

Relief.8

Dan Baum
1650 Lombardy Drive
Boulder, CO 80304
(303) 546-9800
(303) 917-5024 mobile
dan@knoxandbaum.com

The Permission Slip

6,500 words

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 customary last five days of a long deployment, during which family members are invited aboard – was 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.”¹

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 back in the wardroom, happily wolfing Frosted Flakes, peanut butter sandwiches, and, coincidentally, Starbucks Sumatra coffee.

“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.”² Unlike sailors with less glamorous jobs, none of the pilots minded missing the Tiger cruise. “This is 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.”³ The first half of every day, they were flying relief missions to Sumatran towns, based on intelligence of what was needed where. In the afternoons, they freelanced, roaming at will and

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

² Lt. David Moffat, david.moffat@navy.mil

³ Lt. Eric Danielsen, eric.danielsen@navy.mil

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."⁴

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 and often, Lansford said, their nicknames are chosen for them. 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.⁵ Anybody who would choose a hot-dog name for himself like "Maverick" or "Iceman," as in the movie "Top Gun," would be considered uncool, he said. Behind him on the counter, a television alternated between Armed Forces Network, 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 -- and

⁴ Lt. David Moffat, david.moffat@navy.mil

⁵ Navy Lt. Shane Lansford, Shane.lansford@navy.mil

silent black-and-white video of the flight deck, apparently captured by cameras mounted high on the ship. Then AFN picked up Fox News, which scrolled this chiron: The Stingy Americans: You Won't Believe What the Liberals Are Calling America."

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 U.S. air force planes based on its soil to attack Cambodia in response to the seizing of the American freighter Mayaguez. 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. bombers based in Britain fly over their territory on their way to bomb Libya.⁶ 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 finally 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.⁷ As naval officers like to put it, "sea-basing" means the United States can project its power

⁶ File "base access constraints"

⁷ 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.”⁸ The Navy in the past two years 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;⁹ it plans to have eight more patrol international waters,¹⁰ “like a cop on the beat,” as Marines like to put it,¹¹ 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. 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.¹² It is, in short, a military policy ready for the day when America neither has nor needs allies.

On the day the Tiger cruise was canceled, I was passing through the Abraham Lincoln on my way to Expeditionary Strike Group Five, which was performing relief operations about a hundred miles south. Lansford draped a complicated life vest around my neck, shouted

⁸ 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.

⁹ Navy PAO Andrea Leahy, leahya@esg5.navy.mil

¹⁰ Files “Expeditionary Strike Groups in general,” “Expeditionary Strike Group concept,” and “ESGs in general”

¹¹ again, this is something you hear a lot. You can ask Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa at delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil

¹² For a discussion of this concept, which comes under Sea Power 21, see <http://www.usni.org/Proceedings/Articles02/proCNO10.htm#ourvision>

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 the bodies appeared to have sunk, been fished out, or carried to sea. We skimmed over 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 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 had been 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, as the engine raced overhead, crew chief Xipe Brooks began handing out water jugs as fast as he could. 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 "poor." The people grimacing here against our noise and rotor wash were destitute – frighteningly thin, their clothes ragged and filthy, traumatized. They pressed their hands together in a prayerful gesture and patted their hearts in thanks. A hundred yards away, two Indonesian soldiers in camouflage, assault rifles slung from their shoulders, smoked cigarettes and watched. 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.¹³ Ten minutes later we set down at the military

¹³ 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

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 helicopter landing zone from the apron and runways, which were strewn with roaring C-130 and Tupolev cargo planes, representing, at this particular moment, the air forces of Russia, Norway, Malaysia, Thailand, Australia, Singapore, Japan, France, Indonesia, and the United States. Europeans ran in every direction with clipboards or suitcases or television cameras, screaming above the engine roar and slick with 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 generators from Japan, rice and more rice. From here, American helicopters would carry it all to the hinterland.¹⁴ I would find one heading offshore to the Marines.

[line break]

¹⁴ these are my observations.

The USS Bonhomme Richard, named for John Paul Jones's privateer, was designed to be the Marine Corps's dream boat. Its entire stern opens to release the high-speed air-cushion landing craft necessary for the Marines' rare but signature beach assaults.¹⁵ Launched in 1998, the Bonhomme Richard resembles from the outside a small aircraft carrier, though it lacks the catapult for throwing airplanes into the sky. Instead, its flight deck is given over to transport and attack helicopters, as well as two vertical-lift Harrier jump jets. The ship was designed to 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, and other medical equipment; a large elevator descends from here to the hospital below decks. Coils of hose hang from the ceiling and the floor has a large drain. For such a large ship, the Bonhomme Richard draws shallow – only twenty-six feet¹⁶ -- so she can move close to shore. The idea is for helicopters to carry wounded Marines directly here, where corpsmen can stabilize them as they lie on the floor and then shuttle them down to the operating room. The Bonhomme Richard has never handled a mass-casualty event, though it has drilled to handle ten wounded Marines

¹⁵ See paper files

¹⁶ Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

simultaneously. The room is big enough to fit thirty or more. Off to the side hangs a discreet blue curtain, behind which wait twelve stainless-steel morgue drawers.¹⁷ (No tsunami victims were brought here; Marine helicopters took them instead to the civilian hospital at Banda Aceh.) The day after I arrived on board, a huge boxy supply ship, the USNS 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's good graces, envisioned by Sea Power 21. "The unsung heroes are the logisticians," said Rear Admiral Christopher Ames, commander of Expeditionary Strike Group Five, when I met him later in his cramped beige stateroom. "Within the two weeks since 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."¹⁸ He paused while the ship's chaplain came on the intercom with the evening prayer: First Samuel 30:24, which the chaplain artfully interpreted as, "For as his

¹⁷ Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

¹⁸ Admiral Christopher Ames, reachable through Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

share is that goes down to the battle, so shall his share be that stays with the supplies: they shall share alike."¹⁹

Ames is no crusty old salt; at fifty, he has an eager, open manner more executive than warrior, and a masters degree in public administration from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.²⁰ 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 notable for the refusal of a sailor, Fire Controlman 3rd Class Pablo Paredes, to board because he opposed the Iraq War.²¹ 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 told his officers to begin planning to provide help to 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 said. "An order like that is not given without considerable forethought." As the Group pulled into Guam, Ames could

¹⁹ file "Samuel 30:24 (Father Logan changed the last word to "supplies."

²⁰ File "Ames bio."

²¹ File "sailor refuses to deploy"

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.

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: twenty-three helicopters, five landing craft that each could hold sixty tons, desalinators capable of making unlimited quantities of fresh water, and forty high-riding, seven-ton trucks to master the island’s ruined coastal roads.²² The ships carried backhoes, bulldozers, generators, portable floodlights, and twenty-two hundred Marines²³ to rebuild bridges, treat the injured, restore electricity, and provide plenty of healthy young muscle.²⁴ On January 3, one of the Strike Group’s ships peeled off for Sri Lanka, but not before transferring seventy of its Marines to the Bonhomme Richard, because the need appeared so great in Sumatra.²⁵ As the ships approached Indonesian waters, Ames told a

²² this is from the paper files, and also an interview with the Marine commander, Colonel Tom Greenwood. All can be checked with Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa at delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil

²³ Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

²⁴ Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa at delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil

²⁵ this was told to me by Marine Sgt. Arthur Anthony, one of the seventy. (anthonya@duluth.usmc.mil) but could also be confirmed with Capt. Jay Delarosa, the Marine PAO, at delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil

reporter on board that he looked forward to putting "boots on the ground."²⁶

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. Nobody gave reasons for this, but the Marines, bobbing in calm waters almost within earshot of shore, could imagine. The U.S. and Indonesia have been cooling their friendship since the early nineties, when the U.S. began curbing prodigious arms sales to the government in protest of human rights abuses in East Timor.²⁷ Aceh province is home to a separatist movement that the Indonesian Army has been trying to quell, with occasional brutality.²⁸ The Indonesians, having in 1949 shaken off three hundred and sixty-three years of Dutch colonization, did not, in any case, want to appear dependent on foreign powers in responding to the tsunami.²⁹ Indonesia is the most populous Moslem country in the world, and in light of the Iraq war it wouldn't do to have swarms of Marines, with their zabernistic reputation, charging ashore. So here sat the Marines, waiting for their permission slip and itching to get to the beaches.

²⁶ file "boots on the ground"

²⁷ file "arms sales.doc"

²⁸ file "Amnesty International.doc"

²⁹ these are the explanations given by the American diplomatic representative in Medan, Paul Berg, 011-62-61-415-2200 or paulberg2002@yahoo.com

Inactivity is harder on Marines than combat. They're like border collies – if you have something for them to do they're terrific, if you don't, they'll chew your slippers. The Marines on the Bonhomme Richard milled around the ship's narrow steel halls, hung out in the enlisted mess with a big-screen TV, cleaned and recleaned their weapons, and got on each other's nerves. "It's frustrating; we're good to go," said Sergeant Arthur Anthony³⁰ as the television behind him blared Fox News with this banner: The Cost of Freedom: Why Social Security Benefits Must Be Cut! Sea duty is uncomfortable. The enlisted mess is vast, low-ceilinged, and as chaotic as a freshman cafeteria, with lots of shouting and grab-ass. The din is maddening, and suffused with a heavy, rank odor like steam table water left too long. Unlike officers, who eat off china, enlisted sailors and Marines are served on sectioned, beige 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, wet spaghetti. Surveying the room, Lance Corporal Jordan Coleman wished alarmingly for a jagerbomb. He intended no violence, but wanted only his favorite cocktail: the sweet herbal liqueur Jagermeister mixed with Red Bull energy drink.³¹ An aircraft carrier is often compared to a floating city, but with its stale air, incessant clang

³⁰ Sgt. Arthur Anthony anthonya@duluth.usmc.mil

³¹ Lance Corporal Jordan Coleman, jordan.coleman@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil

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 for most sailors and Marines is from a vast hangar bay one deck down, and there only when 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 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 sitting up to read is impossible. To say that enlisted Marines' comfort is the least of the Corps's concerns would be to overstate the priority it's given. It's a tribute to the allure of the services that so many Marines reënlist. Their discomfort helps explain why they're in such magnificent physical condition; they burn up 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 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."³²

[line break]

Peoples' lives were at stake in Sumatra but everybody on the Bonhomme Richard down to the lowliest lance corporal 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 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 believe 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 commander of the Army War College, summarized a view often heard from the men in green: "They haven't fought a blue-water sea battle since Leyte Gulf [in 1944]," he told me. "If you believe as I do that the wars of the conceivable future are going to look like Iraq, why

³² I don't have their names, alas.

do we have so many men, and so much money, floating around the ocean?"³³ 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. What we're doing here validates the beauty of it."³⁴

The ship woke on January 10 to the electrifying news that the Marines were finally going ashore in more than twos and threes. 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 an inflatable rubber skirt, with two twelve-foot fans on the back for propulsion. It can transport a tank, or a hundred Marines, or four humvees, across the waves at forty-five miles an hour and zoom up onto the dry sand.³⁵ The Marines haven't made a landing under fire since Inchon, in 1950,³⁶ but hitting the beach lies at the core of their mythology. They train for it endlessly and organize their

³³ Major General (retired) Robert Scales, 410-531-5345 home, 410-843-6821 office, or roberthscales@colgen.net

³⁴ Admiral Christopher Ames, reachable through Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

³⁵ see paper files

³⁶ I am pretty sure this is true, but I have emails out to several Marine PAOs to confirm it.

Expeditionary Units around the Battalion Landing Team. As they tell it, only the Marines can execute this dashing, 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, too. They've adopted strange, digital camouflage uniforms dotted with tiny, pixilated 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."³⁷ The Marine ethic also dictates that every Marine, man or woman, is a rifleman; even cooks and typists are trained and ready to go into combat at a moment's notice, able to aim an M-16 well enough to hit consistently a man-sized target half a kilometer away. Every Marine – even the cooks and typists – keeps his or her rifle nearby while on shore; the Marine and his rifle are well-nigh inseparable. As they chant

³⁷ Major Donald Wright, WrightDR@15meu.usmc.mil, who prefers not to be identified in the story

in boot camp, "this is my rifle. Without me, it is useless. Without it, I am useless." ³⁸

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.³⁹ 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 to gain independence from Indonesia for half a century. Then a helicopter from the Abraham Lincoln rolled over in a rice paddy when one of its wheels sank in unexpectedly soft mud, and the Marine pilots on the Bonhomme Richard began carrying sidearms – though 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

³⁸ ask any Marine PAO about this

³⁹ Lance Corporal Jordan Coleman, 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.

the day's 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. Major Parry, who commands an elite combat team but had orders to stay aboard and check helicopter manifests, gloomily stirred his cream of wheat. "Don't shoot anybody," Parry mumbled to Salasko, who 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."⁴⁰

Whatever it did to relieve suffering in Sumatra, 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 to 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."⁴¹ We

⁴⁰ Major Robert Salasko, salaskorp@15meu.bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil and Major Keith Parry, keith.parry@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil

⁴¹ Lt. Billy Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

passed through the cavernous hangar deck to get to the elack. Sailors and Marines were scooting about in forklifts to an exquisitely mixed soundtrack of helicopter engines, beep-beeps of backing vehicles, shouts, aa-ooo-gah klaxons, and loudspeaker announcements. Everywhere stood pallets of Gitangkim rice from Thailand, Ice Cool brand bottled water from Malaysia, and US-bagged rice labeled Whole Grain White Rice, Origin: Vietnam.

In the event, the landing wasn't much of a spectacle for anybody but AP and Fox; the rest of us were sealed in a windowless steel compartment. When Marine infantry go ashore in the elkack, they're seated in modular compartments, not al fresco with sea spray in their faces, because anybody on deck would be sucked into the giant fans and chopped to bits. The twelve nautical-mile trip⁴² to shore took about fifteen minutes; when we emerged from the compartment, we faced a phalanx of cameramen and photographers helicoptered to shore ahead of us, and behind them, Meulloboh, an utterly destroyed town that once held [tk] people and a small Indonesian Army base. The Singapore Army was in charge of relief here – its biggest foreign deployment ever⁴³ -- and its smartly dressed soldiers stood in a semi-circle behind the photographers. The noise was intense; three

⁴² Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa, delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil

⁴³ 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.

helicopters, with a television or still cameraman in the door of each, circled above. The Army base, and the town behind it, were 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. 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, commander of the Marines of the Strike Group, stepped off the elcack with Navy Captain Michelle Howard, commanding officer of the three amphibious vessels in the group. They turned, walked back onto the elcack, 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 elcack, 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 Navy's big helicopters could have brought the same quantity of supplies to a dry spot inland⁴⁴, where the Indonesians' small trucks could have reached it, so when Lieutenant Colonel Sao Ho Chin of the Singaporean Army walked by I asked why

⁴⁴ 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

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 wet area beyond the beach. "The trucks can't get through."⁴⁵

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 Captain Howard stepped up to shake hands and introduce herself. "Michelle," she said, pumping my hand. Howard is an African-American woman of high rank in a service that traditionally has not been easy for either women or blacks. She is short and powerfully built, palpably smart and dynamic, with beautiful large, highly animated features. In another life, she'd have been terrific on Sesame Street. 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 gave her body a funky ripple, bobbing her head and pushing down

⁴⁵ 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.

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 Moslem country, and you should have seen them going through the MREs, pulling out all the ones with pork in them.”⁴⁶ Finally we walked back to the elkack and got out of 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. As we backed into the surf, the sixty-four thousand pounds of rice and water still sat on the beach, looking forlorn and forgotten.

[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 televised 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, he said. “How. Can. We. Help. I don’t say,

⁴⁶ Capt. Michelle Howard is reachable through PAO Lt. Bill Ray Davis, pao@esg5.navy.mil

'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 has a folksy air but, at forty-nine, a sterling pedigree -- stints at the Kennedy School and the National Security Council, and a chestful of medals he wasn't wearing.⁴⁷ 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 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

⁴⁷ Greenwood bio in the 15th MEU booklet in the paper files.

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, alluding to the Marines' reputation for breaking a lot of crockery. He pulled out a folding laminated pocket card for Marines to carry in Iraq, filled with transliterated Arabic phrases ("can you get us out of here safely?" tig-der It-tal-laa-na Min-na Ib-a-man) communications tips ("quick upward head snap with tongue click means no") and thumbnail cultural characteristics of the Arabs, Shia, 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. The Marines have learned the hard way. We continue learning."

The specter of Iraq hung over the Bonhomme Richard. On my way here, in Thailand, I'd met a young Marine lance corporal named Joel Abshier, who, no sooner introduced, told me, "I'm eager to get to Iraq, sir! 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."⁴⁸ On the Bonhomme Richard, though, I found the Marines less eager to go – perhaps because, unlike Abshier, they were on their way. The Marines now divide the Iraq war into OIF I – Operation Iraqi Freedom I, the “kinetic” phase, that ended with the declaration of “mission accomplished” – and OIF II, the messy insurgency thereafter. Some are even starting to talk about OIF III, the intensely violent period leading up to the elections. Many aboard the Bonhomme Richard were veterans of OIF I and some even of OIF II. Twenty-three-year-old Lance Corporal Jeremy Harris was a breacher during OIF I; he opened doors in the towns his unit passed through, sometimes with a sledgehammer, sometimes with a shotgun blast, sometimes with C4 explosives. He was scared every time, he said, and phrased his attitude about his return trip the way many Marines did. “No I don’t want to go back, fuck no” he said. “I don’t look forward to shooting bullets into people. But nobody made me sign up. It’s what I have to do so that other people don’t have to. I’m ready.”⁴⁹

The Marines of Expeditionary Strike Group Five have no firm orders to return to Iraq; they’re merely slated to pass from Pacific Command to Central Command, or Centcom, which oversees the Iraq War. Most I spoke to, though, believe that with the war going as it is,

⁴⁸ Lance Cpl. Joel Abshier, abshierjw@mcbbutler.usmc.mil

⁴⁹ Lance Cpl. Jeremy Harris, harrisjr@duluth.usmc.mil

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 bombs that have become the insurgents' primary weapon, I couldn't take my eyes off their springy young legs. One evening in the enlisted mess, I 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.

On the morning of my last full day aboard the *Bonhomme Richard*, I passed by a helicopter-maintenance office to say goodbye to some sailors I'd met. They had a television going. "According to a non-scientific O'Reilly," poll, shouted Bill O'Reilly on Fox, "seventy-eight percent of Americans do not believe their money is getting to the tsunami victims." I hurried along, up to the organized chaos of the flight deck, where, for all the geopolitics involved, it was undeniably touching to see young kids from the midwest sweating and heaving big bags of rice to help Asian fishing communities whom they'd very likely never heard of three weeks earlier. 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 it entered service in 1969, well before either of its pilots were born. Crew chief Marine Corporal Eric Hutchinson, a strapping, ruddy, twenty-three year-old from Portland, Oregon, was wearing a pistol with no clip -- which he kept in

his pocket. "You remember 'Apocalypse 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 are characters on the Sopranos.

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 Business." Hutchinson gave me a toothy thumbs up and waggled his iPod at me, dancing in place as the helicopter leapt upward. At our feet was a box full of elfin cloth parachutes from which dangled rolls of Lifesaver candies. The equipment maintenance crew, which takes care of life jackets and crash helmets used on the helicopters, had made them during their off hours to drop over ruined villages to cheer up children. We flew for about fifteen minutes and set down at a tiny airfield in the midst of a jungle well inland from the destruction, where a group of Indonesian soldiers and civilians waited. We made a bucket brigade line to hand out the rice, then each of us Americans shook hands with each of the Indonesians, Army 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 "Knocking 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.⁵⁰

End.

⁵⁰ Cpl. Eric Hutchinson, who is probably eric.hutchinson@bonhomme-richard.usmc.mil. But if not, he can be reached through Marine PAO Capt. Jay Delarosa, delarosamj@15meu.usmc.mil