

HMCS ATHABASKAN
PO Box 99000 Station Forces
Halifax, NS B3K 5X5



NCSM ATHABASKAN
CP Box 99000 Succursale Forces
Halifax, N-É B3K 5X5

ATH: 3350-1 (CO)

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Families and Friends of ATHABASKAN

A FEW WORDS FROM OFF THE COAST OF HAITI

Good day to you all. As I pen these words we have many of the crew ashore providing aid and assistance to the people of Haiti. I want to assure you that the Canadian Forces, indeed all of Canada, are pitching in together to provide some relief to the Haitians in their time of need. I am sure that all of you are aware of these efforts from the news reports so I will confine myself to the spectacular contributions of your loved ones here in ATH. We are currently patrolling about 3-5 miles off the coast of a town called Leogane; it is west of the capital city of Port au Prince. It is from here that we send, on average, about 50 people ashore each day to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. I will provide more details on what we are doing a little further on.

Leogane is one of the worst hit areas and is one of the focal efforts of Canadian humanitarian assistance. Leogane was very close to the epi-centre of the earthquake and has suffered unbelievable destruction. I would assess (please note that I am not a structural engineer and this is a personal observation) that up to 90 percent of the buildings have been destroyed. Those that remain are largely single level homes that were either very well built or had a “flexible” structure. Two story homes generally “pancaked”: the first floor gave way, unable to take the load of the second floor during the shaking. I would say that most of the 130,000 (approximately) residents of the city are now homeless and have moved to tent cities or are living in their yards and streets. It is a very sobering sight. Because of the many aftershocks, some of which would qualify as earthquakes themselves, the people are reluctant to move back into their homes that have received less damage. I don’t blame them and in the same situation would do the same thing. Water has been scarce, food limited and medical care facilities were destroyed. We are helping with temporary shelter, water and medical support. Several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have spooled up to provide medical, food/water and shelter relief. The Canadian sailors, soldiers and airmen are helping these NGOs as much as possible.

ATHABASKAN has done, and is doing, a fantastic job down here and I am, as you are, very proud of our accomplishments. Although some times it seems so little in an area where the need is so great, I am glad that we are here. On the 13th of Jan we all came to work in Halifax thinking that the ship was in a work period and that shoveling snow was our greatest concern. A short 36 hours later we were at sea heading south at speed. I cannot thank you enough for your support to make this happen, especially those families of sailors from other ships that joined

ATH to fill critical shortages. Not knowing exactly what the situation would be like, we planned for the worst, training people and designing humanitarian assistance teams on the way. On that first day when we went ashore it was clear that we had prepared well. I am relieved that we did not have to deal with the deceased victims of the tragedy as for the most part, that task had been completed. We were able to set our minds and efforts to providing help, comfort and medical care to the survivors.

One of the first jobs that we took on was the set-up of the Canadian Medical Assistance Team camp. Located close to the centre of Leogane, this team of doctors from Canada has treated well over a thousand of Haitians since we arrived. In addition to setting up the facility itself, we helped process patients using our casualty clearing teams; carried patients to and from the treatment tents; and, our medical teams – Doctor, Physicians Assistant and Medical Assistants - have been treating patients alongside the CMAT doctors. CMAT estimates that with our help they are able to treat twice the number of patients that would normally be possible. There have been all manner of operations done in this tent facility from setting of fractures to amputations. Our sailors, especially those who speak French, have proved invaluable in providing comfort and care to patients. On a brighter note, as has been in the press over the last day or two, two ATHABs helped bring a newborn into the world. An excerpt from our daily report:

A Babies Tale (23 Jan 10). Two members of ATH assisted in the delivery of a baby while working with CMAT. The event took place in a makeshift surgical tent on an army cot in what used to be school playground. OS Jean-Francois Cloutier-Joly was on the field translating when someone asked him for help delivering the child. Lt(N) Kate Wyand was asked to provide assistance to the doctor and provide some privacy for the young mother to be. Although there were complications, the mother gave birth to a healthy baby boy. OS Cloutier-Joly, a Haitian orphan himself, held this tiny miracle in his arms and fed him sugar water. Lt(N) Wyand asked a young Haitian translator if he knew the name of the newborn. He informed her that Haitians typically wait seven days before naming a baby in case the child does not survive. Lt(N) Wyand's words: "a sobering response and a quick reminder of where we are."

We have also been providing security to the CMAT camp during the day. Let me assure you that the Haitian people have been very orderly and calm throughout this tragedy. Line-ups for treatment have been long and they have been patient and brave, considering the seriousness of some of the injuries. The need for security has not as yet been called for but is a reasonable precaution on my part to ensure the safety of our personnel should things change.

We are working with two orphanages to help them get back on their feet. The first one cares for about 45 kids and the couple in charge is a husband and wife - she is Canadian from Quebec City and he from California. They have a reasonable supply of food having just received a shipment from the States and we are giving them a steady supply of clean fresh water until their purification system is repaired. We built a shelter for the kids and temporary toilet facilities. Their house is still standing but has significant cracks that make it dangerous, especially with the aftershocks. They were lucky in that everyone survived the earthquake but it broke my heart to

see those kids and I don't mind saying that I shed a tear watching our sailors playing with them amid the destruction that was their home. We just took on a second orphanage with 80 kids and we are working with Crisis International to provide some temporary shelter. Our sailors are working in the heat to build a wooden frame and tarp building that will get the kids off the ground and out of the brutal heat. Crisis International is providing the materials and food and water to this mission.

We have also gone out into the community to seek areas in which we can help – we have fixed solar panels, got generators running and restored water purification systems. Sailors have great skills that they have learned both through the Navy and from their hobbies and pastimes. All are in demand and being put to good use.

One of the biggest assets that we have is the helicopter. It has flown everyday, landing in airports, clearings and farmers fields to move people and materials where they are most needed. We moved most of the DART medical equipment from the capital to a neighboring city, many soldiers to Leogane, and loads of supplies all over the region. We even flew two critically injured people to the US hospital ship, Comfort, who is operating a floating hospital just offshore. The aircrew is flying 8 -10 hours a day and the aircraft never goes anywhere empty. The technicians and landing crew are working in 30 to 40 degree weather to make this happen!

Here onboard, those who are not ashore are working double time to support the teams and keep the ship running. I estimate that it takes just as many people to launch and load the boats as go ashore. The engineering spaces have been as hot as 50 degrees and guys have been down there keeping our water making at 100 percent when the tools are too hot to hold. Everyone is doing their part. I am trying to make sure that over the period that while we are here helping Haitians, everyone who wants to get ashore to help will have that opportunity.

I know that this has been a long letter, but I wanted to let you know personally what a great job your loved ones are doing here. The pride that I feel for their accomplishments is immeasurable and moves me greatly. We were one of the first military organizations to get ashore and make an immediate improvement in the conditions ashore. While we cannot build them new homes, we can help with medical care, water and temporary shelter. I have taken the liberty of modifying the ATHABASKAN motto: We Fight (and Help) as One.

Peter Crain
Commander
Commanding Officer
HMCS ATHABASKAN
“We Fight (and Help) As One”