



A volunteer
army of
military
veterans
brings aid
to shattered
communities
and helps
heal the
wounds
of war

By Steven Hill

MISSION: Relief



COURTESY TEAM RUBICON

Previous page: Team Rubicon member Chris Ryan cradles a newborn—delivered hours before on a desk that served as a makeshift operating table—as the disaster-response group prepares to medevac survivors of Typhoon Haiyan on the Philippine island of Leyte in November 2013. Left: William McNulty in the Manresa camp in Haiti, where Team Rubicon's first mission brought badly needed medical aid to victims of the 2010 earthquake.

treat the most critically wounded first. They improvised supplies, prying doors off ruined houses to use as stretchers and rigging splints from window frames and tree branches. And they were doing it without being shot at.

"It was actually a little bit cathartic for the team, knowing they were operating in this environment and yet they didn't need to carry a gun, didn't need to worry about anybody trying to kill them," McNulty says.

"They were just there to help people."

In the course of their 18 days in Haiti, a team that began with four grew to 60 and treated more than 3,000 wounded. It gained a name—Team Rubicon—and a mission: Take the crisis management skills and passion for service of returning war veterans and apply them to disaster-relief efforts around the globe. Unlike many international aid organizations, which can take days or weeks to fully mobilize, the veterans of Team Rubicon would strike quickly—within 24 hours, in most cases—bridging the gap between the immediate aftermath of disaster and the arrival of large-scale relief operations.

The urgent need for a humanitarian quick reaction force was particularly stark in Haiti, where McNulty soon realized that experience in a combat zone did not prepare the veterans and emergency first responders on his team for everything they would encounter in Port-au-Prince.

"In Iraq I had seen lots of fresh wounds—gunshot wounds, shrapnel wounds," he says. "I had never seen wounds that had been left to fester untreated for five or six days. I had never seen gangrene. Nor had our ER doctors.

When William McNulty arrived in Haiti in January 2010, just three-and-a-half days after a magnitude 7.0 earthquake rocked the Caribbean's poorest, most populous country, the first thing the former Marine noticed was how much the capital city reminded him of a combat zone.

"Port-au-Prince looked just like Iraq after the war," says McNulty, who spent nearly two years in Iraq working in counter-terrorism. "It looked a lot like Fallujah."

Destruction was widespread and catastrophic. Some 250,000 homes collapsed, tens of thousands were killed and millions more were displaced. The nation's already shaky infrastructure was devastated, complicating efforts to bury the dead and bring supplies and medical attention to the wounded. Power and communication grids were down, vehicles and fuel were in short supply, and the Port-au-Prince airport was closed. Media reports claimed that armed mobs were roaming the streets, and the Red Cross and the U.S. State Department advised against travel to the country, further slowing the arrival of international disaster

agencies mobilizing large-scale relief efforts.

But for McNulty, c'01, and the military veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who joined the seat-of-the-pants relief effort that he organized with his friend and fellow Marine Jake Wood, Haiti's "post-chaotic environment" felt like familiar ground.

"There was a calmness the veterans had in dealing with a lot of the same issues [faced in war], the unstable populations, limited resources, the unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells," McNulty recalls. While people and aid had begun piling up at the airport, "no one was operating in town," he says. "We realized that we were out there alone, and just naturally falling back on our military training."

The ad hoc "medical militia," as the group called themselves, set up triage to

This is what we saw every day in Haiti. Crush wounds. Compound fractures. It was an experience no one will ever forget."

On their second day in Port-au-Prince, the team was triaging patients at a collapsed school, sending those needing high-level care to a local hospital. Word came back that the hospital was full of wounded, but there was no medical staff to treat them. McNulty and his team moved in, re-establishing emergency care and staffing the ER for two days.

In their secure compound on the grounds of a Jesuit novitiate at the end of one long day, McNulty turned to Wood and said, "We have a model here. No one else is engaging veterans in this type of service, but it makes so much sense because of the skills we have."

That realization spurred the two men to grow Team Rubicon into a thriving disaster-response organization that taps the unique skills of combat veterans to perform under pressure in crises. The 60 volunteers who joined them in Haiti in 2010 have since swelled to a volunteer force of 35,000 (75 percent of whom are veterans), with a full-time staff of more than 50 that provides back-office support for the dozens of disaster deployments Team Rubicon mounts each year. The nonprofit has attracted backing from the likes of the Clinton Global Initiative, the Starr Foundation and the Drue Heinz Family Foundation, which last year awarded McNulty and Wood the \$250,000 Heinz Prize for the Human Condition.

Along the way, the organization that initially focused its attention on disaster victims began to realize that among those benefiting the most from Team Rubicon's missions were the military veterans themselves.

Shortly before graduating from KU with a degree in communication studies in December 2000, William McNulty walked into a Lawrence recruiting office and enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve, requesting infantry duty rather than officer training. He was following a long family history of service: Both of his grandfathers served in World War II, and his father was a Green Beret, a U.S. Army Special Forces medic.

McNulty's unit was not deployed to Afghanistan; it was put on standby but never sent to Iraq. He found another way into the war, taking a civilian job in Anbar province.

"I thought it was going to pass me by, and I wanted to be there, wanted to be part of the solution," he says.

Growing up in suburban Chicago, he was an Indian Guide, a Cub Scout, a Boy Scout. He attended a Catholic high school, Loyola Academy, where the Jesuit teaching emphasized action in addition to intellect. Service had always given him a sense of purpose.

In Iraq, he pinpointed high-value targets for military units to kill or capture. "At the end of the day it felt like playing whack-a-mole, because there's always another," says McNulty, who, between his Marine Corps service and his civilian job, worked on counter-terrorism for eight years, from 2001 to 2009. "What is the end game? What does winning look like? That was never clearly defined.

"Eventually, I lost my sense of purpose," he says, "because I didn't see any progress with the war."



WILLIAM McNULTY, TEAM RUBICON

Operation:
Haiti Relief
Port-au-Prince
Earthquake
2010



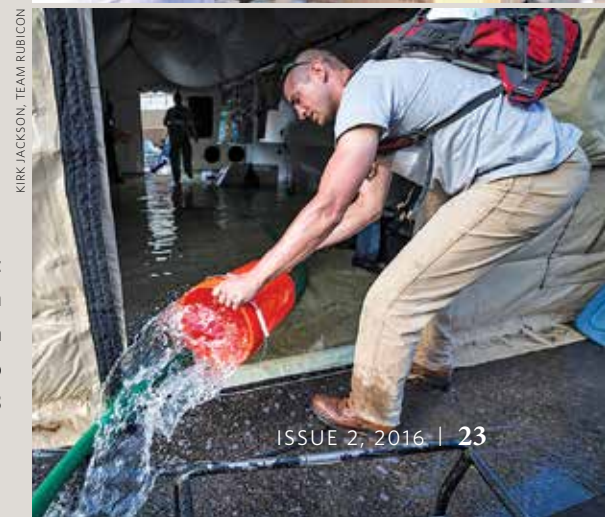
MILES PEPPER, TEAM RUBICON

Operation: Tenzing
Kathmandu, Nepal
Earthquake
2015



KYLE DOYON, TEAM RUBICON

Operation:
Factory One
Flint, Michigan
Contaminated
Water Emergency
2016



KIRK JACKSON, TEAM RUBICON

Operation:
Starting Gun
Moore, Oklahoma
Tornado
2013



MIKE JACKSON, TEAM RUBICON

What he did see was a lot of violence and mayhem. Though he deployed in a civilian capacity, he lived and worked alongside U.S. troops and Iraqis who were targets of mortar barrages, rocket-propelled-grenade volleys, car bombs. Some days the casualty counts reached 20 dead and 100 wounded.

“I was very angry,” McNulty says. “We lost a lot of good people. I lost friends, and it infuriated me.”

McNulty was in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 12, 2010, when he saw the disaster in Haiti unfold on his television screen. He wasn’t about to watch passively.

When Jake Wood posted on Facebook that he was thinking of going to Port-au-Prince, McNulty called him immediately. “I said, ‘Dude, I’m in,’” McNulty recalls. “‘What’s the plan?’”

The plan was to visit Haiti for a few days, deliver medical supplies and come home. McNulty reached out to his old high school, which put him in touch with Brother James Boynton, who’d arrived in Haiti nine days earlier to direct a Jesuit-run school. Boynton needed to organize an outside medical team to respond to the disaster, but the chaos was making it hard to do.

McNulty used his D.C. connections to

secure letters guaranteeing free passage from the ambassadors of Haiti and neighboring Dominican Republic, then contacted a family friend, Dr. Mauricio Consalter, to put together a 16-member medical team from a Chicago hospital. The team would meet Boynton in Santo Domingo, cross the Haitian border and drive to Port-au-Prince. But the plan hit a snag when the hospital vice president wouldn’t authorize the trip.

“He said, ‘I love what you guys are doing, but I just got off the phone with the Red Cross and they say you’re crazy, it’s too dangerous,’” McNulty recalls. “I said, ‘We’re Marines. We have experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we know how to operate in these environments.’” His Jesuit contacts in Haiti were telling a very different story than the world was seeing on CNN. “They said, ‘It’s the walking wounded, and you need to get down here right away,’” McNulty says. “‘Yes, there are some criminal elements, but right now even the criminals are shaking the dust out of their ears.’”

McNulty, Wood and two others flew separately to the Dominican Republic. On the way, each ran into someone who was en route to Haiti and decided to join their team. (McNulty’s find was an Army

A few of the 100 volunteers deployed to the Philippines in response to Typhoon Haiyan deplane near the hard-hit city of Tacloban. During Operation: Seabird, Team Rubicon helped with search and rescue operations, conducted damage assessments and gave medical aid to more than 2,000 people.

Special Forces medic.) In this way the four-man crew became eight. It grew again when McNulty reported to Chicago that conditions were safe, and the hospital dispatched its 16-person medical unit.

Using local sources for transportation and language translation, moving quickly and carrying only what they could fit in backpacks, Team Rubicon got to disaster victims in Haiti—and, later that year and the next, in Chile, Pakistan and Turkey—before the large aid agencies. They undertook humanitarian missions to Burma, South Sudan and Mozambique. And their volunteer army began to grow, just as the military was paring back its commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq.

They were tapping into veterans’ deep need to continue serving after their time in the military was up. A 2009 Civic Enterprises study on veteran reintegration, commissioned by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of

Staff, found that 92 percent of veterans returning from war value community service. The top three issues they want to volunteer for are wounded veterans, other veterans and military families, and disaster relief. Yet only 13 percent reported their transition from military to home life was going well.

By 2009, nearly 2 million Americans had served in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and they faced significant hurdles in their return to civilian life. Veterans experienced higher unemployment rates than civilians and relied on food stamps at nearly twice the civilian rate. One in five service members had filed for divorce since 2001. Veterans aged 20 to 24 years old were two to four times more likely to commit suicide than their civilian peers—a rate that, if it continued, the study warned, could eventually outpace the combat death toll.

McNulty went through his own difficult readjustment.

“There was a point where I was a very angry person, very jaded and disillusioned about the war,” he says. “I see that a lot in fellow veterans, and to help them through this transition process, the reintegration process, has helped me a lot as well.”

Working on the same intractable problems for years with no real forward movement had sapped his sense of purpose. Helping people recover from natural disasters brought it roaring back.

“When we were down there in Port-au-Prince and you’re saving someone’s life, it’s tangible, immediate progress,” he says. “When you go into a city immediately after a tornado ripped through it and you help them batten down a roof or move to shelter, it gives you an extreme sense of purpose.”

Then, in March 2011, Clay Hunt, a 28-year-old former Marine who’d been among the second wave of Team Rubicon volunteers in Haiti, killed himself. Jake Wood had been Hunt’s partner in sniper school, fought with him in Iraq and Afghanistan, and was best man at his wedding. McNulty also knew him well.

“Clay was really happy when he was volunteering with Team Rubicon, because it gave him purpose,” McNulty says of

“When you go into a city immediately after a tornado ripped through it and you help them batten down a roof or move to shelter, it gives you an extreme sense of purpose.”

Hunt, who had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and struggled with depression, panic attacks and sleeplessness. “When he committed suicide it brought to light this reality that 22 veterans a day commit suicide here in the United States, and there’s no silver-bullet answer to why this is happening.”

Hunt’s death jolted McNulty and Wood, making them take a hard look at Team Rubicon’s mission and what the volunteer work they were organizing meant to the veterans themselves.

“After Clay’s death, we decided we’re going to change our mission, we’re going to shift the focus from the disaster victim to the veteran, to give the veterans back those things they lost when they took off the uniform,” McNulty says.

“We were a disaster response organization that used veterans for service,” he adds, “and we became a veterans service organization that just happens to be good at disaster response.”

Soldiers lose three things when they take off the uniform, notes retired Army Gen. David Petraeus.

“You lose a sense of purpose—this idea

of serving a mission that is larger than self. ... The second is the sense of community: You’re doing this mission larger than self with others who are performing a mission larger than self and feel privileged to do that. And then there’s the sense of identity.”

Petraeus, commander of multi-national forces in Iraq in 2007 and of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2010, was speaking at a luncheon in London last June to build international support for the recently launched Team Rubicon Global. The idea behind Team Rubicon Global, which McNulty leads as CEO and Petraeus serves as a board member, is to export the Team Rubicon USA model to countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, Norway, Germany and Canada, where the desire of war veterans to continue serving their countries and communities after leaving the military is strong. Joining Petraeus were two fellow board members, Gen. Sir Nicholas Parker, the retired commander-in-chief of the British Army who served with U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Karl-Theodor Zu Guttenberg, former minister of defense under German Chancellor Angela Merkel.



Now armed with shovels and sledgehammers, Team Rubicon volunteers wear a new uniform—the gray T-shirt with the red-and-white logo that denotes a cross (the traditional symbol of aid) turned on its side (signifying Team Rubicon’s nontraditional approach to disaster response).

The organization’s name refers to Julius Caesar’s famous crossing of the Rubicon River—now a symbol of irrevocable commitment to bold action. The negative space winding through the icon represents the Rubicon River and marks Team Rubicon’s commitment to reinventing disaster relief.

—S.H.

U.S. military uniforms contain a lot of information to anyone who knows how to read the various medals, badges and insignia, Petraeus explained to his British audience. A soldier's name, rank, unit, training and combat history are all on display. "You take that off," he said, "and it's as if you have taken off your identity."

To try to bring that sense of purpose, community and identity to more veterans after Hunt's suicide, Team Rubicon launched U.S. operations. Because they could deploy volunteers to a domestic relief project at a fraction of what it cost to send them overseas, the move allowed them to use their donated funds to give many more vets a chance to pitch in.

Team Rubicon volunteers helped the people of Tuscaloosa, Alabama; Joplin, Missouri; and Moore, Oklahoma, dig out after catastrophic tornadoes. They led cleanup efforts following 2013 floods in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Missouri, Illinois and Wisconsin. In April 2013, after a massive ammonium nitrate explosion at a fertilizer plant in West, Texas, destroyed scores of homes and killed many local first responders who were fighting a fire at the plant when it exploded, Team Rubicon helped state authorities set up and manage the disaster response.

"We never thought we were going to move the needle on the domestic side of disaster operations," McNulty says. "We thought, 'This is America. We've gotta be the best in the world when it comes to natural disasters.' We were so wrong."

A turning point was the organization's response to Superstorm Sandy, the massive hurricane that rocked the Caribbean and the U.S. in 2012, killing more than 200 and causing an estimated \$75 billion in damage—walloping particularly hard the densely populated coasts of New Jersey and New York.

Team Rubicon shut down its Los Angeles headquarters, where support of field operations was conducted from afar, and moved its entire staff to New York, where they set up a forward operating base at 124th Street and Rockaway Beach Boulevard and began their usual drill of dispatching eight- to 10-member teams of military veterans and first responders. But the general public began showing up by the hundreds, wanting to help. Team Rubicon turned them away, McNulty says, "until this former Marine logistics officer who was running the FOB said, 'Hey dummies, you have thousands of people trying to get involved, and we have plenty of tools.'" (Home Depot and other corporate sponsors often arm Team Rubicon with the tools, electronics and other supplies and equipment they need to complete their missions). "Why not break down the 10-man teams of vets to one or two veterans, attach 20 to 40 civilians, give them the safety brief, the work orders, the tools. Now our impact is an order of magnitude greater than it was." The on-the-fly shift in strategy allowed 350 Team Rubicon veterans to manage 10,000 civilian volunteers during the Sandy response.

It marked the beginning of a move to professionalize the organization: Team Rubicon adopted the Incident Command System, which is the standard command structure for the emergency management field. It organized field teams into 10 regions that correspond with regions set up by FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency. And it invested in training for

Operation:
Greased Lightning
Rockaway Peninsula,
New York
Superstorm Sandy
2012



TEAM RUBICON

Operation:
Huckleberry Hustle
Mayes County,
Oklahoma
Flood
2016



TEAM RUBICON

Operation:
Karen Shan
Thai/Burma Border
Humanitarian
mission
2012



TEAM RUBICON

Operation:
Friendly Ghost
Casper, Wyoming
Cole Creek Wildfire
2015



volunteers that can lead to emergency management certifications in a wide range of skills. Team Rubicon's volunteer army is adept not only in the physically demanding work of mucking and gutting homes ravaged by floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes and typhoons, but also skilled in heavy equipment operation, home demolition, wildland firefighting, incident management, disaster mapping and other high-level emergency operations.

Professionalizing hasn't meant forgetting that veterans—with the skills they've built in their military training and deployment and their desire to serve—remain Team Rubicon's backbone. When FEMA sent one of its highest-ranking administrators to study the organization's approach, McNulty was happy to show off the high-tech mapping, management and solar-powered computing tools at his disposal. But he also told his visitor, "Sir, honestly, we're just throwing veterans at the problem, and they're figuring it out."

Last year Team Rubicon Global launched its first overseas network, Team Rubicon United Kingdom, and in the next five years it hopes to establish teams in 12 countries where veterans have indicated a strong desire to keep serving.

International leaders see a chance not only to put skilled veterans to work in support of severely taxed emergency management systems, but also to change attitudes about veterans. Call it winning hearts and minds.

The attitude toward veterans now in England, says Gen. Sir Nicholas Parker, "is a whiff of sympathy rather than respect," an outmoded attitude that, he believes, reflects a basic misunderstanding about the post-9/11 veteran. "He and she is a completely different sort of person to the person that the British Legion was designed to support," Parker says, referring to the charity created in 1921 to help British military members and their families. "It's the sort of person who has massive potential. ... They want to make a difference, and my goodness they are amazingly capable people, who will make things happen, with no money, with no

JONATHAN DAVIS, TEAM RUBICON



structure. It reaffirms for me what a fantastic commodity the veteran is."

Karl-Theodor Zu Guttenberg, the former German defense minister, believes the Team Rubicon model could even have implications for geopolitics and the perception of U.S. foreign policy around the world.

"The idea of having at a certain point not only the fabulous 20 to 30,000 already engaged American veterans they have, but also shoulder-to-shoulder German veterans, British veterans, Norwegian, Australian and maybe—in four or five or six years even Russian veterans," Guttenberg says, "this is a rich building component which is invaluable, and unique. That's something that you cannot produce in the back rooms of G-7 meetings."

There is no shortage of veteran service organizations doing good work on behalf of the men and women who serve in their country's military. McNulty estimates there are some 40,000 in the U.S. alone. But what sets Team Rubicon apart, says Navy veteran and Team Rubicon Global president and chief operating officer Ken Harbaugh, is that "veterans who join our ranks know they will not be the *object* of our mission, but rather the *agents* of it."

Taking a break from assessing damage with an unmanned aerial vehicle after the Nepal earthquake in 2015, Brian Brown, logistics manager for Team Rubicon region VI, delights children with an eye-in-the-sky view of themselves in the remote village of Sermathang.

"We don't give you tickets to the ball game," McNulty says. "We don't lobby the Hill; we don't do advocacy. We recruit, train, equip and deploy military veterans into natural disasters. We challenge you to continue your service in the mission of disaster response."

The mission is familiar: Help people. "I don't know any Marine who joined the Corps to kill people," McNulty says. "I joined the Marine Corps to help people."

The end game is clearly defined: Bring relief. To the rescued, certainly. But also to the rescuer.

"Imagine the amount of purpose that fills you when you realize you're out there helping someone on the worst day of their life," McNulty says.

That's what winning looks like. "For a lot of veterans it's that service of helping someone else," he says, "that is really helping themselves."