

EOD specialists search for victims.

# BEHIND THE SCENES

## THE NZDF RESPONSE AS PART OF OPERATION WHITE ISLAND

By Sue Eden

### Monday 9 December at 2.11pm, Whakaari/White Island erupts.

Within minutes, military personnel who plan operations in New Zealand and overseas, gather at Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand to build a picture of what assets and personnel can be deployed to support the recovery effort.

Reports are coming in around the number of people killed or seriously injured. Everyone at the headquarters is focused on what the New Zealand Defence Force can do to help.

Around the North Island, various units activate their assets and personnel in preparation for being asked to respond.

A Royal New Zealand Air Force P-3K2 Orion aircraft and crew is diverted from another task to carry out surveillance and reconnaissance over Whakaari/White Island and gather imagery. This is the first of several flights the Orion aircraft will do, adding vital information to the rescue and recovery effort. Later in the week, an Orion would carry out an aerial search over a large area of ocean near the island as part of the search for two missing deceased.

Two NH90 helicopters and crew arrive in Whakatane within hours of the eruption. Patients are being transported to burns units in hospitals around the country. At about midnight, the two NH90 helicopters arrive at Trentham Military Camp, right outside the Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand which is coordinating

the NZDF response, carrying five patients seriously injured in the eruption. They are met by ambulance and the patients are transferred to Hutt Hospital.

Royal New Zealand Navy Ship HMNZS Wellington, which had been in Devonport over the weekend after being at sea for six weeks on fisheries patrols, leaves Auckland around 7pm to offer support. Over the week HMNZS Wellington is on station near Whakaari/White Island, the ship providing a reassuring presence to the community.

There is a SH-2G(I) Seasprite helicopter embarked on the ship and two other Seasprite helicopters from RNZAF Base Auckland are used throughout the week for surveillance and reconnaissance.

Military liaison officers go to Police National Headquarters and the National Crisis Management Centre as well as the Emergency

Operations Centre in Whakatane to be on hand to coordinate information, assets and personnel movements.

People work throughout the night and over the next day responding to or chasing down Requests for Information (RFIs), working with other agencies including on the location of deceased on the island, the conditions on the island and the risks of another eruption, so they can contribute to the plan for the recovery effort.

A small team from the Deployable Joint Interagency Taskforce, a high readiness unit within the Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand which works with other agencies to coordinate incident management including in humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations, is dispatched to Whakatane.

Lieutenant Colonel Michael Nochete leads the team from the Deployable Joint Interagency Taskforce. "It was a very dynamic environment in the first 24-48 hours that we were there, with information going backwards and forwards, as we tried to get an idea of what we were facing. Our job was to support the NZ Police with options for the recovery and show them what the NZDF could do to help.

"Due to the environmental conditions on the island, it became apparent that to assist with the recovery of the deceased from the island, we needed to use people trained in using long duration, closed circuit breathing apparatus. Members of the Explosive Ordnance Disposal squadron have that training and were the best people for the job. The NZ Police were grateful that the NZDF had people available with that expertise."



RNZAF air crew played a major role in the eruption rescue and retrieval operation.



HMNZS Wellington, on station near Whakaari/White Island.



"A Police inspector coordinated a meeting in Whakatane which included representatives from multiple agencies including scientists from GNS, science advisors to the Government, Defence Technology Agency and others, who helped us all understand the operating environment. From there, we could determine courses of action and develop a plan for the recovery of six deceased from the island and search for two others that were missing."

"We developed go/no go criteria for the operation and put in place contingencies for all the 'what ifs' - when things could go wrong," LTCOL Nochete said. That included a back-up team of EOD specialists, as well as medical staff on RHIBs near the island, experts from Police, as well as the lead GNS volcanologist on board HMNZS Wellington monitoring the volcano

in real time, looking for warning signs of another eruption. "We had strategies in place to mitigate the risks but we all knew how very real the risks were to our team on the ground."

Colonel Rian McKinstry says the team had worked in difficult conditions including unbearable heat that built up in their protective suits. "Even these exceptionally fit soldiers had found the conditions extreme after rain had turned the volcanic ash underfoot into a thick sludge they had to wade through," he said.

The team located the six deceased, and moved them to a central area to be transported from the island by NH90 helicopter to HMNZS Wellington. Later, the NH90s also transported the six deceased to Auckland.

Imagery taken by one of the Seasprite helicopters, showing the recovery team in action, was beamed around the world by the world's news media.

The recovery team, while exhausted, had wanted to help and bring resolution for some of the families who had lost their loved ones, COL McKinstry says.

They are also relieved they have been able to get the job done, he says.

On HMNZS Wellington, LTCOL Nochete had been monitoring the recovery operation with a senior Police officer. "He looked at me, nodded knowingly as if acknowledging my mix of feelings, and we shook hands. This was truly a joint interagency operation, and we had achieved what we set out to do."

Over coming days, the search for the two missing deceased continues. Police divers and nine Navy divers search the sea. A HMNZS Matataua team had been deployed to the area earlier with three personnel and the Autonomous Underwater Vehicle.

Surveillance flights are carried out by the Seasprite helicopters and P-3K2 but the missing two are not found.

NZDF Mortuary Affairs and Disaster Victim Identification teams continue their work with civil authorities in Whakatane and Auckland.

One week after the tragic events on 9 December, about 20 family members of the two missing deceased embark on HMNZS Wellington where they are taken near Whakaari/White Island to observe a one-minute silence for the victims.

There is a sombre mood as everyone on the ship pays their respects and the families disembark again.

Back at Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand, those who have been working long hours to coordinate the NZDF efforts, are also feeling a mix of elation: the recovery operation for the six deceased has been successfully carried out, but there is sadness for the two families with loved ones missing.

The recovery operation involves a joint inter-agency response. LTCOL Michael Nochete is at the right.

