

HSL-51 "WARLORDS" RELOCATE TO MISAWA

3.11.11 at 2:46 p.m. Japan was hit with a 9.0 earthquake approximately 231 miles northeast of Tokyo. Recorded as the largest earthquake in Japan's recorded history and fifth overall in the World, it caused total destruction along the eastern coast of Japan in Miyagi Prefecture. Within an hour of the quake, a 30 foot massive tsunami reached six miles inland leveling everything in its path leaving approximately six million people without electricity and a death toll in the tens of thousands. About 50 miles to the south of the epicenter, the Fukushima Nuclear Power plant, damaged and without power struggled to cool its nuclear reactors. In response to Japan's tri-disaster earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant crisis, the "Warlords" of HSL-51 and their sister squadron, the HS-14 "Chargers," were mobilized to support the largest helicopter relief effort in the Pacific. The Warlords were prepared to undertake the mission marking what would become the first ever full deployment of the expeditionary HSL squadron.

The mission was dubbed Operation TOMODACHI, which loosely translates to "friendship". The job was to help our friends in the Pacific by delivering food, clothes, and needed supplies. Immediately following the earthquake and tsunami, HSL-51 was ready to support Operation TOMODACHI with five shore-based aircraft and crews. Within 72 hours after the natural disaster, HSL-51 had safely embarked four detachments aboard Yokosuka based ships and was poised to support Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) efforts with a total force of 12 HA/DR configured shore-based and deployed aircraft and crews. The five Warlord aircraft and crews remaining onboard NAF Atsugi were initially placed on 30 minute ready alert to support any SAR and/or HA/DR operational tasking.

Deployed at sea, Detachments TWO, FOUR, FIVE and SIX expeditiously completed any remaining Ship/Air Integration requirements and made preparations to conduct Search and Rescue (SAR) and HA/DR operations as their ships made way towards the East coast of Japan. Meanwhile, the already deployed Detachment ELEVEN onboard USS BLUE RIDGE (LCC 19) was in full gear supporting relief efforts conducting Vertical Replenishment (VERTREP) moving 85 pallets of critical HA/DR supplies from USNS RAPPAHANNOCK (TAO 204) to USS BLUE RIDGE for further transfer to the affected region.

Over the next few days both the deployed detachments and the remaining aircraft and aircrew at Atsugi transitioned from SAR operations to HA/DR operations and began delivering much needed supplies to the local Japanese communities. With the arrival of relief supplies on 14 March, the first two Warlord aircraft launched from Atsugi and made the near 350 mile transit over 8,000 ft mountains to Yamagata airport to re-fuel and then proceeded north of Sendai in search of displaced personnel. Soon after takeoff from Yamagata, the aircrews spotted hundreds of people and skillfully landed in various fields and school yards to determine the needs and medical condition of the local population. After several hours, the crews returned to Atsugi to avoid the decreasing temperatures and forecasted icing conditions in the mountains. The following day, the HA/DR mission was interrupted with a recall of all aircraft over concerns of an explosion in the third reactor at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. The Warlords stood fast and maintained aircraft on HA/DR alert and a two hour Medical Evacuation (MEDEVAC) alert.

3.17.11 As events in Japan unfolded, the Commander In Chief signed the Military Assisted Voluntary Departure and families in Atsugi arranged to leave. As word arrived that families would be departing, both HSL-51 and HS-14 were directed to make preparations for relocation to Misawa Air Base (approximately 378 miles north of Atsugi). It was decided that both squadrons could better support the HA/DR efforts from Misawa rather than from Atsugi by avoiding the two and a half hour transit over the mountains. On Friday, 18 March, at 1725 JST, one week after the earthquake and tsunami, and with only 14 hours notice, HSL-51 departed Atsugi and headed to Misawa, Japan.

With the transport of 180 personnel and equipment via C-9, C-40, and C-130, and the arrival of five SH-60B helicopters from Atsugi, HSL-51 was reestablished in Misawa at 1013 JST on Saturday, 19 March. It was from Misawa that all future joint HSL-51 and HS-14 shore operations would take place.

Eager to help our Japanese allies, the work force of the Warlords and Chargers began setting up shared maintenance shops and offices. The usual banter between on HSL/HS community differences was nonexistent. Warlord and Charger aircrews formed together to share information and begin the mission planning while maintenance technicians readied aircraft for what would be the largest combined HA/DR helicopter force in the Pacific. As the squadron received word from their families that the voluntary evacuation process had begun, the focus was strictly on the mission. Within 24hrs, both HSL-51 and HS-14 were united in Misawa delivering much needed help to our friends from the "Land of the Rising Sun." Just two weeks after the earthquake and tsunami, HSL-51 flew over 250 hours delivering and VERTREPing more than 200,000 pounds of relief supplies to the people of Miyagi Prefecture.

Today, both HSL-51 and HS-14 continue to operate from Misawa Air Base providing support to our long time allies.

Article by LTJG Angela Nakkula.



