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Center of the storm: A commander's perspective during Haiti relief

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4/6/2010 - HURLBURT FIELD, Fla. -- While it's been nearly three months since a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti Jan. 12, the contributions of the Air Commandos there during the relief effort are still making an impact.

Although much of the Air Force Special Operations Command's wartime mission is usually applied to defeat an enemy, it's perhaps both ironic and fitting that its best characteristics of deploying any time, any place would be on full display during a humanitarian mission.

The stories and lessons from Haiti--from the re-establishment of the airfield, distribution of food and water, treatment of wounded patients and repatriation of Americans back to the United States--will be remembered for years as AFSOC continues its mission and prepares for the next time it may be called upon.

Perhaps no one had a clearer insight into the capabilities the Air Commandos brought and the challenges they faced than Col. Buck Elton, 1st Special Operations Group commander and the commander of Joint Special Operations Air Component-Haiti from Jan. 13-31.

Colonel Elton found out about the quake soon after it happened, the same night Hurlburt Field completed its recent operations readiness exercise. As his aircraft landed in Haiti Jan. 13, Colonel Elton stepped off the aircraft with many of the same medical teams, planners and security forces personnel he had worked closely with for the previous week during the exercise.

"In fact, most people didn't have to repack their bags, because we simulated going through a mobility line with 30-day bags," he said. "We were definitely prepared for this because of the ORE."

The Air Commandos' primary task was to restore the Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince during the critical first days. He said the responsibility of air traffic control--the sequencing of the arrival, taxiing, parking and offloading of aircraft--was made difficult by the overwhelming international relief effort that came into the very small airfield.

"There was a tremendous amount of pressure for us to get more aircraft down onto the ground," he said. "It was a constant puzzle of fitting the most aircraft onto a very limited space."

Before the quake, the airfield held eight aircraft and handled 15 flights a day. Once the airfield was cleared, the controllers managed more than 250 aircraft to take off and land in a single day.

While matching the scheduling challenge, the Air Commandos raced to unload the aircraft's cargo, despite the lack of loading equipment at the airfield before the earthquake. Fortunately, the geographic proximity of Hurlburt Field to Haiti helped the deployed team clear any supply or maintenance hurdles through responsive resupply.

"If we needed anything, the logistics response cell back at Hurlburt Field could put it on the next aircraft and get it here quicker than anybody else," he said.

Colonel Elton also said support from the entire Hurlburt community, like the Airman & Family Readiness Center's laundry program, made a significant difference in helping Air Commandos in Haiti.

In his emails to family back home, Colonel Elton wrote there were many stories to tell from his time in Haiti. Many of those stories included Air Commandos performing tasks not only because it was their job but, as he



Lt. Gen. Donald Wurster, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, left, and Col. Buck Elton, 1st Special Operations Group commander, tour the Toussaint L'Ouverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Jan. 27 during Operation Unified Response. U.S. Department of Defense assets were deployed to assist in the relief effort in Haiti in the wake of the 7.0-magnitude earthquake that occurred Jan. 12. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Jeremy Lock/Released)

said, because it was the right thing to do.

For example, there was an instance where Airmen provided air support for foreign nationals to the Dominican Republic because the aircraft taking them home couldn't land in Port-au-Prince.

Another time a critical care evacuation team responded to a call and their helicopter suddenly took off without them. As they wondered how they would get back, they found a different critically wounded Haitian-American patient and another helicopter without a doctor. They stabilized and prepared the patient for air transport out of Haiti by being in the right place at the right time.

There was even a moment when an Airman distributed cans of soda to a crowd and an American citizen asked if he had any diet soda, which are not commonly available in Port-au-Prince. The Airman did and gladly gave it to her.

"We operated under the broad guidance that our headquarters and wing leadership gave us, which was to go do good," Colonel Elton said. "It's pretty easy to operate within those lanes by using your experience, capability and resources to help people."

That spirit of helping others was also reflected in the Haitian people, who Colonel Elton said were friendly from the very beginning.

"Whenever there was a big crowd for distribution of food or water, everyone was very orderly and compliant with whatever order was directed," he said. "Their attitude in the face of such devastation was remarkable. They are a very resilient nation."

After transferring air traffic control responsibility to the conventional Air Force Jan. 25, Colonel Elton returned to Hurlburt Field Jan. 31.

On March 10, he attended U.S. President Barack Obama and Haitian President Rene Preval's joint press conference at the White House Rose Garden in Washington, D.C.

"It was quite an honor to represent our Air Commandos and AFSOC as both presidents personally thanked us for everything we did down there," he said.

Looking back on the experience, Colonel Elton said it was incredible to see how well-suited AFSOC's capabilities were for a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mission.

"We're very good at responding quickly, integrating into the joint task force and being very aggressive to fill any voids that exist," he said. "Our force trains that way and it made us very effective in an uncertain environment. And it was very rewarding to see our Air Commandos step up to the challenge the humanitarian crisis in Haiti presented us."