

The Contribution of U.S. Military Advisors in the Dominican Republic to Operation Unified Response, Haiti Earthquake Relief, 2010

Bradley Lynn Coleman

The U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (USMAAG) office in the Dominican Republic shook around 5:30 p.m. (local) on Tuesday, January 12, 2010. Working in a cubicle in the USMAAG annex across from the chancellery building in Santo Domingo, the U.S. Air Force section chief, Maj. Manuel Ayala, remembered his desk “moving like it was going to break.”¹ Lt. Col. Hector Paz, U.S. Army, standing behind Ayala, felt “dizzy and like I was going to fall.” The men glanced out the window and noticed an adjacent structure “shaking and moving.” According to Paz, USMAAG chief Lt. Col. Mario Arzeno, U.S. Army, bolted from his nearby office and asked, “Did you guys feel that?”² At first, the U.S. military advisors thought the earthquake occurred in the Dominican Republic. Watching television in the conference room, they soon learned that the epicenter lay on the other side of the island, near Port-au-Prince, Haiti, about 190 miles west of the Dominican capital. Around 6:30 p.m., the USMAAG commander walked across the street to the chancellery for a U.S. Embassy Emergency Action Committee meeting.³ Other USMAAG personnel left the embassy to check on friends and family. For the



U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group member Capt. Luis Martinez, Puerto Rico Air National Guard, carrying a young girl at San Isidro Air Base, Dominican Republic, January 14, 2010. The U.S. military used the Dominican site to evacuate thousands of U.S. citizens from Haiti after the earthquake.

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¹ Manuel Ayala, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 22, 2010, SC-OH-20100422-2, 21, Historical Research Collection, USSOUTHCOM, Miami, FL. (Hereinafter cited as HRC, USSOUTHCOM) All documents employed herein are unclassified. They are scheduled for accession to Records of U.S. Southern Command, Record Group (RG) 530, Washington National Records Center (WNRC), Suitland, MD.

² Hector E. Paz III, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 23, 2010, SC-OH-20100423-2, 16–17, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

³ Mario Arzeno, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 21, 2010, SC-OH-20100421-1, 6–7, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

entire staff, the tremor marked the beginning of a period of dramatic service on the island of Hispaniola.

The international community launched a massive humanitarian operation after the earthquake. The natural disaster, Haitian authorities calculated, killed over 200,000 people. It impacted over 3 million others and caused about \$10 billion in physical damage.⁴ Led by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. response included emergency relief, recovery, and reconstruction aid.⁵ U.S. military support for USAID, dubbed Operation Unified Response, involved the deployment of approximately 24,000 servicemembers to Haiti, the largest U.S. military foreign humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief (FHA/DR) mission to date. The scale of the destruction around Port-au-Prince, however, limited direct assistance into affected areas during the early phase of the operation. The swift and creative U.S. effort in neighboring Dominican Republic therefore proved critical to the humanitarian mission. Indeed, before Lt. Gen. P. K. “Ken” Keen’s Joint Task Force (JTF) Haiti in Port-au-Prince became an effective force, the U.S. team in the Dominican Republic facilitated the deployment of first responders; evacuated American citizens from Haiti; moved relief workers and supplies across the border; and enabled the deployment of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets. Throughout, the U.S. military advisors in Santo Domingo, part of the U.S. Southern Command’s (USSOUTHCOM) theater security cooperation network, worked closely with interagency and partner nation officials. The small group of U.S. military professionals, comprising just 10 U.S. servicemembers, made an oversized contribution to Operation Unified Response.

Many writers, including journalists from around the world, have examined aspects of the 2010 disaster in Haiti. Regarding U.S. military operations, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Bob Woodward placed the mission in the larger context of the Barack Obama administration’s early foreign and national security policy struggles.⁶ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates described the deployment as a major success for the U.S. armed forces—in spite of high-level bickering inside

⁴ Statistics from Rhoda Margesson, “Haiti Earthquake: Crisis and Response,” CRS Report to Congress R41023, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, March 2010. Available online at https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20100115_R41023_b45981543db58f9c54a1c0b28969c7e832955e9.pdf (accessed August 15, 2021).

⁵ Overall, the U.S. government spent about \$3 billion in response to the catastrophe. Fact Sheet, “U.S. Government Assistance to Haiti, 2010–2015,” U.S. Department of State, December 2014. Available online at <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/USG-Assistance-in-Haiti-2010-2015.pdf> (accessed August 15, 2021).

⁶ Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 342.

the U.S. government.⁷ The USSOUTHCOM commander, JTF Haiti commander, and other senior U.S. military officers wrote articles for professional journals.⁸ In addition, participants from across the U.S. government prepared after-action reports.⁹ Yet these accounts neglected U.S. activities in the Dominican Republic; none specifically mentioned the USMAAG. Focused on the U.S. military advisors in the Dominican Republic, this article broadens the existing story of Operation Unified Response to include important events on the other side of Hispaniola.

As a Department of Defense (DoD) geographic combatant command, USSOUTHCOM employed professional historians to conduct research on historical aspects of contemporary national security challenges, document current operations, and engage in outreach missions in the USSOUTHCOM area of focus.¹⁰ The task of preserving official records belonged to the USSOUTHCOM records manager, not the USSOUTHCOM historians. Even so, given the well-documented problems of preserving government records in the digital age, the Office of the Command Historian routinely

⁷ Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoir of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 420–25.

⁸ See, for example, Douglas M. Fraser and Wendell S. Hertzelle, “Haiti Relief: An International Effort Enabled through Air, Space, and Cyberspace,” *Air and Space Power Journal* 24 (Winter 2010): 5–12; P. K. Keen and Floriano Peixoto Vieira Neto, “Relationships Matter: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in Haiti,” *Military Review* 90 (May–June 2010): 2–12; P. K. Keen, “Foreign Disaster Response: Joint Task Force–Haiti Observations,” *Military Review* 90 (November–December 2010): 85–96; and James A. Vohr, “Haiti Disaster Relief: Logistics in the Operation,” *Military Review* 91 (July–August 2011): 76–82.

⁹ Commissioned by USAID, Macfadden & Associates prepared a comprehensive review of the U.S. government response, published in January 2011. The report noted that “the U.S. Embassy [Santo Domingo] sent replacement staff” to Haiti; “SOUTHCOM worked . . . to facilitate the transportation of significant volumes of private sector donations across the border to Port-au-Prince”; and that “the embassy in the Dominican Republic acted swiftly to provide relief and support to the embassy in Port-au-Prince.” Debarati Guha-Sapir, et al., “Independent Review of the USG Response to the Haiti Earthquake,” January 1, 2011, Macfadden & Associates Inc., 93, 94, 97, Operation Unified Response (OUR) Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM. The massive Joint Center for Operational Analysis review of U.S. Department of Defense FHA/DR work in Haiti completely ignored the effort in the Dominican Republic. “Operations Unified Response, Haiti Earthquake Response,” Joint Center for Operational Analysis, US Joint Forces Command, May 2010, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM. See also Gary Cecchine et al., *The U.S. Military Response to the 2010 Haiti Earthquake: Considerations for Army Leaders* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2013).

¹⁰ The USSOUTHCOM Area of Responsibility included South America, Central America, and the Caribbean. The Office of the Command Historian, USSOUTHCOM, also linked the combatant command to the Joint History Office, Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the lead U.S. government entity for historical coverage of joint military operations—activities involving two or more branches of the U.S. armed services. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction, “Guidance for the Joint History Program,” August 28, 2003, CJCSI 5320.01A, governed the work of DoD combatant command history programs.

collected, organized, and delivered documents to the National Archives and Records Administration.¹¹ In June 2007, the USSOUTHCOM chief of staff launched an oral history project to supplement this effort.¹² Given the high turnover rate among uniformed personnel, oral histories preserved knowledge, promoted operational continuity, and enlarged the documentary record. They resulted in the creation of new records (oral history transcripts) and helped historians locate other valuable sources, such as otherwise inaccessible emails. Oral interviews proved especially important during Operation Unified Response. The fast-moving U.S. military deployment occurred on verbal commands, leaving little textual documentation of key decisions for future researchers. In late January 2010, after my first deployment to Haiti, I passed through the Dominican Republic en route to the United States. My brief encounter with the USMAAG at San Isidro Air Base opened my eyes to their efforts, a largely invisible dimension of the humanitarian mission. Three months later, I returned to Santo Domingo to conduct oral history interviews with U.S. personnel.¹³ This project, based on those sessions, tells the story of a small unit with a big impact on Operation Unified Response. It likewise contains important lessons for current and future historians, military professionals, and disaster-response experts.

The Initial Response

Established during the early Cold War era, the USMAAG in Santo Domingo served as the principal U.S. link to the Dominican armed services.¹⁴ At the time of the earthquake,

¹¹ For more on 21st-century U.S. government records management, see “Information Management: Additional Actives Are Needed to Meet Requirements of the Managing Government Records Directive,” GAO-15-339 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, May 2015); John Spencer, “How the Military is Making it Hard to Remember our Wars,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 2017; and “Lost to History: Missing War Records Complicate Benefit Claims by Iraq, Afghanistan Veterans,” *ProPublica*, November 9, 2012. Online at: <https://www.propublica.org/article/lost-to-history-missing-war-records-complicate-benefit-claims-by-veterans> (accessed July 7, 2021).

¹² Memorandum for the Chief of Staff, “USSOUTHCOM History Program,” June 17, 2007, Command Historian Office Files, Accession 530-13-0001, RG 530, WNRC. The command historian based the initiative on policies and practices described in Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also Stephen J. Logren, “The Status of Oral History in the Army: Expanding a Tradition,” *The Oral History Review* 30 (Summer-Autumn 2003): 81–97.

¹³ “USSOUTHCOM Historian Site Visit, Santo Domingo,” Luis Martinez, USMAAG, Command Historian Office Files, HRC, USSOUTHCOM. The USSOUTHCOM oral history mandate did not include interviews with foreign officials.

¹⁴ For more on the origins and early development of the U.S. military advisory mission in the Dominican Republic, see Historical Section, Caribbean Defense Command, “Haiti and the Dominican Republic,” 1946, 14–15, Historical Manuscript Collection, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC; H. Freeman Matthews to Robert Lovett, December 21, 1951, 739.5 MSP/12-2151, and related documents in Box 3386, Central Decimal Files, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, National Archives at College Park, MD; and “Military Assistance Agreement Between the United States and the Dominican Republic,” Signed March 6, 1953, document no. 2777, *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements*, vol. 4, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 1955): 184–90.

the U.S. military operated two dozen security cooperation offices in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁵ Across the region, the network of U.S. military advisors planned and managed cooperative security activities, organized educational and training programs, and oversaw the sale of military equipment.¹⁶ The USMAAG in the Dominican Republic, led by the confident, high-energy U.S. Army foreign area officer Mario Arzeno, employed a talented group of Spanish-speaking U.S. military professionals.¹⁷ The Department of State set U.S. objectives in the Dominican Republic. The USMAAG supported the U.S. embassy's country-specific strategic plan.¹⁸ Within that framework, military advisors focused on helping the Dominican armed forces "modernize, professionalize, and develop joint operations and joint command and control capabilities."¹⁹ Important USMAAG projects included technical assistance for Dominican counter-illicit trafficking operations, medical readiness training exercises to improve the Dominican healthcare system, and the placement of Dominican military personnel in technical courses at U.S. service schools. The USMAAG worked closely with other elements of the country team—a coalition of 16 U.S. government agencies under the direction of the chief of mission. "The engagement" between U.S. military and civilian personnel at the embassy, including the 85-person USAID mission, "is almost constant," Michael Schimmel, acting deputy chief of mission, explained. "I don't think two days go by without us talking to the MAAG."²⁰ According to the interim chargé d'affaires, Christopher Lambert, the USMAAG's greatest contribution involved the transmission of American military values to Dominican armed forces.²¹ The entire U.S. country team had a long record of

¹⁵ U.S. officials established security cooperation offices through bilateral agreements with foreign governments. Depending on the bilateral agreement, they are referred to as Military Groups (MILGP), Military Liaison Offices (MLO), Offices of Defense Representation (ODR), Military Assistance Advisory Groups (MAAG), or Offices of Defense Cooperation (ODC). They derive their authorities from Section 515, Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, PL 87-195, 4 September 1961, 189–90. Online at: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Foreign%20Assistance%20Act%20O%20F%201961.pdf> (accessed August 18, 2021).

¹⁶ At the time of the earthquake, the USMAAG and other USSOUTHCOM security cooperation offices functioned under Department of Defense Directive 5105.75, "Department of Defense Operations at U.S. Embassies," Gordon England, December 21, 2007. Online at: https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/d5105_75.pdf (accessed August 18, 2021).

¹⁷ "DOM MAAG Organization," PowerPoint, June 19, 2009, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

¹⁸ Christopher Lambert, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 21, 2010, SC-OH-20100421-3, 8–10, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

¹⁹ "Security Cooperation Office Dominican Republic Commander's Intent for FY2010/11," n.d., OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM. Routine USMAAG activities included educational exchanges; training, exercises, and conferences; and technical/material assistance.

²⁰ Michael Schimmel, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 21, 2010, SC-OH-20100421-4, 8, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

²¹ The U.S. government did not have an accredited ambassador in the Dominican Republic at that time. The deputy chief of mission, Christopher Lambert, a Peace Corps and USAID veteran with experience in Latin America, served as the head of the U.S. country team. Lambert continued as chargé d'affaires ad interim until Ambassador Raul Yzaguirre arrived in November 2010. Christopher Lambert, interview, April 21, 2010, 11.

successful interagency cooperation, including coordinated responses to natural disasters in the Dominican Republic.

Almost universally, U.S. advisors began their stories of Operation Unified Response with U.S. Army General Keen's visit to Santo Domingo days before the office shook. From the combatant command headquarters in Miami-Doral, Florida, the USSOUTHCOM staff scheduled the Dominican Republic as the first stop on the new deputy military commander's three-country orientation tour of the region. Keen and his party arrived in Santo Domingo on Sunday evening, January 10, 2010.²² On Monday morning, after conversations with Arzeno, Keen called on the chief of mission. Keen and Lambert had a "routine but productive" discussion about U.S. activities in the country.²³ Then, the USSOUTHCOM general visited the Dominican minister of defense, Lt. Gen. Pedro R. Peña Antonio, a former Dominican air force pilot, and other Dominican defense officials. In that meeting, the minister pressed the USSOUTHCOM deputy for help with Dominican air force operations and maintenance costs, especially fuel and spare parts. Most importantly, General Peña stressed "the importance of our [bilateral] relationship being a partnership," assuring the USSOUTHCOM deputy that Dominicans "will do their part" to promote security in the Caribbean.²⁴ On Tuesday morning, January 12, U.S. Army section chief Lieutenant Colonel Paz took Keen's group to San Isidro Air Base for their flight to Port-au-Prince.²⁵ The earthquake rocked the island later that day.²⁶

In the immediate aftermath of the massive 7.0 quake, U.S. embassy personnel in Santo Domingo scrambled to understand the situation on Hispaniola, account for American personnel in the Dominican Republic, and establish contact with

²² The itinerary included the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Panama. General Keen traveled to Santo Domingo with his executive officer, Maj. Betsy Ross, U.S. Air Force; USSOUTHCOM country desk officer Maj. Kenneth Bourland, U.S. Air Force; and executive noncommissioned officer Tech Sergeant Fernando Magri, U.S. Air Force. A fourth member of the travel team, Lt. Col. Chris Thomas, U.S. Army, flew directly to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on Sunday, January 10, 2010, to prepare for meetings with Haitian authorities. See Chris Thomas, interview by Timothy A. Schultz, May 10, 2010, SC-OH-20100510, audio only, starting at 15 minutes, 20 seconds. General Keen assumed duties as the USSOUTHCOM deputy military commander in September 2009.

²³ Christopher Lambert, interview, April 21, 2010, 15; and Kenneth Bourland to Ken Keen, "Draft DOM Highlights for Email," January 12, 2010, email, Ken Keen Email File (hereinafter KKEF), HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Hector E. Paz III, interview, April 23, 2010, 32.

²⁶ General Keen soon became the commander of JTF-Haiti, responsible for all U.S. military forces in the Haiti joint operating area. The USMAAG in Santo Domingo, however, fell outside JTF-Haiti structure. It reported to USSOUTHCOM headquarters in Miami-Doral throughout the operation.

Dominican government officials. Although the earthquake “caused tremors in the Dominican Republic,” the Dominican Republic suffered little damage during the quake—and embassy officials reported no Americans missing or casualties of the disaster.²⁷ In the USMAAG office, Colonel Arzeno’s thoughts quickly turned to General Keen and other USSOUTHCOM personnel in Port-au-Prince, and at 5:34 p.m. he emailed Keen:

We just felt the earthquake on our side, we’re hearing it was a 7.0 on the Haitian side . . . all ok with you and your group? . . . Stay Safe!²⁸

Unknown to the USMAAG, two members of the USSOUTHCOM deputy military commander’s group were trapped inside a collapsed hotel in Port-au-Prince.²⁹ Keen had been at the U.S. ambassador’s residence at the time of the earthquake.

Early Tuesday evening, the U.S. country team’s Emergency Action Committee convened in the main conference room at the chancellery building. The extended session included a conversation with State Department officials in Washington, DC. The group also managed to connect with the deputy chief of mission in Port-au-Prince. “His reports were dire,” Arzeno recalled. “He reported a lot of people on the streets, a lot of destruction,” including the collapse of the presidential palace and Hotel Montana.³⁰ Later that night, Lambert talked with Dominican government officials about the developing crisis in Haiti. President Leonel Fernández, the U.S. chargé reported, “provided assurances that the Dominican Government is prepared to provide military and civilian resources to assist in Haiti relief efforts.”³¹ Dominican military officers quickly pledged to cooperate with the United States in FHA/DR operations, a welcomed response given the long history of Dominican-Haitian discord.³² The USMAAG commander, meanwhile, began coordinating

²⁷ Christopher Lambert to Secretary of State, January 13, 2010, “Santo Domingo Earthquake Sitrep 1,” AMHS message 44597299, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

²⁸ Mario Arzeno to Ken Keen, January 12, 2010, email, KKEF, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

²⁹ Tech Sergeant Magri managed to escape from the Hotel Montana later that night. Workers recovered the remains of Maj. Kenneth Bourland, U.S. Air Force, on February 7.

³⁰ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 7.

³¹ Christopher Lambert to Secretary of State, January 13, 2010, “Santo Domingo Earthquake Sitrep 1,” AMHS message 44597299, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

³² For more on Haitian-Dominican relations, see Gerald Horne, *Confronting Black Jacobins: The U.S., the Haitian Revolution, and the Origins of the Dominican Republic* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015); Michele Wucker, *Why Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola* (Hill and Wang, 2000); G. Pope Atkins and Larman C. Wilson, *The Dominican Republic and the United States: From Imperialism to Transnationalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); and Eric Paul Roorda, *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930–1945* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998).



President Barack Obama and his national security team discussing the U.S. response to the earthquake in Haiti, January 13, 2010. The USSOUTHCOM commander, Gen. Douglas Fraser (left), U.S. Air Force, joined the meeting via secure video teleconference.

with the USSOUTHCOM deputy director for operations in Miami-Doral.³³

During the early hours of January 13, senior U.S. officials determined the overall direction of the American response. After a series of White House meetings, President Barack Obama addressed the press around 10:20 a.m. The president promised to “respond with a swift, coordinated, and aggressive effort to save lives,” offering the “full support of the United States in the urgent effort to rescue those trapped beneath the rubble, and to deliver the humanitarian relief—the food, water and medicine—that Haitians will need in the coming days.” The work, the president noted, required cooperation among many U.S. government entities and international partners. “Our government, especially USAID and the Departments of State and Defense are working closely together and with our partners in Haiti, the region, and around the world.”³⁴

President Obama designated USAID as the lead federal agency in the FHA/DR operation, a move consistent with established U.S. doctrine for international humanitarian crises. USAID Administrator Rajiv “Raj” Shah, recently appointed, provided valuable leadership for the entire U.S. interagency. The USAID administrator impressed agency veterans. The head of the USAID mission in the Dominican Republic, Richard Goughnour, recalled that, “he was very decisive,

³³ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 11.

³⁴ “Remarks by the President on Rescue Efforts in Haiti,” January 13, 2010. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-rescue-efforts-haiti> (accessed June 19, 2018).

his instincts were solid, and his management skills were good.”³⁵ Dr. Shah established USAID leadership in Washington, informing and guiding interagency cooperation across Hispaniola. The USMAAG had a close relationship with the USAID mission in the Dominican Republic, a partnership forged during the U.S. response to Tropical Storm Noel in October 2007.³⁶

Soon after the president’s press conference, the interagency group in Santo Domingo met to review the situation and discussed their role in the FHA/DR mission.³⁷ During that session, Colonel Arzeno raised the possibility of using the Dominican air force base at San Isidro, rather than Las Américas International Airport in Santo Domingo, to conduct operations in support of international relief operations. “Good, Great!” Lambert responded. “Let’s make it happen, whatever we can do.”³⁸ After the meeting, Arzeno called the Dominican air force commander, Gen. Altuna Tezanos, for permission to use the base.³⁹ With Dominican consent, around noon on January 13, the chargé formally asked the Department of State to direct any “air evacuations of Port au Prince [embassy] personnel and Amcits [American Citizens] from Haiti” to the Dominican air force facility outside Santo Domingo. “It will be easier,” Lambert explained, “to provide . . . assistance and perform security checks at San Isidro, and it will also be easier to handle charter flights from there.” The U.S. country team foresaw no problem moving evacuees to Las Américas International Airport on buses for outbound commercial flights, should such a need arise.⁴⁰

³⁵ Richard Goughnour, USAID, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 23, 2010, SC-OH-20100423-1, 44, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

³⁶ The USMAAG and USAID elements of the country team routinely partnered on a variety of projects across the country. Former USSOUTHCOM commander Adm. James Stavridis (2006–9) had pushed security cooperation offices across the Americas “to constantly look for ways to support State and AID in their activities with resources, planners, information, and logistics.” James Stavridis, US Navy, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, January 27, 2008, SC-OH-20080127, 56, HRC, USSOUTHCOM. The USMAAG, in turn, established an excellent partnership with their USAID colleagues. “It’s a tremendous alliance that works really well,” Goughnour explained. “We both really get it and work well together.” Richard Goughnour, interview, April 23, 2010, 18. “We have history here,” USAID program officer Jeffrey Cohen added. “Admiral Stavridis said that it [Tropical Storm Noel response] was a model for how these things are supposed to work.” Jeffrey Cohen, USAID, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 23, 2010, SC-OH-20100423-1, 55, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

³⁷ As the USMAAG chief met with the country team in the chancellery, other U.S. military personnel waited in the military annex for guidance. Some tried to contact friends in Port-au-Prince—to gain information on the status of General Keen’s party—but could not communicate with their colleagues in Haiti. See Manuel Ayala, interview, April 22, 2010, 23.

³⁸ Christopher Lambert, interview, April 21, 2010, 18.

³⁹ Luis Martinez, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 22, 2010. SC-OH-20100423-3, 25, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁴⁰ Christopher Lambert to Secretary of State, January 13, 2010, “Santo Domingo Earthquake Sitrep 1,” AMHS message 44597299, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

Arzeno immediately dispatched two USMAAG officers to San Isidro Air Base. Around 2:30 p.m., Lt. Col. Paz, the first U.S. officer to arrive at the base, encountered a van full of embassy personnel waiting for instructions. The USMAAG commander had instructed Paz, an artilleryman commissioned out of the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez, “to set up a base of operations for the evacuations” of American citizens from Haiti.⁴¹ Paz talked with the embassy staff and developed a plan for the reception center.⁴² Capt. Luis Martinez, a pharmaceutical engineer on a one-year assignment with the Puerto Rican National Guard, reached the hangar a short time later. The San Isidro base commander, deputy air force commander, and air force chief of staff also came to the site. Dominican air force personnel “had been painting an aircraft inside the hangar,” Martinez recalled.⁴³ The hangar had power but did not have lights. Paz and Martinez expected the first flight of evacuees that evening. Dominican air force officers found workers to install lighting to allow operations after sunset. Meanwhile, Paz and Martinez organized the embassy workers. “We created a processing line,” Martinez explained. They established stations for consulate workers to confirm the identity of evacuees, medical personnel for first aid and health screening, aid workers to distribute food and clothing, and agents to address financial problems. As the group worked during the afternoon, the USMAAG received five helicopters from the Puerto Rican National Guard and U.S. Custom and Border Protection units in Puerto Rico, critical air assets for the team over the weeks to come. The General Service Office at the embassy sent electronic equipment and furniture to the base. Information technology staff installed computers, televisions, and telephones. Dominican and U.S. personnel stood by to help offload evacuees and handle baggage. The sun began to set in the west. The lights came on at 7 p.m. “And then it started.”⁴⁴

Earlier that day, U.S. Air Force Col. Albert “Buck” Elton, 1st Special Operations Group, and his team arrived in Port-au-Prince, took control of Toussaint Louverture International Airport, severely damaged by the earthquake, and began running flight operations from an improvised air traffic control station on folding tables in the grass next to the airfield.⁴⁵ Colonel Elton directed some of the first outbound flights to the Dominican Republic. That night, two aircraft from Port-au-Prince

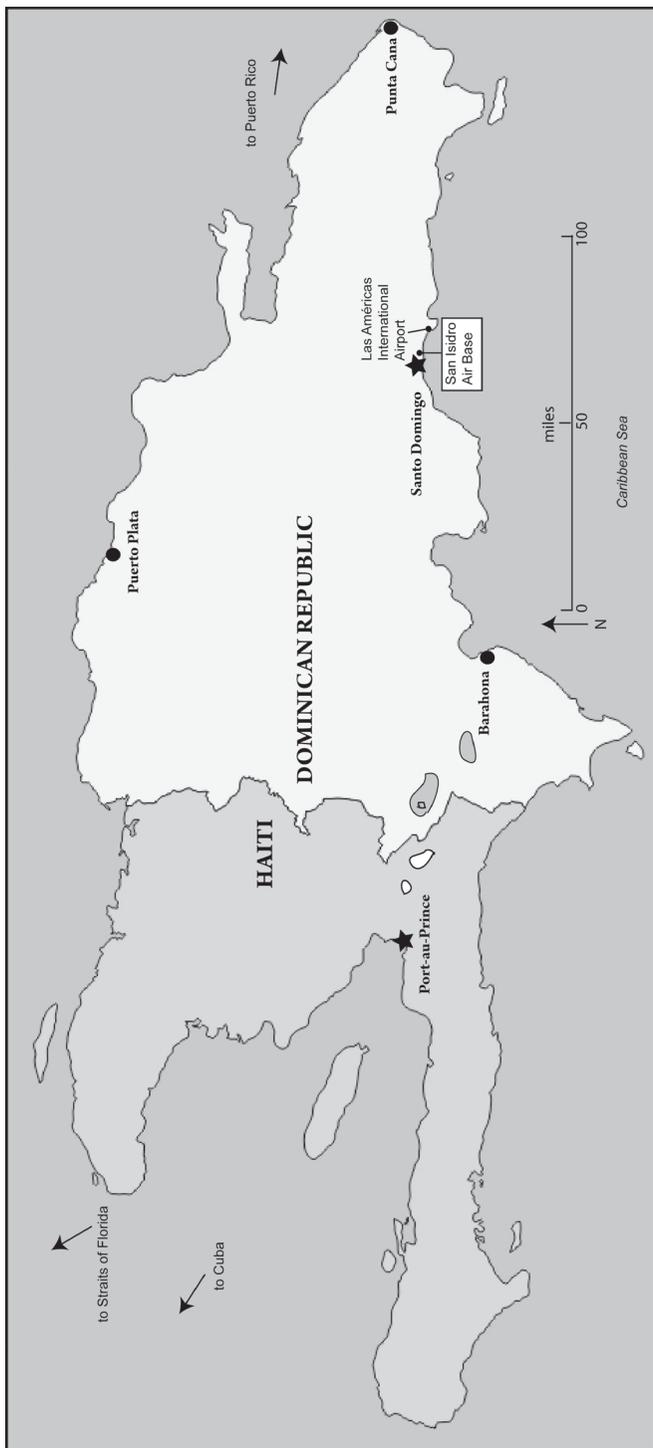
⁴¹ Hector E. Paz III, interview, April 23, 2010, 19.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Luis Martinez, interview, April 22, 2010, 25.

⁴⁴ Hector E. Paz III, interview, April 23, 2010, 22.

⁴⁵ Buck Elton, “Haiti: Boots on the Ground Perspective,” *Small Wars Journal* (January 2010), 1–5. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/355-elton.pdf> (accessed June 2, 2020).



Map of Hispaniola, 2010.

arrived at San Isidro. A U.S. Coast Guard C-130 with 60 passengers landed at 7:30 p.m., and a second Coast Guard aircraft carrying 52 evacuees landed 30 minutes later.⁴⁶ Some of the passengers were U.S. citizens; others were Haitian nationals with U.S. visas. “It was a surprise because it was very organized,” Martinez explained. “You could see in their faces what they had gone through,” Paz recalled. “Some people were crying and some were hugging” the reception center staff.⁴⁷ “They made a line and they started processing everyone. Everybody in the embassy knew what to do. We knew what to do.”⁴⁸ By midnight, the U.S. and Dominican workers had moved most of the evacuees to hotels in Santo Domingo. “The first day was chaos,” Martinez recalled.⁴⁹ Even so, the U.S. country team succeeded in meeting the urgent needs of evacuees.

The evacuations continued the following day. On Thursday, nine aircraft—two U.S. Coast Guard C-130s and six Puerto Rican National Guard UH-60s—moved 246 passengers from Port-au-Prince to San Isidro.⁵⁰ The U.S. country team received 187 people at the evacuation site on Friday. Dominican businesses and citizens donated food, clothing, and toys. The frenetic tempo of operations pushed U.S. personnel to their limits. Then, about a week into the operation, the number of evacuees moving through San Isidro began to decline, although flights continued for weeks. Throughout, the Dominican air force provided air traffic control, communication support, fuel and maintenance assistance, and other support services.⁵¹ With the assistance of Dominican air force operations director Col. Erwin Evans and staff officer Maj. Mao Gómez as the key agents of Dominican-American cooperation, the U.S. country team created “a five-star evacuation” center to handle the victims.⁵²

Some members of the U.S. country team in Santo Domingo questioned the efficiency of bringing evacuees to the Dominican Republic, rather than flying them directly to the United States.⁵³ The evacuation of American citizens involved coordinated interagency action among DoD, Department of Homeland Security, and other U.S. government elements. During the first hours of Operation Unified Response, DoD officials offered to evacuate U.S. citizens through McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, the site of the well-equipped Emergency Family Assistance Control Center. At that time, Air Mobility Command lacked authority (and infrastructure) to

⁴⁶ “Haiti Flight Log,” USMAAG Dominican Republic, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁴⁷ Hector E. Paz III, interview, April 23, 2010, 22.

⁴⁸ Luis Martinez, interview, April 22, 2010, 27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁰ “Haiti Flight Log,” USMAAG Dominican Republic.

⁵¹ Hector E. Paz III, interview, April 23, 2010, 27.

⁵² Michael Schimmel, interview, April 21, 2010, 14.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 13.

conduct evacuations through other locations. The McGuire site worked for long-range C-17 cargo airplanes but, given its distance from Haiti, proved suboptimal for smaller C-130 aircraft.⁵⁴ On January 18, the U.S. government opened an evacuation route through Homestead Air Reserve Base, in South Florida, and other domestic locations. The availability of these new facilities slowed the flow of American citizens through San Isidro Air Base. Nevertheless, during the first days of the operation, with limited resources available to U.S. operators, the San Isidro operation reduced flight times, accelerated turnover, and rapidly delivered endangered Americans to safety. Overall, the U.S. government evacuated about 16,000 U.S. citizens from Haiti following the earthquake. Approximately 14 percent of the evacuees moved through San Isidro during Operation Unified Response.⁵⁵

First Responders

As USMAAG personnel, U.S. embassy staffers, and their Dominican partners managed the evacuation center, they also enabled the deployment of international disaster response units and foreign assistance. The earthquake severely damaged Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince. Even before the disaster, the small airport could not accommodate many inbound flights. International aid workers and rescue teams, therefore, flew to Las Américas International Airport. “All of that relief and air flow was diverting onto the Dominican side” of the island, Arzeno explained. The USMAAG quickly decided to fill empty aircraft moving to Port-au-Prince (to recover American citizens) with aid workers and supplies bound for the disaster zone. “Essentially,” he added, “we became a forward operation base” for the FHA/DR mission in Haiti.⁵⁶

The USMAAG first needed to deploy the USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance’s (OFDA) specialized Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART)—highly trained experts in foreign disaster relief work. The four-person DART, led by veteran OFDA officer Tim Callahan, tried to fly directly from the United States to Haiti on Wednesday, January 13, but could not land at Toussaint Louverture International Airport. Air traffic controllers diverted the DART flight to the Dominican Republic. On the ground in Santo Domingo late Wednesday, the country team scrambled to find a helicopter to take the group to Haiti; earlier that day, the USAID director had identified the deployment of the DART as the U.S. government’s top priority. USAID program officer Jeffrey Cohen remembered,

⁵⁴ Historical Report, “Operation Unified Response,” 38–40, June 2011, Office of History, 12th Air Force/ Air Forces Southern, Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Tucson, AZ. Copy of the report is in OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁵⁵ “Haiti Flight Log,” USMAAG Dominican Republic, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁵⁶ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 9.

“You can’t have OFDA do its job if they [DART] are not there” in Haiti.⁵⁷ That evening Cohen took Callahan and his group to a local hotel. Around midnight, U.S. Navy section chief Comm. Ricardo Flores and his USMAAG colleagues secured U.S. helicopters from Trinidad. Cohen and Flores returned to the hotel, collected the team, and rushed them back to San Isidro.⁵⁸ There, the DART boarded a U.S. Coast Guard HH-60, the only helicopter certified for nighttime missions then under USMAAG control, at 3:45 a.m. on Thursday, January 14.⁵⁹ Callahan soon established himself—along with the U.S. ambassador to Haiti and the JTF Haiti commander—as a key architect of the on-the-ground U.S. government humanitarian effort.⁶⁰

With the DART delivered to Port-au-Prince, the USMAAG began pushing search and rescue (SAR) units into Haiti. Unable to reach Port-au-Prince, specialized teams from around the world arrived at Las Américas International Airport on commercial flights. USAID workers at the airport established a reception desk to coordinate the flow. On January 14, a USAID staffer at Las Américas called Captain Martinez at San Isidro. A nine-man SAR team had just arrived from Mexico and needed help reaching Haiti. “Do you have space for them?” he asked. Martinez told them to drive to San Isidro Air Base. On Friday morning, they loaded the Mexican unit onto a Customs and Border Patrol UH-60. Their equipment filled two Puerto Rican Air National Guard helicopters. French, German, Peruvian, Israeli, German, and Chilean SAR teams followed soon thereafter. The Miami-Dade County Urban Search and Rescue unit also moved through San Isidro.⁶¹ “We would get all these different groups and Colonel Arzeno got them over there” to Haiti, USAID mission director remembered.⁶² “We were the only game in town,” Cohen added.⁶³

In contact with the DART in Port-au-Prince, USAID officers in Santo Domingo fed U.S. government priorities to the USMAAG, which controlled U.S. air assets at San Isidro. Following USAID instructions, they rapidly filled helicopters and airplanes with relief workers and supplies. In 15–20 minutes, the USMAAG off-loaded evacuees, filled the aircraft with first responders and supplies, and launched it back to Haiti. “You couldn’t do this type of cooperation in DC in a year!” Cohen observed.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Cohen, interview, April 23, 2010, 46.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁹ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 10.

⁶⁰ Jeffrey Cohen, interview, April 23, 2010, 28.

⁶¹ Two other major U.S. elements, the Fairfax County and Los Angeles SAR units, flew directly into Port-au-Prince.

⁶² Richard Goughnour, interview, April 23, 2010, 28.

⁶³ Jeffrey Cohen, interview, April 23, 2010, 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

The Dominican military provided critical support to U.S. operations. On Tuesday night, January 12, the Dominican minister of defense called the USMAAG chief to offer his assistance—before the U.S. government had formulated its FHA/DR plan.⁶⁵ After that, Arzeno, remembered, “the MOD [minister] and I probably spoke every several hours—especially for the first few days.”⁶⁶ Dominican military personnel, he added, “bent over backwards” to help with the FHA/DR operations.⁶⁷ General Tezanos and Colonel Evans established the tone for bilateral cooperation on the ground at San Isidro. Maj. Mao Gómez focused on direct support for U.S. military operations. “We needed fuel and they had fuel there all of the time,” U.S. Navy section chief Lt. Comm. Ricardo Flores explained. A Bolivian-born graduate of the University of Illinois, Flores added: “I needed to land an aircraft at 2 a.m. and he [Gómez] would have somebody there. . . . They gave us security people, there were security folks there to help us out with the movement of people . . . [to] help us physically load aircraft.”⁶⁸ The same Dominican officials who were asking for fuel during the meeting with USSOUTHCOM deputy military commander on January 11 freely gave its resources to the United States to support the FHA/DR mission in Haiti.

Rescue Missions and Border Security

During the first days of Operation Unified Response, the USMAAG rescued isolated American citizens in Haiti, people unable to reach evacuation sites in Port-au-Prince due to poor road conditions. It also promoted orderly Dominican security operations along the Haitian border. The first rescue mission began with a telephone call from a U.S. Navy officer in Orlando, Florida. The serviceman passed contact information, including cell phone number and GPS location, to the USMAAG commander for a group of 32 American student missionaries stranded about seven miles south of the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince. “I called the cell phone number and a young girl answered,” Arzeno remembered.⁶⁹ The girl described their location to Arzeno. The U.S. military advisors used Google Earth to locate the group. The USMAAG chief recognized the dangers connected with the mission: “We still didn’t have a complete picture of what was happening on the ground . . . we weren’t sure of the security situation.”⁷⁰ Even so, the USMAAG commander pushed forward.

Arzeno sent a Beechcraft C-12 forward to examine the proposed landing zone.

⁶⁵ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 9, 22.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁸ Ricardo Flores, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 22, 2010, SC-OH-20100422-1, 21, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁶⁹ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

Confident the field would support UH-60 helicopters, the USMAAG chief launched the rescue mission. Arzeno called the students just before the team arrived. “Have nothing more than a backpack,” he said. “When you see the first helicopter land, that’s a security element,” he explained, “listen to what they’re saying.” Once the Blackhawks arrived for extraction, he continued, “run to those helicopters with the security detachment—follow them. Don’t run in back of the helicopters—run in front of it—do you understand?” A law enforcement detachment landed to secure the site, organize the students, and load the helicopters. The pilots delivered the students to the processing facility at San Isidro. “It was a beautiful thing, it all went like music,” Arzeno recalled.⁷¹ A short time later, the USMAAG launched a similar mission to rescue another group of aid workers from a location 14 miles north of Port-au-Prince.⁷² The American officers in the Dominican Republic contributed to other operations by relaying actionable information they acquired in Santo Domingo to international forces in Haiti. “It was real stuff that you could never imagine in your lifetime,” Paz remembered. “It was impressive.”⁷³

At the same time, the U.S. country team supported Dominican operations along the Haitian border. After the earthquake, the Dominican government shifted resources toward the frontier to maintain order and deliver emergency services to Haitian nationals. Given the painful history of Dominican-Haitian border violence, U.S. officials feared the deployment might spark unrest that would amplify the human tragedy. On January 13, a senior Dominican official contacted the U.S. embassy regarding the movement of Dominican security forces. “We’re very concerned that there’ll be a stampede at the border,” the deputy chief of mission remembered her saying.⁷⁴ Americans officials urged Dominicans to exercise restraint, and pledged U.S. assistance in border region. During the weeks that followed, the Dominican government maintained order on the frontier. They also established aid stations and medical facilities for Haitian earthquake victims. The U.S. embassy invested \$3 million in medical facilities in the border region.⁷⁵ USMAAG helicopters transported critically injured Haitians to surgical facilities, including the USNS *Comfort* off the Haitian coast; the presence of U.S. personnel promoted discipline and accountability among partner nation forces.⁷⁶ Throughout, Dominican forces showed great compassion toward Haitian nationals. In doing so, they earned high praise from U.S. officials in Santo Domingo.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² MAAG Situation Report, January 29, 2010, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁷³ Hector E. Paz III, interview, April 23, 2010, 20.

⁷⁴ Michael Schimmel, interview, April 21, 2010, 29.

⁷⁵ Richard Goughnour, interview, April 23, 2010, 32.

⁷⁶ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 23.

⁷⁷ Christopher Lambert to Secretary of State, January 14, 2010, “Managing DR-Haiti Border After Earthquake: So Far, So Good,” AMHS message 000015, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

Relief Supplies

As the humanitarian operation developed, U.S. planners identified the need to move large volumes of relief supplies into Haiti. Given the limited capacity of the airport in Port-au-Prince, and damage to the Haitian seaports, USSOUTHCOM looked to the Dominican Republic. Building on the model employed to insert the DART and international SAR teams, U.S. military officers sought to use Dominican facilities to land cargo. The U.S. government and its partners would then move the supplies overland to Haiti. On January 16, USSOUTHCOM deputy civilian commander Ambassador Paul Trivelli talked to Christopher Lambert on the telephone about ways to expand U.S.-Dominican collaboration to include ground convoys and an “air bridge” to Haiti. The civilian deputy commander urged U.S. military planners to ensure that their plans were properly coordinated with local officials. Trivelli emailed USSOUTHCOM logistics director Col. James Vohr, U.S. Marine Corps, “I suggest you let him [Lambert] and Milgp Commander [MAAG chief] know what your thoughts are to check for feasibility on the ground.” Trivelli also raised the possibility of employing the airport at Barahona on the southwest coast of the Dominican Republic. “In any case—please touch base with Embassy Santo Domingo.”⁷⁸ The U.S. Air Forces Southern/12th Air Force commander, Lt. Gen. Glenn Spears, immediately tasked his foreign policy advisor with the coordination of a request to the Dominican Republic: “We . . . request ability to begin survey and coordination today, first light tomorrow.”⁷⁹ The U.S. chargé in Santo Domingo talked with President Fernández about an hour later; the Dominican president promptly authorized “the establishment of the [a] larger mission to assist Haiti from the Dominican Republic.”⁸⁰

The new assignment required the location of a second airfield and deployment of additional U.S. military personnel to the Dominican Republic. First, the U.S. Air Force sent the 615th Contingency Response Wing to San Isidro Air Base. The specialized unit increased the capacity of existing operations. Simultaneously, U.S. officials searched for an additional airport to support the FHA/DR mission. After reviewing the available facilities, Arzeno reported, “we made a collective decision that the best field was Barahona.”⁸¹ About 120 miles west of Santo Domingo, La Isabela International Airport at Barahona could handle C-17 aircraft and would reduce transit time and costs associated with overland travel to Port-au-Prince. La Isabela International Airport

⁷⁸ Paul Trivelli to James Vohr, January 16, 2010, 12:00 p.m., email, “Logistics operation at San Isidro DR,” KKEF, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁷⁹ Glenn Spears to Allan Langland, January 16, 2010, 3:13 p.m., email, “RE: Logistics operation at San Isidro DR,” KKEF, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁸⁰ Lambert to Langland, January 16, 2010, 5:37 p.m., email, “RE: Logistics operation at San Isidro DR,” KKEF, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁸¹ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 17.



Airmen from the 615th Contingency Response Wing approach a C-130 aircraft at San Isidro Air Base in January 2010. The secretary of defense authorized the deployment of about 200 additional U.S. military personnel to the Dominican Republic to expand logistics operations after the earthquake.

belonged to Dominican civilian aviation authorities, not the air force, but Dominican officials quickly approved the U.S. military deployment to Barahona. The 123rd Contingency Response Group, a Kentucky National Guard element commanded by Lt. Col. Dave Mounkes, promptly moved to Barahona, beginning operations on January 23, 2010.⁸² Elements of the 410th Contracting Agency arrived in the Dominican Republic to manage the payment of expenses connected with ongoing operations, such as the hiring of trucks and local drivers to transport supplies to Haiti. Overall, in addition to the USMAAG, about 200 U.S. military personnel served in the Dominican Republic during Operation Unified Response.

The USMAAG managed all U.S. military activities in the Dominican Republic during the FHA/DR mission. Coast Guard liaison Lt. Comm. Derrick Cromwell and U.S. Navy section chief Lt. Comm. Flores alternated tours as the USMAAG

⁸² Philip K. Miller to Ken Keen, February 8, 2010, email, "RE: Kentucky Greetings!" KKEF, HRC, USSOUTHCOM; and Phyllis Hanson, "Kentucky National Guard Provides Neighborly Support for Haiti from the Dominican Republic," US Air Force Live: The Officials Blog of the United States Air Force, January 26, 2010. <http://airforcelive.dodlive.mil/2010/01/kentucky-national-guard-provides-neighborly-support-for-haiti-from-the-dominican-republic/> (accessed March 15, 2017).

representative at Barahona. Compared to other parts of the Dominican Republic, the Barahona area lacked facilities to support the deployment and presented challenges for the DoD force protection team. From the beginning, James Evans, a DoD civilian employee at the USMAAG, worked policy and coordination issues from the embassy. Federico López, another DoD civilian, directed field operations. To handle the workload, the Pentagon dispatched an augmentation cell to help the two men protect the growing number of American servicemembers working in the Dominican Republic. “Yes, we worked over long hours, but we were able to do it without any incidents or any hitch in—again, the most important thing is the professionalism,” López concluded. “When you’ve got good people around you things get done [with] very little guidance.”⁸³

With expanded air facilities, U.S. officials in Santo Domingo organized motorized relief convoys to Port-au-Prince. The concept called for trucks and buses to carry supplies and relief workers from Santo Domingo (later Barahona) to Port-au-Prince, about 200 miles overland. The vehicles would return with evacuees bound for the reception center at San Isidro Air Base. Like all efforts across the Dominican Republic, the undertaking required extensive interagency cooperation. The embassy team needed to rent vehicles, determine proper sequencing of supply shipments, organize security details, and coordinate with border guards and the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) forces in Haiti. Embassy officials expressed concerns about the safety of the convoys. Senior U.S. officials worried that “some mob might block the road” before Port-au-Prince and loot the relief supplies. Even so, many embassy staffers volunteered to help with the convoys; others wanted to join the U.S. country team in Port-au-Prince. U.S. embassy public affairs counselor Gary Keith, for example, traveled with the first convoy to Port-au-Prince. Like many others, Keith volunteered for an assignment in Haiti. His friend Victoria Delong, a State Department public affairs officer in Haiti, died when her home in Port-au-Prince collapsed on January 12.⁸⁴ Keith wanted to “honor her memory” and “help the people of Haiti get back on their feet.”⁸⁵ Nineteen of 27 U.S. consular officers in Santo Domingo volunteered for service in Port-au-Prince.⁸⁶ They all moved to Haiti in convoys organized by the USMAAG.

⁸³ Federico López, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 23, 2010, SC-OH-20100423-3, 9, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁸⁴ Laura Rozen, “State Reports Death of US Embassy Official,” *Politico*, January 14, 2010. https://www.politico.com/blogs/laurarozen/0110/State_reports_death_of_US_embassy_official.html (accessed June 14, 2018.)

⁸⁵ Gary Keith, interview by Bradley Lynn Coleman, April 21, 2010, SC-OH-2010421-2, 5, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁸⁶ Michael Schimmel, interview, April 21, 2010, 20, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

The first convoy, 13 vehicles, accompanied by “a lot of diplomatic security personnel in full gear with weapons” left the U.S. embassy at 3:30 a.m. on January 23. “For us the key thing was getting there early” to avoid traffic leaving Santo Domingo, and congestion at the Haitian border, López explained. When they arrived at the Haitian border checkpoint around 8 a.m., the trucks and buses moved forward without delay; American officers had already coordinated entry with UN and Haitian officials. “Then,” Keith recalled, “it was basically creeping along on what were largely gravel roads” toward the Haitian capital. Riding in the first vehicle at the front of the convoy, López found the devastation appalling, recalling that “people tend to over exaggerate at times . . . but then you put eyes on target and it’s like—wow.”⁸⁷ Colonel Arzeno’s wife and other embassy spouses rode to Haiti, organized evacuees in Port-au-Prince, and served refreshments on the drive back to the Dominican Republic. “We’re a small country team so it was a full effort—everything was about supporting Haiti,” Arzeno explained.⁸⁸ In sum, López led three motorized convoys to Port-au-Prince and back. The embassy initiative delivered 150 truckloads of supplies and dozens of relief workers to Haiti during Operation Unified Response. Nongovernmental organizations leveraged the system to ship additional aid to Haiti during the weeks that followed.

Intelligence Assets and Distinguished Visitors

The USMAAG enabled the deployment of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets in support of U.S. operations in Haiti. The U.S. military advisors also facilitated high-level contacts that promoted interagency and international cooperation. On January 13, the 12th Reconnaissance Squadron dispatched a RQ-4 Global Hawk remotely piloted aircraft to survey the damage in Haiti. The aircraft operated from bases in the United States.⁸⁹ A few days later, the USSOUTHCOM commander received operational control of several unarmed MQ-1 Predator drones to provide continuous, full-motion video of aid distribution sites in Haiti. U.S. Air Force officers quickly moved the remotely piloted aircraft to facilities in Puerto Rico. Yet Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations governing the use of low-flying drones in civilian airspace delayed their use over Haiti. As the DoD, FAA, and partner nation officials formed

⁸⁷ Oral History, Federico López, April 23, 2010, Interviewed by X, SC-OH-20100421-2, 17, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁸⁸ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 20.

⁸⁹ On the RQ-4 mission, *Time* magazine correspondent Mark Thompson wrote: “Only the U.S. military can send a spy drone from California to fly lazy orbits over Port-au-Prince snapping close to 1,000 pictures a day, which when compared with similar ones shot last summer, create a map of the hardest hit areas that can be instantly relayed to those working on the ground.” Mark Thompson, “The U.S. Military in Haiti: A Compassionate Invasion,” *Time*, January 16, 2010, 6.

policies governing the employment of drones, the Texas Air National Guard and New Mexico Air National Guard each sent one RC-26 aircraft to Hispaniola. The manned RC-26s provided a full array of surveillance capabilities. Although these aircraft were typically used for counterdrug operations, U.S. officials had deployed similar aircraft to conduct damage assessments following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.⁹⁰ To reduce flight time over areas affected by the earthquake, U.S. officers wanted to station the aircraft, crew, and supporting personnel in the Dominican Republic. Major Ayala and Colonel Arzeno took the request to the Fernández administration. USSOUTHCOM wanted to know if the Dominicans “would be okay with that type of aircraft flying over” their country; the U.S. officers also asked for permission to fly the MQ-1 Predators in Dominican airspace, pending approval from the FAA.⁹¹

After additional consultations with Dominican civil aviation authorities, President Fernández agreed to the request. The RC-26s, crew, and supporting personnel moved to Puerto Plata Air Base on the northern coast of the Dominican Republic on January 23. The DoD force protection team supported the deployment. “It was our job to make sure their [reconnaissance personnel] lives, meals, security, quality of life, and functional things were taken care of,” Arzeno explained, so they could focus on their work.⁹² The Dominican air force assigned guards to provide continuous security for the platforms on the ground in Puerto Plata. The RC-26s conducted sorties over Haiti for about four weeks, delivering critical, real-time information to operators in Haiti.⁹³ The MQ-1 drones transited Dominican airspace without complications. “We had zero incidents involving any DOD personnel” in the Dominican Republic during the humanitarian operation, López proudly recalled. The statistics, he believed, reflected the professionalism of the entire U.S. military team deployed to the Dominican Republic during Operation Unified Response.⁹⁴

To advance U.S. policymaking during Operation Unified Response, the USMAAG supported important high-level U.S. visitors to the Dominican Republic. On January 18, the USMAAG facilitated a meeting between the USSOUTHCOM

⁹⁰ Historical Report, “Operation Unified Response,” June 2011.

⁹¹ Manuel Ayala, interview, April 22, 2010, 33.

⁹² Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 22.

⁹³ Mike Smith, “Air Guard Scales Back Haiti Relief Effort,” February 19, 2010. <http://www.nationalguard.mil/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=31&ModuleId=7964&Article=576649> (accessed June 21, 2018).

⁹⁴ Federico López, interview, April 23, 2010, 14.

commander, Gen. Douglas Fraser, U.S. Air Force, and Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela at San Isidro.⁹⁵ Two weeks later, General Fraser returned to the Dominican Republic with U.S. Transportation Command head Gen. Duncan J. McNabb, U.S. Air Force. The generals surveyed operations at Barahona before flying to Port-au-Prince.⁹⁶ Thereafter, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Julissa Reynoso, members of Congress, and others visited the Dominican Republic.⁹⁷ Then, in early March, Arzeno took Gen. Pedro R. Peña to the USSOUTHCOM headquarters in Miami. The USMAAG chief recalled, the USSOUTHCOM commander “was expressing his gratitude” to the Dominican minister of defense during their bilateral meeting.⁹⁸ These and other visits sharpened and informed U.S. policymaking and interagency cooperation—and deepened the U.S.-Dominican partnership. From a USSOUTHCOM perspective, constant interaction among senior DoD and Dominican personnel significantly accelerated the U.S. response to the disaster in Haiti.

Conclusion

The operational importance of Dominican facilities declined as the international relief effort matured. In Haiti, engineers repaired air and seaports, allowing cargo to move directly to distribution centers in Port-au-Prince. The flow of international assistance also slowed in early February, reducing the need for Dominican-based operations. On February 5, Lt. Gen. Glenn Spears therefore recommended the consolidation of all U.S. military FHA/DR activities in the Dominican Republic to San Isidro Air Base.⁹⁹ The USSOUTHCOM commander approved on February 6.¹⁰⁰ Three days later, the U.S. military ended operations at Barahona. The USMAAG and Dominican air force managed San Isidro as an “alternative airfield” for transports to Port-au-Prince for another two weeks.¹⁰¹ The last Dominican-based flight in support of Operation Unified Response left San Isidro Air Base on February 20.¹⁰²

Like other elements of the U.S. government, the USMAAG worked hard during

⁹⁵ Christopher Lambert to Secretary of State, January 20, 2010, “Embassy Santo Domingo Sitrep 7,” AMHS message 44604413, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁹⁶ MAAG Situation Report, February 5, 2010, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁹⁷ MAAG Situation Report, February 19, 2010, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

⁹⁸ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 24.

⁹⁹ Glenn F. Spears to Kent Keen, February 5, 2010, 7:09 p.m., email, “One DOMREP APOD,” KKEF, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

¹⁰⁰ Glenn Spears to Robert Parker, February 6, 2010, 11:08 a.m., email, “RE: One DOMREP APOD,” KKEF, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

¹⁰¹ MAAG Situation Report, February 14, 2010, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

¹⁰² Dereck Cromwell to Mario Arzeno, February 20, 2010, email, MAAG Dom Rep, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

Operation Unified Response. “There was a lot of activity,” Arzeno remembered. “We were there [San Isidro] basically twenty-four hours, seven days a week” into early February. “The helicopters didn’t fly at night, but they flew all day. Then, we had the C-130s coming in at night. It was constant airflow.”¹⁰³ Paz labored at San Isidro for 45 consecutive days. “It was hectic, tough, and long hours,” he recalled.¹⁰⁴ The entire country team responded to the adversity with professionalism and humor. “We were happy, laughing, had a joke, were making fun of each other. It was needed,” Paz explained, “if not we would have gone nuts. It was a stressful situation for our small group.”¹⁰⁵

Although neglected by historians and journalists, the small USMAAG in the Dominican Republic had an enormous impact on Operation Unified Response. The group enabled the swift evacuation of American citizens, deployment of first responders, and delivery of relief supplies. Yet, rather than claiming the effort as an extraordinary achievement, U.S. military advisors universally downplayed their involvement. “We saw the big picture,” the U.S. Army section chief reflected. “We were nothing—we were doing something really small into something really big.”¹⁰⁶ Every member of the U.S. country team credited others for their success. The USMAAG “really did a fantastic job and made all the difference” in the Dominican Republic, the *chargé d’affaires* observed. “Mario [Arzeno] and his team were central to the whole thing and their spirit and their ethos . . . showed the rest of us how it needed to work.”¹⁰⁷ The USMAAG personnel, on the other hand, praised USAID and State Department personnel. “The embassy folks did a superb job,” Paz remembered.¹⁰⁸ This selfless approach inside a proven country team structure enabled effective interagency cooperation.

The U.S. country team could not have accomplished its mission without Dominican partners. “The Dominican Government reacted immediately, compassionately and effectively to the Haitian tragedy,” the U.S. chief of mission reported.¹⁰⁹ The Fernández government opened its military bases, deployed resources, and facilitated the movement of international assistance through its sovereign territory. “Basically, it was a combined [U.S.-Dominican] operation,” Paz emphasized. “We

¹⁰³ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 16.

¹⁰⁴ Hector E. Paz III, interview, April 23, 2010, 26.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Lambert, interview, April 21, 2010, 26–27.

¹⁰⁸ Hector E. Paz III, interview, April 23, 2010, 21.

¹⁰⁹ Christopher Lambert to Secretary of State, January 28, 2010, “After the Earth Moved: A New Hispaniola,” AMHS message 44614009, OUR Subject File, HRC, USSOUTHCOM.

never took over and ran the tower [at San Isidro]—none of that. We were like a tenant using their space, processing personnel and cargo. The rest was a Dominican effort.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, the Dominican military operated the airfields, provided security, loaded and unloaded aircraft, and gave fuel and supplies to U.S. forces. Dominican officers, such as Altuna Tezanos, Erwin Evans, and Mao Gómez, played a key role in Operation Unified Response. The effective U.S.-Dominican partnership revealed the intrinsic value of the USSOUTHCOM theater security cooperation program. Through persistent, long-term contact and cooperation, a small group of highly trained U.S. military professionals formed an enduring bond with the Dominican armed forces in the years *before* the emergency. The Dominican military repaid the United States during Operation Unified Response. “We needed them, they came through for us,” the USMAAG chief emphasized.¹¹¹

Santo Domingo’s approach to the humanitarian mission in Haiti fueled expectations for improved Dominican-Haitian relations. The natural disaster “brought forth a common humanity of everybody on the island,” the deputy chief of mission observed.¹¹² Although Dominican goodwill gradually gave way to old, anti-Haitian attitudes, the entire episode revealed the potential for multinational cooperation on Hispaniola.¹¹³

Operation Unified Response likewise demonstrated the utility of the USSOUTHCOM oral history project. “Foreign humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief operations are some of the most complicated operations conducted by the military,” Cathal O’Connor wrote in the *Naval War College Review*.¹¹⁴ They are, moreover, an increasingly common undertaking for the U.S. armed forces.¹¹⁵ In this light, the oral history interviews in Santo Domingo captured important lessons for current

¹¹⁰ Hector E. Paz III, interview, April 23, 2010, 29.

¹¹¹ Mario Arzeno, interview, April 21, 2010, 22.

¹¹² Michael Schimmel, interview, April 21, 2010, 29.

¹¹³ “History looms large between the two countries” of Hispaniola, *New York Times* reporter Ahmed Azam wrote in 2015. Ahmed Azam, “Haitian Migrants Flee Dominican Republic for Camps Along Border,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2015, A12. For additional coverage of post-earthquake relations, see also Randal C. Archibold, “As Refugees from Haiti Linger, Dominicans’ Good Will Fades,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2011, A1; and Daly Guilamo, “Dominican Funnies, Not So Funny: The Representation of Haitians in Dominican Newspaper Comic Strips, After the 2010 Earthquake,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5 (March 2013): 63–82.

¹¹⁴ Cathal O’Connor, “Foreign Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster-Relief Operations: Lessons Learned and Best Practices,” *Naval War College Review* 65 (Winter 2012): 152–60.

¹¹⁵ “Although US military forces are organized, trained, and equipped to conduct [kinetic] military operations that defend and protect” the country, the U.S. military’s “inherent, unique capabilities” are required for current and future FHA/DR missions, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff recognized in 2012. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, Joint Publication 3-29 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2014), ix.

and future policymakers and operators. Viewed through the USMAAG experience on the other side of the island, the 2010 FHA/DR mission showed the importance of creative, selfless interagency and international teamwork—and the value of preexisting military-to-military relationships. The U.S. government will need to leverage both to save lives and mitigate human suffering following natural disasters in the years ahead.

Picture credits: Capt. Luis Martinez, U.S. Coast Guard; National Security team meeting, White House; map of Hispaniola, courtesy of the author; airmen at San Isidro Air Base, U.S. Air Force.

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