

A COMMANDERS PERSPECTIVE

Families and Friends of HALIFAX

As those who support our men and women in uniform know all too well, things rarely go according to plan. Indeed, as the very nature of our profession is predicated on its ability to respond rapidly, effectively and efficiently to an ever changing environment, we have asked, and to continue to ask, a great deal from all of you. As the events of the past few weeks have continued to unfold in Haiti, Canada's, and indeed the worlds, attention has been focused on the grim reality of untold human suffering. I have no doubt that many of you, when you heard the initial news of HALIFAX's new mission, felt a dizzying spectrum of emotions. Most likely anticipation for the mission at hand, pride in our families and friends for the impact that they would soon impart and perhaps even a sense of fear for the many unknown elements that they soon may face. As their Captain, I can attest that the work of your loved ones who make up this great ship has made a most tangible and apparent impact on the lives of many. They have brought food and water to the hungry, provided shelter to the displaced and given hope to the people of Jacmel. They have risen to a challenge of such scale and magnitude that has perhaps seen no equal in the past many decades. They have made a difference for many.

Haiti has weathered more than its fair share of hardship over the past few decades. Government instability, civil unrest, rampant disease, and abject poverty have all hindered the nation's ability to climb out of the grips of the Third World. Not to mention a series of devastating hurricanes and now the most destructive earthquake in the region in perhaps 300 years.

When HALIFAX learned of our new mission during Directed Work-Ups back on January 12th, our focus invariably shifted from the realm of training and synthetic scenarios to preparing for a colossal real world undertaking which reinforced the value, realism and relevancy of the months of prior preparation and training that we had undergone. As the news reports slowly trickled in, the scale and seriousness of the events in Haiti slowly began to take hold. Nearly around-the-clock planning and preparation was taking place and a way ahead was beginning to take shape. Indeed however, the most important piece of the puzzle would be missing until the day we arrived and first set foot ashore. Post-disaster information on the ground was sketchy at best. HALIFAX had no choice but to prepare for the worst.

While en-route to Haiti, my primary focus was in taking all precautions possible in order to ensure the safety of our sailors while they brought aid to the local populace. We embarked medical professionals and began a comprehensive and exhaustive inoculation plan for the ship's company. Furthermore, as the security situation on the ground was still uncertain, HALIFAX undertook a focused and stringent force protection training program to ensure our sailors would be safe in all circumstances. Of special concern was the very real possibility that our sailors would be involved in the removal of the deceased. A most difficult task under even the best of conditions, the potential challenges this task presented were daunting. Initial reports from the Red Cross estimated between 40 and 50 thousand people had perished in the Port au Prince region alone, a number that would climb rapidly over the coming days. In preparation for this task, our Chaplain counseled many of the crew one-on-one and prepared HALIFAX to the best of his ability. Indeed,

the nature of our profession calls upon us all to dig deep and steel ourselves to the harsh realities most will never witness.

As HALIFAX neared the coast of Haiti our mission became ever clearer. HALIFAX would be tasked to provide aid to a small village on the southern coast called Jacmel. Her population was about 45,000 people and the village was well known as the tourist and cultural hub of Haiti. The problems so widespread in Port au Prince were believed to be of much less concern here. The problem was however that Jacmel had been only a few miles from the earthquakes epicenter to the north, separated by a 4000 foot mountain range, and was completely cut off from the rest of the island. One road, though a mountain valley was passable only by motorcycle, while very limited and initial surveys reported devastation within the village. As HALIFAX neared the coast the sense of anticipation and excitement was tempered with uncertainty. Those many unknown question would soon be answered.

At day break on Tuesday 19 January, HALIFAX came ashore in Jacmel to find devastation and sheer resiliency of spirit all mixed into one. Of great relief, the deceased had been dealt with by the local population and life around the village was coping with the situation at hand the best they could manage. The villagers were calm and patient. Criminal activity was no where to be seen and overall HALIFAX was in all respects ready to start the community back on the road to self sufficiency.

Over the next many days, HALIFAX, in consort with the Disaster Assistance Relief Team (DART) and other Non-Government Organizations or NGOs, established food distribution centers at a displaced persons camp, constructed latrines, cleared debris from main roadways, established a presence at the local hospital, cleared a local airfield enabling resupply flights from Hercules aircraft, and established a medical clinic at the villages main harbour pier. In all, the efforts of your loved ones have had an immediate and profound impact on the lives of thousands. They have given themselves completely to the staggering task at hand and although it will take years and countless resources to bring this nation back from the brink, the selfless contribution of your families and friends will be forever seen as a turning point for the people of Haiti.

I would like to take this time to personally thank each and every one of you for your continued support. The many acts of bravery, compassion, fortitude and strength of all your loved ones have moved me greatly and I am sure you are every bit as proud of them as I am. We will keep you posted on our programme, our operations and our return date. I thank you for your kind words on our ship's website and I look forward to bringing our ship and your family members home safely to Halifax once our work is done here.

Ever Brave,

M.T.J. Kurtz
Commander
Commanding Officer
HMCS HALIFAX