

The marines of Expeditionary Strike Group Five had no firm orders directing them to Iraq; they were merely slated to pass from Pacific Command to Central Command, or CENTCOM, which oversees the Iraq war. Most of the marines I spoke to, though, believed that with the war going as it is they would be called in. On my way to Indonesia, in Thailand, I'd met Marine Lance Corporal Joel Abshier, a young man who, as soon as we were introduced, told me, "I'm eager to get to Iraq, sir! That's where the fight is." 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." On the Bonhomme Richard, though, I found the marines more reflective, perhaps because many of them were veterans of the war's initial, or "kinetic" phase, which ended with the declaration "Mission accomplished." (The Marines now refer to that phase as Operation Iraqi Freedom I, or O.I.F. I. The messy insurgency that followed, which some of the Bonhomme Richard marines also participated in, is called O.I.F. II. Some are even starting to talk about O.I.F. III, the intensely violent period surrounding the elections.)

Lance Corporal Jeremy Harris, who is twenty-three, was a breacher in Iraq; he opened doors in the towns that his unit passed through, sometimes with a sledgehammer, sometimes with a shotgun blast, sometimes with C-4 explosives. He was scared every time, he said, and described his attitude about his return trip the way many marines did. "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."

On the morning of my last full day aboard the Bonhomme Richard, I stopped in a helicopter-maintenance office to say goodbye to some sailors I'd met and then hurried up to the organized chaos of the flight deck, where, for all the geopolitics involved, it was undeniably touching to see kids from the Midwest sweating and heaving big sacks of rice to help Asian fishing communities that they'd very likely never heard of before. I was put aboard a CH-46, a banana-shaped helicopter that was a mainstay during Vietnam; this one, in fact, had a little brass plate saying that it entered service in 1969—well before either of its pilots was born. The crew chief, Marine Corporal Eric Hutchinson, a strapping, ruddy twenty-two-year-old from outside Portland, Oregon, was wearing an unloaded pistol with the clip in his pocket. "You remember 'Apocalypse Now,' when the woman throws a grenade into the helicopter?" he shouted over the engines as he strapped me in. "I'm not down with that."

Hutchinson was eager to set me up with an audio helmet: I could hear the pilots talking to each other and then, suddenly, an electric guitar—Linkin Park's "Nobody's Listening." Grinning, Hutchinson gave me a thumbs-up and waggled his iPod at me, dancing in place as the helicopter leaped upward. At our feet was a box full of elfin parachutes from which dangled rolls of Life Savers. The flight-equipment crew, which takes care of life jackets and crash helmets, had made them during their off hours to drop over ruined villages to cheer up children. We flew fifty feet above the water at about a hundred and fifty m.p.h., 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 had been two weeks since the tsunami, and the bodies appeared to have sunk, been fished out, or carried out to sea. We skimmed

over coastal mudflats, which extended inland about half a mile. But they weren't mudflats. Faint squares showed through the 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 were the remains of a concrete building, shattered into pieces the size of dinner plates and strewn inland. Regiments of oil palms lay identically on their sides. All this destruction had happened in minutes on the morning of December 26th.

We flew for about fifteen minutes and set down at a tiny airfield in the middle of a jungle, well inland from the destruction, where a group of Indonesian soldiers and civilians waited. The people who lived along Sumatra's coast had never been long on cash and the things cash buys, but with fish and rice abundant neither had they been desperately poor. The soldiers seemed well enough cared for, but the civilians, grimacing against our noise and rotor wash, were destitute—frighteningly thin, traumatized, their clothes ragged and filthy. We made a bucket brigade to hand out the rice, then each of us Americans shook hands with each of the Indonesians, soldier and civilian alike. They touched their hearts and pressed their hands together. We had camcorders; they had camcorders. We filmed them and they filmed us. As we lifted off and swung back toward the ship for another load, Guns N' Roses came on the headset, singing "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." One advantage to listening to rock and roll on a Marine helicopter is that you can sing along as loud as you like. ✦