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Order from Chaos: 601st AOC supports Haiti relief

By Lt. Col. Stephen Davidson, 601st AOC Regional Air Movement Control Center

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – On Jan. 12 at 4:53 p.m., the most destructive earthquake ever recorded on the small island nation of Haiti occurred and created wide spread devastation to more than three quarters of a million people.

Port-au-Prince's main seaport was destroyed and most roads were impassible, leaving airlift into Toussaint Louverture International as the only lifeline for relief to the Haitian people.

With the control tower destroyed and airlift arriving from every corner of the world, the volume of air traffic arriving into the airport instantly became unmanageable beyond its normal average of 25 flights per day.



Aircraft were arriving uncontrolled from all over the globe, resulting in desperately needed medical supplies, water, and food being diverted because unmanageable congestion at the airport.

At the request of the Government of Haiti, the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron from Hurlburt Field, Fla., arrived within 24 hours of the quake, bringing some order to airfield arrivals. An average of 50 aircraft per day were now being accommodated, but excessive holding times, frequent divers and poor airflow management still plagued significant relief from reaching the Haitian people.

Enter the 601st Air and Space Operations Center's Regional Air Movement Control Center here, which became ground zero for the management of airflow into Haiti for the first 15 days of airlift relief operations. This small team of Canadian and U.S. Air Force mobility personnel established a provisional coalition organization redesignated as the Haiti Flight Operations Coordination Center and were credited with streamlining a worldwide airlift multi-national operation rivaling in scope to the Berlin Airlift.

The HFOCC's efforts directly prevented a repeat reminiscent of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina at Louis Armstrong International Airport in 2005. Though simple in concept, their laser-like focus was critical in thwarting airport and airspace paralysis during an absence of civil support.

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Recognizing an airflow management system vacuum and because operations were on a global scale, the organization morphed into a provisional multi-national organization. Within three days of the disaster, the Haitian Government signed an agreement with the U.S., allowing the HFOCC to control airflow into Port-au-Prince through a slot coordination program.

Despite the expertise being poured into the mix, the challenges were many. United States Northern Command's Regional Air Movement Control Center concept was designed for a *domestic* contingency, not one to be employed at a sovereign nation's busiest airfield.



Coordination went beyond the normal Federal Aviation Administration and Department of Homeland Defense agencies to include the Haitian Government, the United Nations World Food Programme, U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of State, and countless other nations, just to name a few.

Success was almost immediate and in keeping with the 601st RAMCC's motto, 'order from chaos' was achieved. Within the first three days, slot requests exceeded 1,000 and aircraft arrival rates jumped to 130-175 per day depending on port capabilities. Nearly 3,400 people were

evacuated including 2,997 American citizens, and 2,452 short tons of cargo along with medical personnel, supplies, food, water, and other essential items were delivered.

Unexpected challenges constantly threatened to derail this well oiled machine. Countries were continuously arriving unannounced without slots, often with large aircraft. Others would spend longer than allocated on the ramp, impacting inbound aircraft. Some aircraft broke for extended periods of time, occupying valuable ramp space already designated for incoming aircraft.

To stabilize growing unrest and to protect aid workers in the first 72 critical hours of the operation, the 82nd Airborne required a massive rapid deployment into Haiti. Numerous flights required insertion into an already jammed schedule while minimizing impact on international and civilian missions. Furthermore, numerous Visual Flight Rules aircraft not visible to the HFOCC were continuously arriving, impacting parking and arrival rates.

Despite these gauntlets, the HFOCC's critical ramp coordination with JTF-Port Opening resulted in only two aircraft with slots diverting in the first 72 hours. Given that aircraft were arriving in a conveyor belt like-fashion every five minutes, it was an incredible feat by any standard.

As the saying goes, success has many fathers, and this process was no exception. The HFOCC's ability to smoothly coordinate slot times and airlift would not have been possible were it not for the herculean efforts of the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron and the JTF-PO. These professionals turned airplanes with unbelievable speed while operating on 18-hour shifts and interrupted sleep in extremely austere conditions.

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By Jan. 30, more than 3,500 slot requests had been received with thousands of missions flown, delivering 9,712 short tons of cargo, relocating 18,346 passengers, and evacuating nearly 13,826 American citizens.

HFOCC controllers were able to begin a transition of handing airflow control over to the U.N.'s World Food Programme and a newly trained Regional Air Movement Control Center at U.S. Southern Command.

Maj. J.J. Grindrod, one of the HFOCC's experts on air mobility said, "While our team from the 601st was standing at the ready to support just such an event domestically, the call for us to adapt and operate in an international environment highlighted the flexibility, dedication and commitment of our Airmen."