



AN OPERATION OTHER THAN WAR: AMERICAN FORCES IN CENTRAL AFRICA

The ability of United States military forces to deploy within days to Central Africa, build an infrastructure virtually across a continent and initiate effective relief efforts has been referred to by Secretary of Defense William Perry as "the most complex {humanitarian effort} in American military history."

U.S. forces once again made it look easy. While Americans at home read and watched in horror and disbelief the reports of the mass exodus of Rwandans and the disease and dying in refugee camps in Zaire, and while critics complained that the United States moved too slowly and then didn't do enough, 2,600 U.S. servicemen and women implemented the successful Rwandan relief effort.

How exactly did they accomplish this mission?

U.S. troops established transportation hubs for the relief effort in Goma and Bukavu, Zaire; Entebbe, Uganda; and later in Kigali, Rwanda. An entire transportation infrastructure had to be established so that equipment and supplies could be flown in, unloaded, transported, and distributed by relief agencies. U.S. troops were also called upon to provide clean water and bury the thousands of Rwandans who died from disease.

To establish some perspective, consider, for example, that a few of the roads around Goma, Bukavu and Entebbe are gravel, crushed stone and laterite. Most are earthen tracks. In addition, countless refugees walked along the roads and dead bodies were literally piled everywhere.

The situations at the airports were not much better. The Entebbe airport could accommodate C-5 aircraft, so cargo was airlifted there, then transferred to the smaller planes that could be handled at the Goma and Bukavu airports. However, the Entebbe airport has insufficient space to park aircraft. The

war-damaged airport in Kigali had no water, electricity or fuel, and the area around the airport had to be cleared of any unexploded ordnance.

The U.S. military provided each airport with everything from control tower communications equipment to runway lights and radar. Even then, an Air Force C-141 StarLifter cargo plane had difficulty landing at Goma because of the refugees lining and darting across the runway.

Within a period of days, an entire regional population fled from war-ravaged Rwanda to remote areas with no support facilities. The water of Lake Kivu was contaminated by excrement and cadavers from the tribal massacres. There were no sanitation facilities, and cholera raged. The drinking water shortage spurred the epidemic, as did the unburied bodies of over 11,000 cholera victims.

For the overworked medical teams to begin combatting the cholera epidemic, large quantities of clean drinking water were required to curb the spread of the disease. Water from the lake was chlorinated until water purification systems were installed. Some 20 million oral rehydration packets (to treat cholera) and other medical supplies were received and distributed. Sixty thousand latrines had to be dug into volcanic rock, an operation complicated by refugees camped on the rock.

Other materials supplied by the United States included plastic sheeting for shelters, blankets, tents, thousands of tons of food and powdered milk, prefabricated warehouses, antibiotics and syringes, transport trucks and cookstoves.

In response to a plea for help, American troops were sent to dig pits for mass graves. Corpses, some wrapped but most uncovered, were sprayed with a disinfectant before being loaded for burial. Aid workers and soldiers in surgical face

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masks and rubber gloves loaded corpses into pickup trucks and then slung them into the pits all day every day for more than a week.

The final cost of the Rwandan relief operation has not been tallied. Estimates range from \$250 million to \$320 million, figures which do not include the cost of relief supplies.

American forces were ordered to Central Africa on July 22, 1994, and arrived the next day. They worked around the clock to build a cross-continental infrastructure and set up necessary communications. When U.S. troops arrived, 5,000 people were dying each day in the refugee camps. When the pull-out began in late August, the number was less than 500, and 40 flights were arriving daily in Kigali alone with relief supplies.

During the Rwandan relief effort, most Americans caught glimpses and snapshots of pieces of the operation. We and the rest of the world recognize that **the United States is the only nation in the world with the capability to successfully complete such an immense operational and logistical effort.**

But we must also recognize that even while such “operations other than war” are in process, our armed forces have the primary mission to fight and win the nation’s wars. Our forces must still remain trained and ready to respond to military contingencies — the two major regional conflicts which are the basis for current strategic planning. We must wonder, “What if a major regional conflict had erupted during the Rwandan relief effort? What if two had happened?” We have to ask what terms like “decisive force” and “total victory” and “overwhelming force” mean when we are also committed to operations other than war. These operations have a price.

The performance of American forces in Rwanda was awesome. As we shake our heads in proud amazement, let us not become so mesmerized by such missions that we undermine the primary mission of the armed forces to win the nation’s wars. The demand for using military forces in operations other than war is increasing and guidelines are unclear. Worse yet, there is a general lack of realistic recognition of the effort and resources involved.

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