



Task Force Falcon:

Rapid Response to Hurricane Helene Relief Aid in Western North Carolina

Soldiers assigned to 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment travel to Garren Creek, NC, to deliver relief supplies on 7 October 2024. (Photo by SSG Cory Reese)

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More than 1,000 Soldiers from the 2nd Mobile Brigade Combat Team (MBCT), 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) recently deployed to western North Carolina in support of Hurricane Helene response efforts. 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment “Strike Force” deployed over 500 Soldiers, forming Task Force (TF) Falcon. TF Falcon conducted a variety of tasks to include rescue and recovery, medical aid, route assessment clearance, traffic control, warehouse management, supply distribution, general transportation, and equipment maintenance. They employed tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) developed over the past year during the unit’s transformation from an infantry brigade combat team (IBCT) to an MBCT. During the operation, TF Falcon leveraged lessons learned and best practices developed during multiple repetitions of large-scale, long-range air assault (L2A2) operations at home station and the Joint Rotational Training Center (JRTC). This article provides reflections about TF Falcon’s Hurricane Helene response, the capabilities of an MBCT in a civil support mission set, and lessons learned that may be applicable to future L2A2 operations.

Timeline and Mission

The 101st Airborne Division issued a

Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment begin staging for hurricane response efforts. (Photo courtesy of the 101st Airborne Division Public Affairs Office)

verbal warning order to 2-502 IN on 3 October to be prepared to send up to a battalion task force to support relief efforts following Hurricane Helene. Within 36 hours of notification, Strike Force assembled and organized TF Falcon, and within 15 hours of notification of modes of travel, it deployed more than 500 Soldiers to support humanitarian operations in western North Carolina. 2/101 MBCT attached its Multi-Functional Reconnaissance Company (MFRC) and Havoc Company (Forward Support Company), 526th Light Support Battalion (LSB) to provide capability and endurance.

TF Falcon deployed on 5 October by both ground and air, using 11 CH-47 and five UH-60 helicopters, five ground convoy serials, and six coach buses to insert into the joint operational area (JOA) and occupy the intermediate stag-



ing base (ISB). Fifty-nine Soldiers travelled by contracted buses that morning to Greenville, TN, to establish ISB Greenville while one CH-47 simultaneously initiated air movement and the assault command post to Helicopter Landing Zone (HLZ) Castle in Marion, NC, in order to link up with the higher headquarters commander of the 20th Engineer Brigade. Two-hundred-eighty-one Soldiers began ground movement with 67 Infantry Squad Vehicles (ISVs) and 31 additional tactical support vehicles at 0830 on 5 October. After this initial movement, TF Falcon delivered 248 Soldiers and 18 ISVs into the JOA. On 6 October, it continued to deliver forces to the JOA and increased its presence to 370 Soldiers, 34 ISVs, and three field litter ambulances (FLAs). TF Falcon also established a separate primary HLZ at Camp Windy Gap in Weaverville, NC, to deliver forces one hour closer to the point of need. The final air movements from the ISB to the JOA concluded on 7 October, resulting in the arrival of all TF Falcon Soldiers and equipment in the JOA in less than 72 hours.

Task Organization

Of the 537 Soldiers assigned to TF Falcon, 345 were organic to 2-502 IN: 96 Soldiers from Attack Company (A Co.), 80 from Renegade Company (B Co.), and 107 from Charger Company (C Co.). Two scout squads from the Strike Force Multi-Purpose Company (MPC) were assigned to both Attack and Charger Companies. 2/101 MBCT delegated operational control of 81 Soldiers from the brigade MFRC to TF Falcon as well as 78 Soldiers from the 42nd Combat Engineer Company-Infantry (CEC-I). TF Falcon maintained internal sustainment support capabilities through H/526 LSB (TF Havoc), with 51 Soldiers attached.

TF Falcon and TF Talon (1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 2/101 MBCT) fell under the higher headquarters of the 20th Engineer Brigade and the XVIII Airborne Corps to create TF Castle. While TF Castle held operational control, both task forces operated in conjunction and within parameters set forth by the state of North Carolina through mission assignment task orders (MATOs). These MATOs directed TF Falcon on areas requiring support and assistance, typically counties or major public road infrastructures. Additionally,

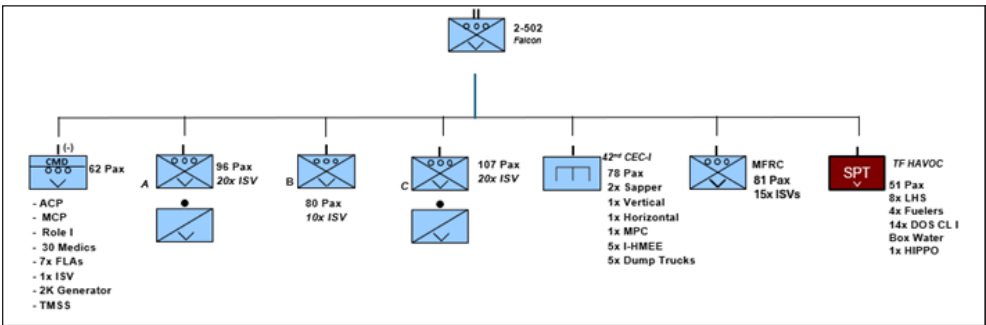


Figure 1 — 2-502nd Task Organization

Mission Assignment Task Order							
TF Falcon Hurricane Response							
CAO: 12 1100 OCT 24							
MATO	Order Number	Start DTG	Company Assigned	NLT DTG	Point of Contact	Task	Location
7.4	FRAGO 8 to OPOD 25-001	06 0700 OCT 24	42 CEC-I	14 1700 OCT 24	LTC William Hathaway	Establish truck restriction barriers on NCDOT routes to prevent tractor usage	BUNCOMBE COUNTY
7.4.1	FRAGO 8 to OPOD 25-001	06 0700 OCT 24	42 CEC-I	14 1700 OCT 24	LTC William Hathaway	Set tractor barrier	Cove Creek Rd at US 276
7.4.2	FRAGO 8 to OPOD 25-001	06 0700 OCT 24	42 CEC-I	14 1700 OCT 24	LTC William Hathaway	Set tractor barrier	I-26 Westbound at Exit 3
7.4.3	FRAGO 8 to OPOD 25-001	06 0700 OCT 24	42 CEC-I	14 1700 OCT 24	LTC William Hathaway	Set tractor barrier	NC209 at I-40 and Exit 24
7.4.4	FRAGO 8 to OPOD 25-001	06 0700 OCT 24	42 CEC-I	14 1700 OCT 24	LTC William Hathaway	Set tractor barrier	US 70/25
7.4.5	FRAGO 8 to OPOD 25-001	06 0700 OCT 24	42 CEC-I	14 1700 OCT 24	LTC William Hathaway	Set tractor barrier	US 197 at US 19E
7.9	FRAGO 8 to OPOD 25-001	06 0700 OCT 24	RENEGADE CO	14 1700 OCT 24	Mr. Travis Donaldson	Conduct emergency route clearance, local lifesaving assistance to isolated homes, and general manpower support	HAYWOOD COUNTY
7.9.1	FRAGO 9 to OPOD 25-001	06 2100 OCT 24	RENEGADE CO	14 1700 OCT 24	Mr. Travis Donaldson	Wayfinding to households on Temple Rd and Blue Ridge Assembly Rd (primary bridge washed out)	Black Mountain, NC
7.9.2	FRAGO 9 to OPOD 25-001	06 2100 OCT 24	RENEGADE CO	14 1700 OCT 24	Mr. Travis Donaldson	Debris clearance and route widening (beyond quad width to vehicle width) to Summer Haven community	Summer Haven Rd, Swannanoa, NC
7.9.3	FRAGO 9 to OPOD 25-001	06 2100 OCT 24	RENEGADE CO	14 1700 OCT 24	Mr. Travis Donaldson	Side roads and neighborhoods east of Merrimon Ave between Williams St. and Stoney Knob Rd, including Reems Creek Rd east to Paint Fork Rd.	Weaverville, NC

Figure 2 — Task Force Falcon Mission Assignment Task Order

these MATOs detailed authorized methods of support by Title 10 forces within the JOA, including route clearance, aid distribution, obstacle removal, traffic control, and general incident assessments. These MATOs served as parameters for TF Falcon leaders to ensure lines of effort in providing aid enabled immediate response to hurricane effects and set conditions for recovery within the JOA.

Air Movement Planning for Civil Support Response

After conducting L2A2 training exercises at home station (April 2024) and to JRTC (January and August 2024), the 101st Airborne Division determined the number days required to effectively plan and execute an L2A2. Based on mission requirements and the immediate activation of Title 10 forces, TF Falcon began air movement 15 hours from notification



Soldiers offload Infantry Squad Vehicles at the start of hurricane relief efforts. (Photo courtesy of the 101st Airborne Division Public Affairs Office)

that the task force would move by air. The division quickly executed the air assault planning process within the allotted time and developed a course of action that included air movements over three days to deliver all passengers and vehicles. HLZ Castle served as the primary HLZ for day one while HLZ Nighthawk at Camp Windy Gap became the primary HLZ for days two and three. The L2A2 training conducted over the past year and the relationships built between the ground force and the Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) were invaluable to the success of this operation.

Civil Partner Integration

TF Falcon quickly realized that the most efficient way to understand the operational area and environment was to integrate into the local populace. We quickly built relationships with local fire departments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to understand the ground truth, aid individuals, and identify points of need. Quickly understanding what the people needed and delivering on those needs opened opportunities for support and as well as built relationships with the local leaders and population.

Although this tactic was critical to gaining situational understanding of the critical need, as time went on, we began to recognize that local leadership and NGOs were often inundated with information. Crisis management teams (CMTs) from around the country were utilized to relieve the burden of local first responders to meet the critical needs on a large scale, and many NGOs worked to meet direct needs of the populace on a smaller scale. Our team eventually became the connective tissue between many organizations that were working very hard within the scope

of their problem set but did not effectively work with other organizations. This led to duplicated and wasted effort and resources on numerous occasions.

To prevent this, our companies conducted a daily sync with the county emergency operations centers (EOC) in the morning. Following this sync, one company would go to every distribution center throughout the county and every location their platoons were working at as well as the fire departments/police stations in each town within the assigned county. This served multiple purposes as each day brought new information. First, taking about 20-30 minutes at each site allowed us to have the most up-to-date information for each location throughout the county. We were able to discuss the needs of each region of the county and visibly see the affected areas



A Soldier from the 2nd Mobile Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division meets with civilians during hurricane relief operations. (Photo courtesy of the 101st Airborne Division Public Affairs Office)

and their progress while making valid assessments. Second, more than just a phone call, we could discuss the information being consolidated at the EOC and confirm with our platoon leadership.

Each night the companies debriefed their platoons and ensured that they were hunting for information while out conducting missions. The platoon leaders and platoon sergeants were by far the most valuable sources of information. They spoke with distribution center leaders, church leadership, and every civilian they came across to assess needs throughout the day. Each day our company leadership brought this information to the EOCs to ensure they understood the updated needs of the county and were not reliant on stale information. We acted as the hands, feet, and eyes of the county EOC and provided timely and accurate reporting to paint the bigger picture for them.

Additionally, our partnership with the National Guard was critical. One company remained overnight near the National Guard regional command team, and each day the company's leaders met with leadership at the central receiving and distribution point (CRDP) to assess the needs of the distribution centers scattered throughout the county. We then brought this information to the National Guard liaison officer at the EOC to ensure that distribution of resources was being properly managed.

Service Support and Sustainment

As TF Falcon massed forces within the JOA, the next problem set was long-term sustainment within the area. Operating off the assumption that logistical support would be minimal on ground, elements from the 526th LSB were consolidated under Havoc Company to provide logistical support for both TF Falcon and TF Talon. The two biggest capabilities that Havoc brought to the operation were wreck-

By rapidly establishing multiple LSAs, TF Falcon could conduct decentralized operations throughout the JOA, giving commanders the freedom to operate from whichever location was closest to the communities specified in their MATOs.

ers and bulk resupply assets. Despite their necessity in the operation, bulk resupply assets created significant strain on convoys attempting to move through the mountains to reach Logistics Support Area (LSA) Marion.

Consequently, Havoc became delayed several times in their ground movement due to their Heavy Expanded Mobility Tactical Truck (HEMTT) struggling to pull 14 days of sustainment through difficult terrain. Due to the rapid nature of the mission deployment, aerial resupply through rotary-wing platforms was limited, and the terrain did not allow for Cargo Delivery System (CDS) drops. In order to alleviate the problems encountered, TF Falcon adapted by limiting HEMTT systems loads on unknown routes to minimize mechanical issues.

Throughout the JOA, ISVs proved essential to maintaining the operational pace required to assist the local communities in their recovery. The simplicity of the ISV platform allowed TF Falcon to mass Soldiers and individual equipment at any given location in the JOA within two hours. Despite the mobility and versatility of the ISV in the mountainous environment, logistical resupply of forward elements was consistently hampered by the capabilities of legacy vehicles.

Due to what equipment was on hand, TF Falcon relied heavily on HEMTT platform vehicles to provide logistical support. These vehicles lacked the simplicity and maneuverability of the ISV fleet and thus took significantly longer to employ within the JOA. Consequently, HEMTT convoys took an average of three to four hours to complete missions and required extensive route reconnaissance to ensure

Soldiers assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment unload a trailer of supplies at a local community relief center in Brunsville, NC, on 10 October 2024. (Photo by MSG Anthony Hewitt)



adequate road space, structure, and vertical clearance. These limitations inherent to the design and purpose of the HEMTT platform created significant strain in exchange for the ability to relocate bulk sustainment assets within the JOA.

The utilization of land use agreements and life support contracts to rapidly stand-up multiple LSAs within the operational environment were critical to TF Falcon's success in the civil support mission set. Contracting officer representatives (CORs) were essential in this process, as their liaising between task force staff and local businesses facilitated rapid awarding and fulfillment of contracts to support our Soldiers in their mission set. By rapidly establishing multiple LSAs, TF Falcon could conduct decentralized operations throughout the JOA, giving commanders the freedom to operate from whichever location was closest to the communities specified in their MATOs.

Integration of Public Affairs

Embedding a public affairs officer (PAO) from division for the duration of this operation increased positive atmospherics for the battalion, represented by a greater number of views, positive reactions, and increased public awareness in the JOA. The PAO liaised with news agencies and social media outlets, creating opportunities to spread strategic messages on multiple platforms. This included coordinating and executing video interviews with Senator Ted Budd, FOX News, and CBS. Additionally, the PAO advocated for battalion photographs, videos, and stories through division channels to ensure public affairs goals met the commander's intent. At daily commander's update briefs, the PAO provided updates

by the numbers to ensure shared understanding of the reach of public messaging.

In future operations, an embedded PAO could serve as liaison for organizations beyond media. For example, morale organizations (USO, Salvation Army, local donors) liaised with individual camp mayor cells rather than a central battalion representative. With the PAO acting as the interface for these and other groups, it would create a single point of contact who regulates the relationships between battalion and the civilian population.

Command and Control (C2) Architecture

We utilized a split command post to achieve better proximity to the affected areas with the main command post located at LSA Windy Gap and the alternate command post, which was co-located with our higher headquarters, TF Castle, in Marion (50 miles apart). We aligned companies to specific counties to spread the forces throughout the area of operations. Throughout the operation, Bravo Company, completed MATOs in Haywood County (primarily in and around Waynesville, NC) and even established a more forward LSA at the county fairgrounds where Soldiers slept and sustained themselves. Alpha Company, Charlie Company, and MFRC completed MATOs and other operations in Buncombe, Madison, Yancey, and Mitchell counties at various points in the operation but rested and resupplied primarily at LSA Windy Gap.

Our battalion S-1 utilized a by-name personnel status report to accurately track personnel strength in the JOA. Trip tickets and an entrance/exit control point (ECP) to the LSAs provided sufficient operational data to track movement of personnel and the humanitarian aid operations. Using Microsoft Power BI to count, display, and sort all this data, the S-1 promoted a shared understanding of TF Falcon's personnel strength with both the higher headquarters (forward and rear) and within the task force.

TF Falcon used a distinct C2 configuration across our two command posts (CPs). We were required to employ specific equipment, compounded by the challenging mountainous terrain, which resulted in significant elevation variations. Initially, our CPs established a foothold with limited cellular capabilities but quickly transitioned to an in-place solution using Starlink. Our reliance on Starlink for high-speed internet became essential as frequency deconfliction between our systems and civilian systems restricted the available waveform types.

The companies faced a unique set of challenges as they experienced severe elevation changes in the mountainous terrain while utilizing our new radios and capabilities. Although they had access to limited waveforms similar to those of the CPs, the approved source for local radio communication was frequency

Figure 3 — Example Public Affairs Interview

SEN Ted Budd (N.C.) and LTC Walt Gray talk Hurricane Helene relief support



NORTH CAROLINA, UNITED STATES

10.07.2024

Video by Staff Sgt. Joshua Joyner

2024 Hurricane Season DoD Support

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At left, Soldiers in 1st Platoon, Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Mobile Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), remove debris so a local citizen can get to her tractor in western North Carolina on 11 October 2024. Above, Soldiers assigned to 2-502 IN deliver a generator to an isolated citizen during Hurricane Helene relieve efforts in Brunsville, NC, on 10 October 2024. (Photos by MSG Anthony Hewitt)

modulation (FM). However, FM communications were largely ineffective due to the need for line of sight (LOS), which was hindered by the topography. Consequently, the companies relied heavily on cellular service and the Starlink systems of local fire and police departments to maintain communication with the CPs.

To enhance our humanitarian response efforts, a proactive approach to frequency deconfliction and local unit support through spectrum management would be beneficial. The Tactical Scalable Mobile (TSM) network could have mitigated some of the challenges associated with elevation and LOS issues encountered by the companies. Furthermore, in non-tactical scenarios, satellite communications were pivotal to the mission's success. Starlink capabilities are essential both on and off the battlefield, especially in environments lacking local communication infrastructure.

Conclusion

Task Force Falcon deployed 537 Soldiers and 67 ISVs by large-scale, long-range air movement with less than 18-hour notice in support of humanitarian aid, utilizing the same TTPs that enabled success in force-on-force training exercises during JRTC Rotation 24-10. The equipment and capabilities

that enable fast, effective, and controlled operations for a mobile brigade combat team in a contested environment can be effectively employed to provide support to civilian authorities as well. TF Falcon's ability to implement the tools and operating procedures tailored to warfighting into a humanitarian aid mission demonstrates the flexibility and dynamic strength of the MBCT.

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