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Friday, 22 May 2015 15:04

The days surrounding Memorial Day are sometimes filled with sad memories. No matter if loved ones are old or young, they are still missed. Much attention is focused on service members who died while serving this great country. Those service members are remembered fondly by their friends and families and greatly appreciated by those they were protecting.

It is also good to remember the other side of the military. The humanitarian efforts of the armed forces of the United States have saved countless lives. Senior Chief Shon Lewis, US Navy retired, comes from a family of Navy men. His father, Glen Lewis and his grandfather were in the Navy. “I wasn’t forced into the Navy, but it was the best choice for me,” said Lewis. He is employed with Powerline Technologies where he uses the managerial skills he learned in the Navy as a project manager in his new job. “I served 25 years, 10 months and 18 days … and I don’t regret any of it.”

“I’ve been a part of 4 different large humanitarian efforts.” He remembers his days on the ships that offered relief after those 4 disasters in the Indian Ocean.

Operation Fiery Vigil was launched after the June 12, 1991 eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines. Lewis said, “I had friends that were stationed there.” The operation was charged with evacuating Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base. The volcanic blast sent ash 100,000 feet into the air laying a sheet of 1-2 feet of ash. The troops also gave emergency water and food to residents while they awaited more substantial help.

Operation Sea Angel was a response to Cyclone Marian that devastated Bangladesh on April 29-30, 1991 with 140 mile per hour winds and tidal surges of 15-20 feet. Over 100,000 people died in this disaster and millions became homeless. “There were bodies in the water that we had to fish out,” Lewis said.He was aboard the USS St. Louis during this relief effort. He remembers there were 4 or 5 ships in the Philippines at the time. “Probably 3,000 sailors and marines were involved in the effort,” said Lewis. He added, “We went ashore and provided food and water until a larger emergency infrastructure could get there.” It is estimated that US military relief efforts were responsible for saving over 200,000 lives after this catastrophe.

Christmas Tsunami in Sumatra was a result of an 8.9 magnitude earthquake that happened after two earth plates shifted in the Indian Ocean causing a wave to travel about 550 miles per hour and devastate 11 countries. The Abraham Lincoln was deployed out of Hong Kong to assist in relief efforts. Lewis said they arrived in Hong Kong Christmas Eve. “We heard about it, packed our bags and got back to the ship,” Lewis said, adding “That was the shortest I ever stayed in Hong Kong.” They left Christmas day but it took four or five days to get to Sumatra.

They were in Sumatra two weeks dispensing drinkable water and giving out food. Lewis said they made a way to distill water on the ship and then took it ashore. They had supplies for 5000 people and were able to get more from other ships. They emptied almost all their backup supplies.

Operation Tomadachi (Japanese for “friendship”) started after the 2011 Japanese Tsunami caused by an 8.9 magnitude earthquake that created 30 foot waves. This disaster was complicated by the instability of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Lewis was in Malaysia and attached to the USS Essex at the time. Once again, the US military was deployed to assist.

911 changed everything. After 911, there are no set schedules. “That’s the really hard part,” explained Lewis. When you leave home, you never know when you’re coming back.” Missing the kids and the family are a part of the Navy life.

“The upside to all of this is the kids. You’re helping them. They are happy to see you,” says Lewis. “No one else in the world can do it the way we can,” he commented about the way the US helps in disaster situations.