

40,000 Tons of Hope

Coalition of Hope's bold new approach to humanitarian assistance operations

BY TOM FIEDLER



Timothy Keegan,
founder and CEO
of COH

The people of Haiti were nearing the end of a normal January day in 2010 when the earth suddenly shook with crushing ferocity.

The quake claimed some 250,000 lives, many of them in minutes and others over subsequent weeks

from injuries and disease. Five million Haitians were left homeless. Schools, shops, first responders – even civil government and other necessities of normal life – existed no more. The devastation was so great in this impoverished country that efforts by others to rush in with aid were thwarted by the utter lack of infrastructure. Timothy Keegan understood the need.

The year before, Keegan was a U.S. Army Reserve Military Intelligence Officer deployed with International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan. He had witnessed scenes of disaster: villages destroyed, victims displaced and the often-thwarted attempts to render assistance when and where it was most needed. But the scale of devastation in Haiti was magnitudes greater and prompted Keegan to action. He organized a non-profit effort he named the Coalition of Hope, which gathered and delivered more than 600 tons of relief supplies to the quake's victims.

From the chaos Keegan saw entrapping the

Caribbean nation emerged a vision for rendering more effective responses to future disasters.

That vision is the “Excelsior Project,” which, if successful, will fulfill the dream of turning weapons into assets of peace. At the heart of the project would be a retired U.S. Navy amphibious assault ship retrofitted for humanitarian missions. It would be staffed with an international crew of government and civilian specialists in disaster response. This, Keegan says, is “an unprecedented concept that will provide optimized capability in support of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief missions.”

More than the venerable hospital ship, an amphibious assault ship includes helicopter support platforms, ship-to-shore landing craft, substantial freshwater production and power-generation capability, storage for heavy equipment and emergency supplies, medical facilities and short-term housing for as many as 4,000 displaced persons. Keegan and his Coalition partners are confident that such a ship, when outfitted for disaster relief missions, could replace the poorly administered, outdated and needlessly expensive approaches commonly practiced today.

“The size and security provided by our ship in a crisis environment allows for unprecedented on-site assistance,” Keegan says.

In addition to the disaster relief mission, he said discussions have begun to emplace a full-time teaching hospital aboard ship to serve as an advanced “medical center of excellence” and

scientific research facility.

When deployed abroad, this one-of-a-kind learning environment will serve as a beacon of contemporary medicine in areas of the world where medical care is either basic, or non-existent, he adds.

Keegan estimates the cost of retrofitting an available ship, the decommissioned USS Nassau, to be approximately \$375 million, which he says the Coalition is close to finalizing through a consortium of international and US institutional investors. Once the ship is operational, the annual operating budget will be predominately borne by the coalition's nation-state partners. He's also optimistic that Project Excelsior will earn the backing of the nation's political leadership.

“Grand human endeavors capture the attention of history,” says Keegan. “President Kennedy is recalled for sending men to the moon and enabling the Peace Corps. President Reagan set in motion the events that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. With Project Excelsior, we know that this life-saving gift to humanity will be recognized, respected and remembered for establishing a sea-borne force capable of carrying out humanitarian missions with modern-day effectiveness and efficiency.” **WL**

A VIDEO ABOUT THE PROJECT CAN BE VIEWED AT COHEXCELSIOR.COM

Tom Fiedler is a member of the Coalition of Hope's advisory board and a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist