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COMMENTARY

COMMAND AND CONTROL DURING THE “PERFECT STORM” HURRICANE IRMA AND THE ENSUING NATURAL DISASTERS DURING SEPTEMBER 2017 WITHIN REGION 9, MARINE CORPS EMBASSY SECURITY GROUP

Joseph E. Galvin

In September 2017, the Caribbean basin and the state of Florida encountered Hurricane Irma—the most powerful and potentially the most devastating storm to impact the region since recordings began. This category 5 hurricane formed in the southern part of the North Atlantic Ocean and traversed to the Leeward Islands, smashing into Antigua, Barbuda, Saint Martin, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, leaving them in a major state of peril. All the while, the forecasted path of the eye of the storm directly targeted the metropolitan centers of Miami and Fort Lauderdale, the latter the home of Region 9 Headquarters (HQ), Marine Corps Embassy Security Group (MCESG). The hurricane continued on its path, grazing Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti, fortunately sparing their people major desolation and their infrastructure major damage, but still wreaking havoc on those nations. The hurricane then slammed into the northern beaches of Cuba, where the U.S. embassy is situated. As Irma bounced off Cuba, the eye of the hurricane changed its projected track, shifting to bring the brunt of the storm

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to the Florida Keys and the western side of mainland Florida. This extraordinary turn of events dramatically altered destruction forecasts and impacted command-and-control (C2) operations.

As if a category 5 hurricane rampaging among Region 9's detachments and barreling directly toward Region 9 HQ were not enough to disrupt C2, the storm threatened to produce ten- to fifteen-foot storm surges along multiple coasts, and actually

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spawned numerous confirmed tornadoes throughout mainland Florida. Adding to the mix, during the height of hurricane command operations, Mexico experienced an earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale—breaking a century-old record—that triggered emergency reactions from Detachment Mexico City.¹ This earthquake brought threats of tsunamis off the coasts of Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala, causing detachments there to consider emergency actions. Furthermore, during the aftermath, Detachment Havana experienced major flooding of the chancery that affected operational abilities and administrative routines. A pseudothreat of fire even challenged Region 9 HQ's displaced operations center—a fire alarm forced evacuation for a period.

This lays out the situation that Region 9, MCESG—the command element for all the Marine security guards (MSGs) for embassies in the Caribbean, Central America, and Canada—was charged with controlling. As the regional headquarters for the Caribbean MSG detachments in the embassies in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, Jamaica, and the Bahamas, Region 9 HQ ensures that assigned Marines are trained to coordinate with and follow the operational and emergency-action plans laid out by the regional security officer (RSO) for hurricanes and their aftermath. Additionally, the Region 9 HQ staff maintains direct administrative control over these detachments to ensure completion of all training and manpower matters.

C2 within the Region 9 HQ staff and with the MSG detachments during Hurricane Irma focused on safety, communication, and accountability.

Safety

Safety was the theme—the main focus of effort—during Hurricane Irma. The number one command priority in a natural disaster, especially one as potentially devastating and unpredictable as a category 5 hurricane, is the safety of Marines and their families. No loss of material possessions, missed work time, or personal inconvenience can trump a well-contemplated decision that offers safety from death or serious injury. Decisions involving safety are made continuously and courses of action may be adapted or otherwise change, depending on the path of the hurricane and the trail of destruction it leaves. Safety is the priority not only during preparations and the actual weathering of the hurricane but also, and perhaps most importantly, during the cleanup phase, as this is when people are most likely to let their guard down, leading to accidents. A combination of full-blown and speedier operational risk management (ORM) plans provides outstanding assessments of courses of action contemplated during hurricane phases. Understanding the potential safety issues that hurricanes bring and how they can affect the well-being of Marines is crucial to exercising command with safety as a priority.

During preparation, Region 9 HQ coordinated with the potentially affected detachments and the respective RSOs to determine whether additional support from the Marine Security Augmentation Unit (MSAU) at MCESG would be required. In two cases, those of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, such support was requested and provided. MSAU Marines arrived in those countries to assist with any safety and operational matters the RSOs deemed necessary. This support provided extra MSGs to protect the embassies' compounds, add manpower to the detachments, and respond to operational incidents, thereby providing an extra layer of safety and security to the embassies. Region 9 HQ continuously preached safety to the detachments during the successive hurricane phases. Understanding the ORM for each plan of action and communicating that concept to every Marine were crucial to success in the campaign against Hurricane Irma.

Region 9 HQ employed another calculated safety measure by issuing a departure order for the HQ staff to evacuate southern Florida and put the continuity of operations plan (COOP) into effect. The prescribed evacuation safe haven was MacDill Air Force Base (AFB) in Tampa, Florida. This decision was not taken lightly, as the main thrust of the region strategic C2 takes place in HQ, where the infrastructure is in place. However, considering all the factors—Florida's governor directing mandatory departure from parts of the county in which Region 9 HQ is located and some Region 9 HQ Marines live, the Florida Regional Center (the physical location of Region 9 HQ) officially closing, and a category 5 hurricane bearing down directly on the location—the order was sensible, logical, timely, and prudent.² Bottom line: it was the right thing to do.

Marines are taught to adapt and overcome to accomplish the mission. The execution of the COOP at MacDill was a true testament to that ethos. However, Region 9 HQ would be tested again. After Region 9 HQ spent thirty-six hours conducting operations from the safe haven, the unpredictable hurricane curved westward around southern Florida, now severely threatening the Tampa coastline. At this juncture, the commanding general of MacDill AFB ordered the evacuation of all residents and guests. By all analyses, this was an astute decision, as Hurricane Irma's new course endangered thousands. Reacting to this new chain of events, Region 9 HQ developed courses of action in a hasty planning process, then settled on a dispersion of forces to various safe locations throughout South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida.³ The resultant split-forces operations required detailed coordination and a particularized communications plan (discussed later).

This theme of safety applied not only to the Marines of Region 9 but also to their families. Where authorized departures were activated at the embassies, Region 9 HQ encouraged detachment commanders to send families out of harm's way and helped coordinate logistical and administrative efforts to ensure a

smooth process. Similarly, when Region 9 HQ decided to put the departure order into effect, safety of the families was a critical factor. All courses of action hinged on the safety of the activity or preparation, whether that involved ensuring that Marines had approved safe relocation sites; planned travel itineraries (via flying or driving); or adequate food, water, other emergency provisions, and rest. Getting the Region 9 family as a whole into the safest position possible to weather the hurricane allowed the Marines to continue to carry out their duties effectively, even when facing the dilemmas resulting from operating amid multiple natural disasters.

Communication

Safe operational courses of action are successful only when a sustainable and reliable communication structure allows a free flow of information. One of the tenets of the Region 9 commanding officer's (CO's) command philosophy is that effective communication entails ensuring that information is conveyed to all who need to know it in a timely manner. During Hurricane Irma, operations involved keeping a communication gateway among the affected detachments, Region 9 HQ, and other MCESG HQs. A preestablished communication plan enabled constant information flow throughout each event during this period of the "perfect storm." For example, when the earthquake off the coast of Mexico threatened to produce devastating tsunamis and aftershocks that would impact Guatemala, Mexico, and El Salvador, the Region 9 CO, MCESG, and the detachments communicated up-to-the-minute status reports on Marines' welfare, embassy damage, and local weather.

These entities used a highly effective push-and-pull system of information gathering/producing that was effectuated by multiple media, including e-mail; web-based applications; and cell phone text and voice functions, as well as applications (specifically, WhatsApp). An open, flat communication structure within which all parties were privy to real-time information dispensed with any communication lag, enabling those who required critical information to make efficient and knowledgeable decisions. For example, Region 9 HQ was able to produce multiple daily situation reports for MCESG HQ that offered insight on the overall status of the command and where the focus of attention needed to be as Hurricane Irma navigated through the region's area of responsibility. Often these reports were completed via e-mail; however, when communication media did not work because of weather, other forms were employed as well.

In contingency operations communication is never perfect; this was true during the Hurricane Irma event. Use of cell phones and the Internet during and after the hurricane proved to be troublesome, not only because of connectivity issues but also because almost the entire state of Florida and the Caribbean lost

electrical service for various periods. Conserving resources was key to allowing communications to continue to flow in an effective manner.

Instituting a multimedia communication structure provided significant insurance against a total communication breakdown across the vast region. However, Region 9 HQ prepared for any anomaly by designating a special Hurricane Irma liaison officer who would assume the position of the Region 9 HQ and act as an intermediary between the detachments and MCESG HQ. The Region 9 CO appointed the Ottawa (Canada) detachment commander to this liaison position and established a protocol that provided set timelines, so if all communication from Region 9 HQ was lost the liaison officer automatically would follow a prescribed plan. This “fallback” provision proved extremely beneficial. The liaison officer relayed information to detachments and MCESG, but more importantly provided stability within the region while the HQ element went through multiple evacuations and natural catastrophes. For example, when the tornadoes ripped through central Florida and temporarily cut off cell phone and Internet service, the liaison officer was able to keep up a continuous stream of communication with the detachments, providing assessments of embassy damage.

Accountability

Perhaps the most critical use of effective communication was to account for personnel and equipment. During Hurricane Irma, judicious and steadfast communicative processes enabled all detachments and HQ Marines to submit morning reports with 100 percent accountability, providing higher HQs with an assurance that all personnel were accounted for, uninjured, and safe. Region 9 HQ mandated that all personnel report in each morning; prior to, during, and on completion of any prolonged movement; and when any commander-critical information requirements specific to the hurricane were triggered (e.g., injury or power outage). Prior to the hurricane’s arrival, all the detachments reported accountability via the Internet. However, as the storm traversed the region and destroyed electrical power grids and paralyzed Internet access, detachments switched to other methods, including cell phones. For example, Cuba lost power for more than a week owing to wind damage and the flooding of the embassy, but the detachment used cell phones effectively to provide morning and situational reports to Region 9 HQ. Similarly, when Region 9 HQ was forced to conduct operations from separate physical locations after the second evacuation, it conducted internal accountability through the WhatsApp cell phone application, providing a flat-line communication method that allowed instantaneous distribution of information to all.

Ensuring the whereabouts, condition, and safety of Marines and unit equipment is the core of C2. Accountability comes as second nature to Marine

commanders—but it may not be truly tested until lives are at risk. MSG command naturally embodies a strong accountability requirement, given that regions' detachments are dispersed throughout broad areas of the world; however, risk to life and limb is not always present.⁴ Accountability becomes even more vital when the lives of family members and friends accompanying Marines are entrusted to the Marine Corps family. Hurricane Irma and its accompanying natural disasters tested Region 9's accountability procedures. Throughout the storms, Region 9 accounted for all its detachment Marines and families; this included the Region 9 HQ staff, family, and accompanying friends through two evacuations and hundreds of miles of travel.

Accountability cannot be taken for granted or assumed at any time, but especially during times of peril. Accurate accountability allows for the timely mitigation of issues and quicker resolution of problems that might fester without due attention. As noted, during the hurricane, Region 9 conducted accountability procedures in response to multiple triggers. This enabled the command and higher HQ to have full faith and confidence that all Marines and family members were uninjured and in safe locations. Because of the distances traveled and shortages of fuel, accountability was fundamental when Region 9 HQ Marines dispersed from Tampa to their various safe havens.

Command and control within the Region 9 HQ staff and the MSG detachments during Hurricane Irma and the other natural disasters focused on safety, communication, and accountability. The interplay among these three elements highlighted the importance of establishing mechanisms to facilitate internal and external coordination. Ensuring the well-being of Marines and families when life and limb are at risk is paramount to leadership, and it was the priority in this case. Constant, effective communication that provided up-to-date information to and from all affected units and individuals established positive control and instilled confidence in command capabilities. Employing multiple media mechanisms safeguarded against potential communication breakdowns that would have crippled administrative and operational movements. Accountability of Marines and equipment was a core concept of control and ensured timely and accurate reporting. The unpredictable and challenging scenarios encountered during the "perfect storm" truly tested the tenets of command and control.

NOTES

1. Joshua Berlinger, Mariano Castillo, and Ray Sanchez, "Mexico's Strongest Earthquake in a Century Leaves Dozens Dead," *CNN*, September 9, 2017, www.cnn.com/.
2. Governor Rick Scott issued partial mandatory evacuations for sixteen counties and directed voluntary evacuations for thirteen other counties. Sarah Almkhtar et al., "Maps: Tracking Hurricane Irma's Path over Florida," *New York Times*, September 11, 2017, www.nytimes.com/.
3. Maintaining a regional HQ in one location and still accomplishing the mission was deemed impossible because no lodging was available within approximately five hundred miles of Tampa. The course of action employed was for Region 9 HQ staff to stay with friends and family within the (relatively) immediate area of northern Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina.
4. For some detachments, the threat of death or serious bodily injury is a daily peril (e.g., in Afghanistan). The hazards associated with a hurricane or other natural disasters do not compare to man-made threats; the point is that the dangers vary.