

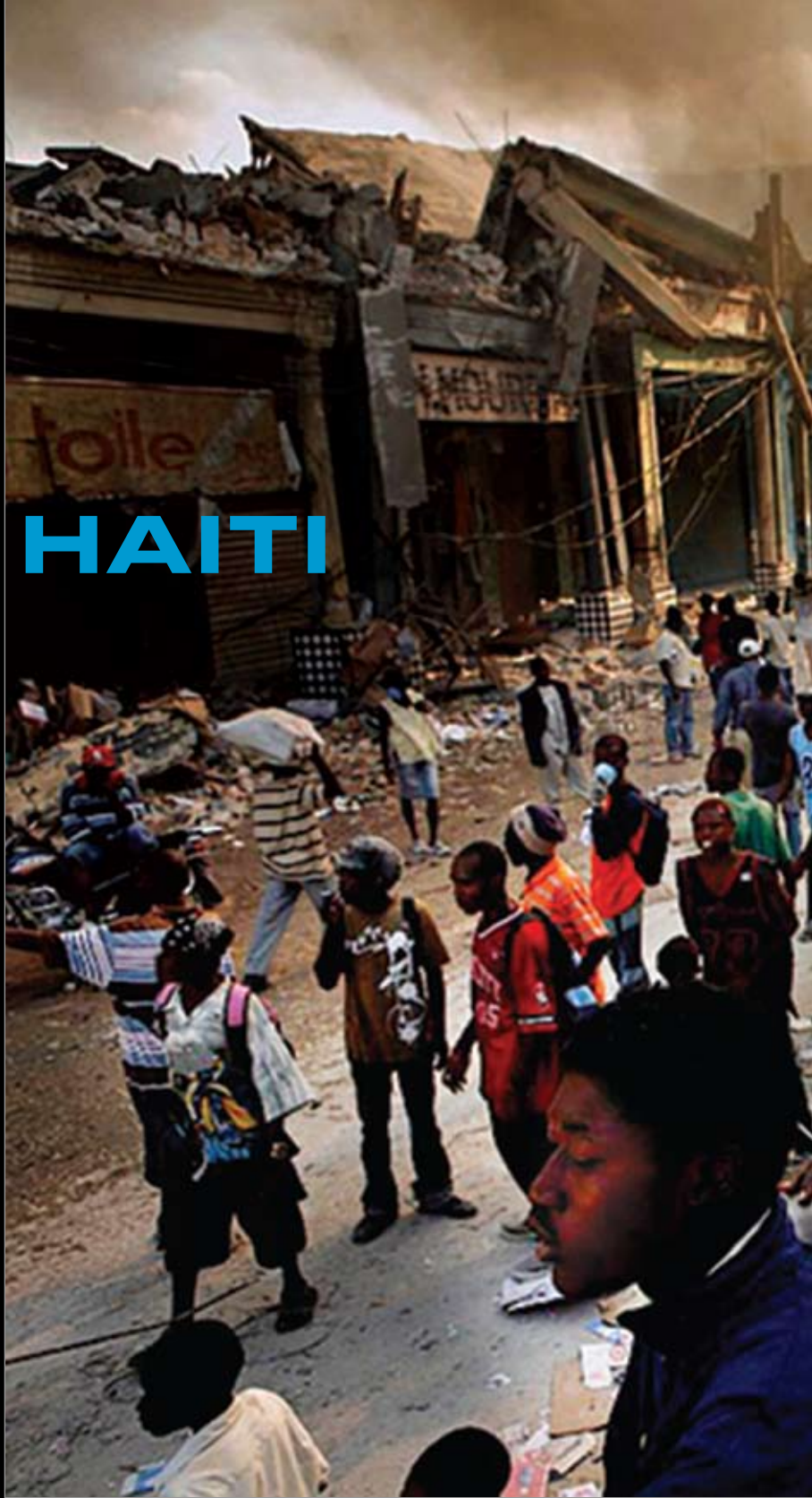
VISIONS OF HAITI

GRADUATES RESPOND IN FORCE TO THE DEVASTATING EARTHQUAKE

On Tuesday, January 12, 2010, life in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince began as it did on any other day. The streets bustled with busy commuters, shop vendors and business people, all moving about their daily routines as the sun glinted down through a humid sky. At approximately 4:53pm local time, business owners were beginning to close down for the day when the ground began to shake. In the following seconds, as the 7.0 magnitude earthquake ripped through the capital city, buildings crumbled in violent clouds of fire and dust. People were knocked off of their feet, cars were crushed by structures tumbling into the streets, and countless thousands were buried alive as the fragile concrete architecture of Port-au-Prince came cascading down in every direction. The devastation was unbiased in its destruction, sparing virtually no structure. The Presidential Palace, the Port-au-Prince Cathedral and the National Assembly building were laid waste. In a matter of moments, more than 250,000 people lost their lives; over 300,000 were injured; and more than 1 million were left homeless. From the rubble came screams of agony as survivors began furiously digging to resurrect their lost friends and family from beneath the debris. With chaos equal to that of the most vicious bombing raids of any war in history, the nation of Haiti had just undergone the most bloody tragedy in its sordid history. As the painful cries for help began to make their way beyond the Haitian borders, the international community rallied to come and lend its support. More than 2,000 miles away, at McGuire AFB, New Jersey, Air Force Major Matt Jones, '99, began laying plans for Col. Patrick Hollrah's

BY LEWIS CARLYLE

IMAGES COURTESY OF MAJ. MATT JONES, '99







contingency response group to enter the fray of aid relief. Joining forces with an Army Rapid Port Opening Element, the Joint Task Force (Port Opening) loaded their 217-member team onto C-17s and deployed for the heart of darkness. Jones, acting as Director of Operations (J3) and also as Deputy Commander, arrived in Haiti a mere 50 hours after the quake had struck. “We became the senior airfield authority,” he recalls. “We were running the international airport.”

Port-au-Prince has only one international airport. The air traffic control tower and passenger terminal were badly damaged, rendering most existing infrastructure unusable; the contingency response group quickly prioritized restoring order and minimizing aircraft diversions as their main objective.

With the Haitian Presidential Palace lying in ruins, the Prime Minister’s office was re-located to a police station, where it initially conducted operations during the relief effort. Jones explains, “There were two or three of us who were somewhat hastily escorted off of the airfield to meet with the Prime Minister. We walked into a situation where everyone was trying to help; the Haitians—despite the devastation which had occurred in their personal lives—were still in control of the airfield. This meeting, immediately following a telecom with the highest levels of our government, was the culmination of the Government of Haiti relinquishing control of air operations to the United States Military. They officially signed a memorandum which gave the FAA the authority to take over the airspace and for us to begin assigning priority to the aircraft arriving.”

Jones adds, “At the last moment, the Haitians added in handwriting, either party had the authority to immediately terminate the agreement. That’s what made the agreement so fragile. We were very confident that we could help them. However, Port-au-Prince is a single runway, single taxi airport, which also made it the single point of failure.”

With pressure mounting at the airfield, and thousands of earthquake victims in desperate need of food, water and medicine, the contingency response group went to work. Jones describes, “The airfield was like nothing you could ever imagine. There were wall to wall airplanes parked on the grass, national media and NGOs walking around everywhere ... There were essentially ten parking spots for a C-17 or 737-size aircraft. Probably for the first five days straight we had at least fifteen aircraft parked on the ground at any given time, and that’s not including those parked on the grass. It was a real ballet working with USAID, the FAA, the Haitians and the US Special Forces, who were providing tower operations. We were augmented by the 1st AOC out

of Tyndall Air Force Base who was devising a slot-management system for all civilian, military and international flights. We were the link between all of these elements.”

Jones recounts, “We understood immediately that any failure would have a negative effect on getting the life saving relief equipment into Haiti. Our first task was to stand up a Collaborative Base Operations Center where we could work with the Haitians side-by-side. We decided to pull our only shower tent to support this new requirement. No one in camp showered for the first 10 days, but the Haitian Airfield Manager had a desk, computer, internet and telephone within our camp. Additionally, the FAA and UN’s World Food Program were also given a desk alongside our Air Force airfield managers.”

In the early days of the tragedy, the contingency response group focused on getting life-saving first-responders into the country. Doctors, paramedics, soldiers and support staff were ushered through the airfield and into the city to assist with rescue operations. “As time allowed,” Jones recalls, “we began to see medical equipment; then came water purification systems and food. Commercial operations didn’t resume until 36 days after the quake.”

Port-au-Prince’s main seaport was badly damaged during the quake. With the shipping lanes diminished, the airfield became the major focal point for the flow of relief aid. Jones is quick to point out that none of this joint operation would have been possible without the Army. “The process is simple,” he explains. “During a humanitarian operation, as cargo enters a location, it can very quickly bog down the airfield. The airmen offload the aircraft into a cargo yard. From there, the Army takes over to ensure the yard doesn’t become saturated. You could enter the cargo yard on any given day and it would be at 80% capacity or better. You could walk out there 24 hours later and the yard would still be at 80%, yet all that cargo had turned over. The Army soldiers were moving everything out to our forward distribution node just as fast as we could get it in. It was truly a joint organization under the US Transportation Command. The Army was marvelous to work with.”

For Jones, one of the most important logistical achievements was keeping the aid flowing into the country. “Everywhere you could look,” he describes, “there were people who wanted to help. There was relief aid just about as far as the eye could see.” And yet, despite the massive influx of help coming into the country, the airport was not a one-way road. The devastation had left millions out on the streets, and among the homeless were thousands of American citizens in need of evacua-



Top row from the left: Security forces patrol the airfield. Off-loading of supplies runs day and night. The cargo yard stays busy 24 hours a day. Airmen begin preparing for disaster relief. Above: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton fields questions regarding the relief effort.

I cannot express how important it is to be professionally, mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually prepared, because you never know when something of this magnitude is going to strike.”

Whether you are a Boy Scout, humanitarian aide worker, or an Air Force officer, the prospect of being prepared for any situation is critical to your ability to serve others in need. As the aid relief moved into full stride, Academy graduates from all across the nation had a hand in easing the suffering. “One of our operations officers was an Air Force Academy grad in fact,” Jones explains. “Lt. Col. John Krystyniak, ’93. We probably ran into hundreds of Academy grads throughout the ordeal, and with the constant barrage of aircrews flying in, there were graduates we came into contact with every day.”

As the notion of the Air Force Academy’s influence over the Haitian relief effort enters the historical record, Jones points out

tion. In a moment of solidarity, Jones painfully recalls, “Every last one of the 15,000 American citizens we evacuated personally knew someone who had been killed in the earthquake. Many of these Americans had lived in Haiti their whole lives; some spoke no English at all. Many had to wait days to get out of the country, and not all of them knew what they were going to do when they got to the United States.”

In the beginning, the airfield was awash with aid workers, media, military personnel and civilians. “What we realized early on was that we had to allow things to happen in an emergency contingency environment on day one that you normally wouldn’t allow. Just as important, we made small strides towards normalcy. What we accepted on day one we did not accept on day two, and so on.” These small strides eventually transitioned the airfield from a chaotic traffic jam of airplanes and people to a smoothly flowing epicenter of lifesaving support.

As the days wore on, Jones and the other senior commanders had the opportunity to visit downtown Port-au-Prince and see the devastation first hand. “There were people living off of Meals Ready to Eat, washing from a bucket, using make-shift latrines and living in tents. For the 37 days our team was there, those were the exact same conditions we lived in as well. We set up camp on the grass at the infield of the airport.”

Jones recalls fondly that the Haitians were amazingly civil considering what they had just been through. Most of the people the contingency group came into contact with were not looking for handouts, they were looking for work.

“It really drilled home when we went downtown,” Jones remembers. “The Haitian Civil Aviation Authority airfield manager—Hans—was the one who personally took us on a tour. We passed by a place which had been decimated by the quake, and Hans informed us that the house belonged to the person who sat next to him at work.”

The locals, Jones explains, showed tremendous resolve. On the one hand, their personal lives had been turned upside down; yet on the other hand, they knew they had a job to do, and returned to their posts at the airfield every day without fail.

“Witnessing all of this from a position of responsibility really changes your life,” Jones continues. “It is hard to put into words. I’m in an organization which provides contingency response. We’re on a humanitarian mission, we open airfields and we enable airfield operations. The training we receive is absolutely essential.

Refugees made homeless by the quake prepare to be transported to the United States.





From top: The airfield base camp at Port-au-Prince. Airmen lend their support to victims of the earthquake. Col. Patrick Hollrah with Maj. Matt Jones, '99.

that his own USAFA experience played a strong role in his ability to do his job. "If I had to sum it up," he muses, "I would say having the ability to frame and solve ill-defined problems was a big thing for me. We faced day after day of difficult decisions. Having the ability to work under stress and pressure over long hours certainly harkened back to my time at the Academy. The ability to multi task was also paramount. There were non-stop hours when I had a phone in one hand and a radio in the other."

As history has shown, earthquakes do not provide lead-time for contingency operations. They are ruthless, violent and unforgiving. They kill and maim with unbiased regard for human life. And yet, it is in the midst of our greatest hardships that we see the greatest quality emerge among our fellow humans, that of compassion. In the time since the quake raked its destructive path across Haiti,

nations all across the world have made the call to arms, mobilizing their braves soldiers, their gentle care givers and their generous contributions to help ease the suffering of those in need.

Major Jones considers the travesty to be among the most profound life-changing experiences he has ever known. "This is the perfect example of an operation which drops at a moment's notice," he concludes thoughtfully, "and it takes every ounce of readiness you are capable of—because if you're not prepared, then you're not going to be able to help others."

One month into the relief effort, Port-au-Prince International Airport had become the world's busiest single runway. Thirty-one million pounds of airlifted humanitarian relief were offloaded and, 3,000 mishap-free flights later, the joint task force returned home where they again sit alert—ready to answer the call. ✓



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