

Disaster Relief Mission



U.S. servicemembers from the Army and Air Force search through the rubble for buried victims of an earthquake disaster at Agadir, Morocco, March 1960. (Courtesy of National Archives)

Devastating Earthquake Prompts U.S. Military To Provide Relief in Agadir, Morocco, in 1960

By GySgt Brian Knowles, USMCR

Editor's note: The following article is the second-place winner of the 2019 Leatherneck Writing Contest. Major Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines, through the Marine Corps Association & Foundation. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the third-place winner and honorable mention entrants.

On Feb. 29, 1960, the weather was warm and clear, as is typical of a winter evening in the coastal city of Agadir, Morocco. On this Leap Day, Moroccans were celebrating Iftar feasting in observance of the third night of Ramadan. Over the previous week, minor earthquakes had occurred but hardly disturbed the usual rhythms of life in Agadir. These small quakes were barely felt. Most

small tremors went unnoticed in a region known for centuries to be earthquake-free; however, a slightly stronger quake occurred just before noon, sending a jolt through the city and providing the only warning of impending danger.

Later that night at 11:41 p.m., a severe earthquake with a magnitude 5.7 and lasting roughly 15 seconds, devastated the city. Brutal ground motions lasted several moments and caused old masonry buildings to collapse. Even modern buildings developed structural failures, some with wall sections breaking loose and crashing to streets below. The newest hotels and apartments with reinforced concrete failed

and collapsed, burying hundreds of visiting tourists under twisted beams, shattered columns, and smashed concrete. Throughout the city, buildings crumbled into heaps of wreckage. Thousands of people were killed as plaster walls fragmented and concrete slab ceilings pancaked onto floors below. Thousands more were buried beneath collapsed structures and debris. It is estimated that between 10,000 and 12,000 were killed over the next few days. Another 10,000 were injured. The great loss of life and unbelievable damages to property and infrastructure overwhelmed basic emergency services. The earthquake put the population of 32,000 local Moroccans in a debilitating and hazardous situation.

Recognizing the dire need of the Moroccans, U.S. Marine Corps Colonel Samuel D. Mandeville Jr., the commanding officer of the Marine Barracks at Kenitra, Morocco, prepared 23 of his Guard Detachment Marines and 29 Marines of Air Transport Squadron VMR-252 for a rescue and relief mission. They stood by for official orders to commence the relief mission. Charles W. Yost, U.S. Ambassador to Morocco, received the formal request for assistance from the Moroccan government and forwarded the message through the State Department and to the Department of Defense. At 4:55 p.m. on March 1, 17 hours after the earthquake, U.S. military commanders for the region issued orders to provide relief efforts to the impacted area. With the relief mission authorized, Marines in Kenitra mustered in 25 minutes and departed in convoy. The quick response was instrumental in rescuing dozens of trapped survivors and easing the suffering of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of injured persons across Agadir.

Lieutenant Colonel Walter L. Williams led the Marine detachment. Within hours of departure, the 52 Marines were joined by 20 U.S. Navy personnel assigned to Port Lyautey Naval Base, 54 Air Force personnel from a Strategic Air Command (SAC) airfield near Rabat and an American translator from U.S. Embassy Rabat. Using pickaxes, flashlights, shovels and crowbars, rescue teams searched and recovered more than 300 survivors from collapsed buildings within hours of arrival. At the airfield in Agadir, 200-300 survivors were being treated by a Navy doctor and other medical staff.

Early the next morning, March 2, the Agadir airfield had been established as a base of operations for the impromptu relief force. From the airfield, rescuers were tasked out to the Moroccan Coordinating Agency, which began to lead operations. U.S. forces were directed to focus on res-



Above: In the aftermath of the temblor, Marines and Sailors work side-by-side to recover a casualty from a collapsed building.



Sailors use a bulldozer to clear rubble during relief efforts.

idential areas. Moving into their assigned search areas, they recovered 25 Moroccan survivors and an unknown number of fatalities buried under rubble. Additional supplies of water, canteens, blankets and clothing arrived for distribution.

It wasn't until 7 p.m. on March 2 that U.S. servicemen were told to stop for the night; however, only when no more voices could be heard in the ruins and the last of the daylight faded, did the Marines finally rest. Most had been awake for two days and in action for more than 24 hours. A second group of U.S. Marines

from Port Lyautey arrived to join the relief efforts led by First Lieutenant Orville R. Kartchner. Other U.S. personnel from Ben Guerir Air Base, Nouasseur Air Base and Port Lyautey Naval Air Station arrived as additional volunteers. Throughout the day, more than 100 U.S. servicemen joined the rescue effort, while exhausted men were returned to their respective bases. Total U.S. military personnel on site averaged about 140 per day throughout the mission. Due to the rapid deployment of Marines, Sailors, airmen and soldiers, an accurate count of exactly who and how

USS Newport News from the U.S. 6th Fleet arrived on March 3, 1960, and provided emergency supplies, helicopter transport, communications facilities and personnel for the relief effort. (USN photo)



many contributed to the relief efforts is unknown.

On March 2, President Dwight Eisenhower wrote a message of sympathy to King Mohamed V, King of Morocco:

“Your Majesty:

I have been deeply saddened by the news of the terrible earthquake which has caused so much loss of life and suffering at Agadir. Please accept the sincere condolences of the American people and myself in this great tragedy.

Dwight D. Eisenhower”

The response message from King Mohamed V, dated March 12, 1960, to President Eisenhower:

“His Excellency
Dwight D. Eisenhower,
President of the United States

We were particularly touched by the message of sympathy Your Excellency transmitted to us in your own name and that of the American people in connection with the disaster in Agadir.

We wish to express to Your Excellency and to your country, our friend, sincere appreciation for your deep concern over this tragic occurrence.

Mohamed V”



U.S. military cargo aircraft transported personnel, vehicles, and relief supplies from as far away as Germany, Italy, and England to support relief efforts in Agadir, Morocco. (Photo courtesy of National Archives)

On March 3, the mission continued in the early hours with all hands conducting search and recovery operations. Only fatalities were discovered. The count of deceased recovered for the day is unknown but estimated at several dozen. U.S. Army Europe coordinated the deployment of heavy equipment and personnel from the 39th Engineer Group arriving from

Ramstein, Germany. Company A, 79th Engineer Battalion arrived by airlift with full field and construction equipment. The engineers were flown to Agadir by Air Force C-119s, C-124s and C-130s of the U.S. Air Forces Europe’s [USAFE] 322nd Air Division. The engineers and heavy equipment greatly aided excavation and recovery operations. They also conducted

decontamination to restore sanitation and reduce sickness among the relief forces. The engineers installed a water purification system at the city's pumping station, donating the equipment to the Moroccans when the relief mission ended.

Flights from Europe were coordinated by the USAFE Headquarters Command Post at Wiesbaden, Germany. Greater command and control became essential in managing the various military flights through the international air traffic. Managing air transport of personnel, equipment and supplies from Africa, Europe and the U.S. was a complex problem that was dutifully managed to provide a smooth flow of logistics and personnel.

USS *Newport News* (CA-148), from the U.S. 6th Fleet, arrived on March 3 and provided emergency supplies, helicopter transport, communications facilities and personnel for the relief effort. *Newport News* had been sailing 75 miles northeast of Sicily on March 1 when ordered to render assistance in Agadir. Steaming 1,225 miles in 40.5 hours, the ship averaged 31 knots to arrive just two days later. Proving their outstanding seamanship, the Sailors added invaluable support to the relief mission. By 6 p.m. on March 3, as darkness settled over Agadir, the fatigued rescuers ceased operations and returned to the airfield and ship for the night.

On March 4, excavation and body recovery were halted by order of the Moroccan medical authorities. The hazards of recovering corpses—several thousand remained buried within damaged structures—had become too great for the recovery crews. Biohazards and the spread of disease from the decomposition became a serious issue and medical authorities determined it best to leave the remaining bodies buried to contain any spread.

By 9:30 p.m. on the 4th, all Marine and Navy personnel departed Agadir by air to Port Lyautey or returned aboard ship. Six Navy Seabees with a bulldozer and USAFE flight-line personnel remained to support of the Army's 79th Engineer Company, which assumed command of operations from the Marines. Astonishingly, survivors were still being located in the rubble up to 10 days after the quake. The soldiers from the 79th Engineering Battalion were the last of the U.S. military personnel to cease relief operations and departed for Germany on March 12.

During the relief mission, VMR-252's C-119s totaled 49 flights from March 1-7, 1960, with 270 flight crew hours and 400 ground crew hours. One flight of cargo was flown from as far away as Aviano, Italy. In total, they transported more than 103,335 pounds of equipment, supplies and personnel. U.S. Air Forces Europe



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U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force medical personnel provided first aid and evacuation to earthquake victims at an airfield in Agadir, Morocco, March 1960.

provided heavy-lift transport, airlifting U.S. Army troops and equipment. With 39 C-130s, eight C-124s and five C-119 aircraft, more than 575 tons of cargo, vehicles and 481 passengers were airlifted when flight operations ended on March 14. The supplies distributed included food, water, tents, blankets, ponchos, clothing, and medical supplies. The 316th Air Division Defense Control Center, located at Rabat-Salé Air Base, Morocco, coordinated much of the local airlift traffic. Throughout the mission, coordination of

the U.S. military was invaluable to success.

The international community responded to the event with swift aid and assistance. Spanish fishing vessels in Agadir Harbor first radioed news of the disaster to the outside world. Several European, American and African countries mobilized relief efforts immediately. Supplies were shipped from the United States, Spain, Germany and other countries. Moroccans quickly organized their efforts and coordinated the international relief. King Mohammed V himself surveyed the disaster and placed

THE U.S. AND MOROCCO

The Kingdom of Morocco and the United States share a long history of mutually beneficial accord. Morocco formally recognized the United States by signing a Treaty of Peace and Friendship on June 23, 1786. The treaty was valid for 50 years and was renewed in 1837, with subsequent agreements of friendship and cooperation. Today U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM), located in Stuttgart, Germany, has responsibility for U.S. military interests and operations throughout Africa. The joint U.S. command conducts annual military exercises and counterterrorism partnership efforts with Moroccan military forces, working closely to safeguard both countries' national security interests. A friendship built on centuries of goodwill and solidarity will continue to endure and prosper.

GySgt Brian Knowles, USMC

Relief efforts included the air transport evacuation of earthquake survivors. Here, Moroccans wait for instructions to board U.S. Navy and Air Force cargo transports.

his son, Prince Moulay Hassan, in charge of all relief operations.

Several factors led to the severity and destructiveness of the 1960 Agadir earthquake. The shallowness of the earthquake focused ground motion directly toward Agadir. Few buildings within Agadir were constructed to seismic codes as the region was not known for seismic activity. No warnings were issued to prepare people for an earthquake. Agadir was far removed from international emergency aid and local emergency services were ill-prepared for the magnitude and destructiveness of the earthquake. The last known earthquake near Agadir occurred in 1731, which destroyed the town of Santa Cruz de Aguer. These factors all contributed to the devastation following the earthquake.

Within seconds of the ground motion, several square miles of Agadir were completely destroyed. One-third of the population was killed. Another third of the population was injured or incapacitated. Some sections of the city had 95 percent death rates. All structures suffered damage or were entirely shattered. The number of casualties will never be known as many bodies were never found or recovered.

In Morocco's desperate time of need, the U.S. offered as much assistance as it could and helped save countless lives. From March 1-12, 1960, Marines and Sailors from Port Lyautey, the crew of *Newport News*, airmen from airfields near Rabat, dozens of soldiers from units in Europe and American translators and staff from U.S. Embassy Rabat rescued injured, trapped and displaced civilians in one of



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the most devastating earthquakes. Although not a joint mission by design, the U.S. military and Department of State integrated their efforts in the best application of their respective capabilities. The 1960 Agadir earthquake was an impromptu joint humanitarian mission that could compare well to contemporary relief operations. All U.S. personnel sent to Agadir performed an exemplary demonstration of their compassion, determination and professionalism. The men and

women who joined the relief mission can be proud of their efforts in easing suffering from the catastrophe.

Author's bio: GySgt Brian Knowles served with Communications Platoon, HQ Co, 3rd Bn, 24th Marines from 2001-2010. He then served in the Marine Corps History Division's Field Historian Branch. He is currently serving as a historian for public affairs, U.S. Africa Command.



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U.S. Marine guards speak with a local citizen in Morocco in 1960.



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This 1960 image shows Marines posing near a sign that reads, "Marine Barracks, 2nd Guard Company, Sidi Yahia, Morocco."