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Operation Sea Signal:

U.S. Military Support for Caribbean Migration Emergencies, May 1994 to February 1996

by David Bentley

Conclusions

- Both Haitian and Cuban migration flows during this emergency were prompted by a migrant perception that the risk of a hazardous sea voyage was justified by an increased chance of reaching the United States. Just as with the Mariel boatlift of 1980, and the Haitian exodus of 1991 and 1992, the "pull" factor of perceived opportunity was much more significant than the "push" factor of miserable conditions in Cuba or Haiti.
- Immigration and refugee matters are not the normal responsibility of the military, but military support for migration emergencies that exceed the capabilities of civilian agencies is an appropriate task. Nonetheless, involvement of active military forces in the routine support of immigration and refugee matters should be avoided because it distracts forces from their principal mission of defense and readiness.
- Sea Signal was an unqualified military success. Military forces were not specifically trained in migrant support missions, but the long-term investment in capable forces, quality people, and development of resourceful leaders was a significant contribution to the success of Sea Signal.

Background

Operation Sea Signal began in May 1994 when a U.S. policy decision to screen Haitian migrants for refugee status on board ships--rather than immediately returning them to Haiti--caused a sudden, heavy outflow of Haitian migrants. To prevent the loss of life at sea--and uncontrolled, illegal immigration into the United States through Florida--Navy and Coast Guard vessels interdicted and rescued migrants. An initial attempt to screen and provide a safehaven for the migrants on board leased ships anchored off Kingston, Jamaica was quickly overwhelmed by the large numbers of migrants, resulting in a decision to temporarily shelter them ashore at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo, Cuba. In August 1994, Castro changed his internal policy and allowed Cubans to leave the island. The immediate exodus of thousands of Cubans further complicated matters. It quickly became apparent that the routine capabilities of the United States to control immigration had been exceeded. The U.S. military provided the emergency capability to protect the country's borders from uncontrolled immigration and to provide humanitarian assistance to the migrants until they could be brought to the United States, resettled, or returned to their home countries. Both migrations were triggered by policy changes that created a perception of increased

opportunity to reach the United States.

Sea Signal was implemented on short notice in a dynamic international and domestic political environment. The interagency policy formulation process had to balance the protection of U.S. interests against the protection of foreign migrants' lives, weigh national responsibilities against international obligations, and use the resources and authorities of each agency in an appropriate, effective manner. Working under demanding conditions, Sea Signal participants helped save more than 60,000 Haitians and Cubans, shelter them temporarily, and eventually return them to their homes or bring them to the United States in a legal, controlled manner.

Immigration matters are not the normal responsibility of the U.S. military. Routine administration of U.S. immigration policy is handled by the Department of State and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) of the Department of Justice. The interdiction of illegal migrants at sea is the responsibility of the U.S. Coast Guard. The military role during this extraordinary migration was to support the INS and the Coast Guard with a rapid response capability and resources .

Previous Caribbean migration emergencies also required military support. In 1980, military support was needed during the Mariel boatlift. In 1991 and 1992, in the aftermath of the Haitian coup against Jean Bertrand Aristide, thousands of Haitian migrants were rescued at sea and sheltered in camps at Guantanamo. These experiences served as a foundation in the development of plans for future migrant support operations. When Sea Signal began in May 1994, some of these plans served as a basis for the early days of the operation.

Sea Signal was an expensive operation. The Joint Staff estimated incremental military costs in fiscal years 1994 and 1995 to be approximately $373 million. A September 1995 GAO estimate of the costs of all agencies associated with the Cuban migration alone was approximately $497 million. Total costs from May 1994 until the operation terminated in February 1996, for all agencies of the U.S. Government and for both the Haitian and Cuban governments, easily exceeded a half billion dollars.

Chart showing flow of Haitian and Cuban migrants from April - December 1994.

Challenges

Flexibility and Responsiveness. The ability to respond quickly and effectively in emergent situations is one of the greatest strengths of the U.S. military. Procedures for planning, coordinating, and executing operations have been practiced and refined in exercises and other operations. While providing a safehaven for migrants is not normally a military task, U.S. military planners were able to adapt existing plans for reaction to migrant contingencies. Joint Task Force 160 (JTF-160) was organized to meet the particular needs of this unique mission, and it was flexible enough, at all levels, to evolve with the dynamic changes in the situation.

Interagency Coordination. This mission required the capabilities of national, international, and non-government organizations, and interagency coordination was critical to success. Commanders integrated representatives of INS, Community Relations Services (CRS), Department of State, and the Coast Guard into the JTF. In Washington, interagency coordination resolved policy and funding issues. The World Relief Corporation provided health and social services, vocational training, mail services, and coordination of private donations. The International Organization for Migration worked with Haitians in the camps and arranged resettlement to third countries for a small number of Cubans. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees maintained an advisory role to ensure the protection of refugee rights. By recognizing the capabilities and limitations of these organizations the JTF was able to keep such diverse groups working together effectively.

Public Affairs. There was intense media interest in the operation. Domestic political sensitivity surrounding the policy toward Haitian and Cuban migrants would have been exacerbated if a less open media policy, as is sometimes required in combat operations, had been employed. Openness, accessibility, and cooperation resulted in a more favorable impression by the media, and helped prevent publication of inaccurate or misleading stories as a result of incomplete information.

Employing the Joint Task Force. JTF-160 was a diverse group of individuals and units, both active duty and reserve, pulled together on short notice. At the height of the operation, with over 50,000 migrants in the camps, the JTF numbered approximately 8,000 military personnel. Different types of units came for periods ranging from 90 to 180 days. Individual arrivals and departures made personnel changeover in staff sections a constant. Keeping everyone focused on the mission, training new arrivals, and reacting to changing situations made effective leadership essential at all levels of the JTF. The death of only one service member, in a traffic accident at Guantanamo, is testimony to the effectiveness of JTF leadership.

Intelligence. Intelligence took on a modified mission in Sea Signal. As the camps began to fill up, and migrants became disgruntled as they realized they were not going to the United States, JTF intelligence personnel studied trends in behavior, as well as the attitudes, rumors, and morale of migrants within the camps. Quick attention to negative indicators helped the JTF avoid conflicts. Early recognition of the utility of intelligence assets contributed to overall success.

Operations. Receiving additional migrants daily, caring for those already in the camps, and processing them for repatriation or admission into the United States was a broad challenge. The U.S. Atlantic Command (USACOM) identified three principles that were followed by JTF-160 that contributed significantly to the operation's success.

1. Accountability was maintained by means of a database containing information keyed to a coded bracelet worn by each migrant. This system allowed easy identification and a ready means of determining what stage of processing the individual had received.
2. Communication between migrants and the JTF leaders was essential. Military Information Support Teams were employed to publish newspapers and broadcast radio programs in Spanish and Haitian Creole. Each camp elected leaders who provided a two-way conduit for information between the migrants and the JTF Commander. Accurate information squelched rumors that could have disrupted camp tranquillity.
3. Security and the maintenance of order and discipline within the camps were critical to both the success of the mission and the migrants' personal safety. Haitians and Cubans were kept in separate camps, and troublemakers were isolated from the general populations. Clear rules of engagement for disturbances worked effectively during isolated incidents. Frequent patrolling of camps deterred many problems.

Logistics. A customized Joint Logistics Support Command was created to meet the unique logisitics requirements of Sea Signal. Feeding nearly 50,000 migrants and 8,000 support personnel, constructing and maintaining living quarters, emptying and servicing portable toilets, discarding trash, providing laundry facilities, and providing potable water are enormous tasks. Guantanamo is an isolated base to which all supplies are shipped by sea and air. Potable water is produced by a desalinization plant. The logistics effort was a major factor in making this operation a success, and construction of the camps was a major feat. In June 1994, when the Haitian migration peaked at more than 2,000 persons a day; and again in August, when Cuban migration peaked at more than 3,000 migrants per day, JTF personnel

rushed to raise tents, position portable toilets and shower facilities, erect containment fences, and provide food and water. Approximately 8,000 Cuban migrants were temporarily moved to camps in Panama to ease camp crowding. As the migrant population in Guantanamo was reduced through repatriation--or by admission to the United States--upgrades of living structures, toilet facilities, and common areas greatly improved conditions for remaining migrants for what was thought might be an indefinite stay, and migrants were moved from Panama back to Guantanamo.

Medical Care. Both Haitian and Cuban migrants presented a challenge for medical personnel. Infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS were not uncommon. Many of the migrants had little familiarity with the sanitation and preventive medicine procedures that are critical to masses of people crowded into a small area. Some medical problems required treatment unavailable at Guantanamo. In those cases, interagency cooperation was necessary to determine where treatment would be provided.

Migrant Welfare and Morale. Many factors contributed to good morale among the migrants in their crowded camps. Organized recreational activities and sports eased boredom. Opportunities to perform meaningful work by improving camp conditions appealed to some migrant volunteers. After the decision was made to bring remaining Cuban migrants to the United States in May 1995, education programs were initiated to provide skills to ease transition into life in the United States. Opportunities were provided for migrants to practice their religious beliefs. Providing familiar foods lessened the shock of being in a strange environment with limited freedom of movement. By consulting with migrant leaders and using migrant cooks, separate menus suitable for the different tastes of Haitians and Cubans were developed. Migrant welfare also encompassed protecting migrants from each other. In response to reports that women in the camps were being sexually abused, a tent--designated as a shelter for women--was erected near the guard post in each camp.

Major Reasons for Success

Three factors stand out as reasons for the overall success of Sea Signal. First, the U.S. military routinely critiques its own performance. Military units review operational performance looking for better ways to accomplish their assigned tasks. Units adapt to dynamic change in the short-term and develop new doctrine for future operations. Sea Signal began by drawing on the lessons learned during earlier migrant support operations, and during the operation, the ability to adapt operating procedures to a changing situation led to constant improvements in migrant support. Any future, similar operations will benefit from the lessons learned in this operation because USACOM has organized and compiled a multitude of operational details in an innovative video/CD-ROM/pamphlet format that provides both broad policy guidance and specific tactical solutions.

Second, this operation benefited from vastly improved interagency coordination. While the interagency coordination process was not effortless, military and civilian leaders from the many agencies involved in Sea Signal were able to overcome bureaucratic differences to ultimately get the job done. Without such cooperation, the Haitian and Cuban migrants would have quickly overwhelmed either the military's or any civilian agency's capability to control them. In a time of shrinking government resources, the lesson to be learned here is that capabilities can be maintained by capitalizing on the synergy achieved through interagency cooperation.

Third, wise long term investment has made the U.S. military a unique and valuable national resource. In a broad sense, Sea Signal is an indicator of the U.S. military's success as an institution: by recruiting high-quality people, training those people in ways that enhance flexibility, making the right investments in professional military education for leaders, and selecting the right commanders. With the exception of

the Coast Guard and some of the civilian agencies, most participants in this operation had never experienced anything similar, nor had they been trained to conduct a military operation of this type. The components and individuals of the JTF had never before practiced together as a unit. The ability of leaders to forge their units into a common team in very difficult circumstances speaks highly of the U.S. military's system of training individuals and units, and employing them together in effective joint force packages. Sea Signal also shows the value of maintaining adequate forces to meet unexpected contingencies. This operation required forces from all four Services and the Coast Guard, and at times strained response capability. Less capable forces might have resulted in loss of life for migrants or imposed constraints on policy making.

Recommendations

- **Plan now for future migration crises in the Caribbean**. During Sea Signal, finding safe havens for migrants among the nations of the Caribbean basin was very difficult. An effort should be made to establish international cooperation agreements for migration emergencies.

- **Keep military forces out of routine support for migration problems**. Military response is appropriate when no other agency is capable of responding effectively to true migration emergencies. However, after the emergency has passed, the military should be relieved of routine migrant support duties. Responsibility should revert to civilian agencies, even if migrants remain on a U.S. military installation.

- **Practice interagency responses to complex contingencies**. The military knows the value of having and exercising plans and using simulations to stimulate thinking about potential problems. Many of the civilian agencies lack the resources and personnel to invest in exercises and simulations. Low cost programs should be adopted that will not overburden other departments and agencies. A modest, long-term investment will pay for itself through more efficient response to emergencies requiring interagency teamwork.

Lieutenant Colonel David Bentley, U.S. Army, is a senior military fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies. For more information his telephone number is (202) 685-3846, ext. 528, fax (202) 685-3972, Internet: bentleyd@ndu.edu. NOTE

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