

A GRAIN OF SAND

AN OFFICER AND HIS FRIENDS DO THEIR PART TO SAVE LIVES IN HAITI

STORY BY TECH. SGT. AMAANI LYLE

He took eight days of leave, \$57 worth of protein bars, some water, a couple of changes of clothes and set out to catch a last-minute flight to the Caribbean. Lt. Col. Greg Beeker was not headed for a tropical beach vacation and comfort wasn't his objective.

GETTING THERE

The air staff war mobilization plans and requirements officer wrestled with the idea of going to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. As part of the Pentagon's crisis action team, he saw the raw data that spoke of the death, disease and desperation caused by a magnitude 7.0 earthquake. He knew it had claimed more than 200,000 lives and left more than 3.5 million Haitians destitute and living in lawlessness.

So, when Colonel Beeker's friend, Loubna Starnes, said she'd volunteered at a mission in Cité Soleil, the poorest slum in Port-au-Prince, he was worried. He tried to convince the slight-framed woman not to go until the military established security. At the same time, he battled his own desire to serve.

"I wanted to help, but knowing the risks, I had to be cautious," Colonel Beeker said. "I started to get a real understanding of how bad things were a couple of days after the quake; without security

we couldn't take care of the people."

The information he learned as a member of the crisis action team confirmed that the earthquake sent conditions reeling from bad to worse.

"This was a nation that was already so impoverished," he said. "Even before the quake hit they had very limited resources."

As the reality of the nation's fate continued to unfold, the colonel reassessed his own hesitancy in traveling to Haiti to help while his friend prepared to leave.

He explained Starnes was traveling with Pastor Mark Dreibelbis, a friend of the family and a leader with the Famine Relief Foundation. The pastor was determined to help his staff. Two had lost family members in the quake. Those serving at the mission in Haiti needed help themselves now.

Aware of the quake-induced collapse of a large prison from which more than 300 prisoners had escaped, Colonel Beeker realized overnight what he had to do.

BEING THERE

Four hours after Dreibelbis' team left for Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, Colonel Beeker was on a flight to meet them. There, they obtained ground transport into Port-au-Prince. The next morning, the self-financed group hired a van and driver.

The eight-hour drive over dirt roads and potholes ended at a hotel that was already filled to capacity.

Making the best of the situation, the team camped out on folding chairs and inflatable mattresses on the hotel's outdoor pool deck.

"We were just grateful that the hotel provided security, showers and clean restrooms," Colonel Beeker said.

Though, they carried some food with them, the hotel also served hot meals and sandwiches, if the team returned in time. If not, the day's opportunity for food was lost.

"We missed lunch one day and ate only pistachios," Starnes said. "I didn't mind because many of the people who live in this area feel hunger every day."

The uncertainty of food seemed a welcome discomfort compared to what would happen next.

"I was so tired that I passed out and slept hard on the pool deck," Starnes said. "The next thing I remember, Colonel Beeker was dragging me by the ankles to wake me up and everything was shaking."

It wasn't a hotel wake-up call, but a magnitude 6.1 aftershock that triggered the team's first awakening.

"Colonel Beeker yelled, 'get up, get up!' as we all tried to run down the stairs to the front of the hotel," Starnes said.

Undeterred by the morning's

pandemonium, the weary and weather-beaten crew set out for the clinic along roads patrolled by U.S. Army Soldiers. A backdrop of squalor compounded the quake's devastation. Along the road to the clinic sat uneven dirt-floor shacks, cramped tin houses and ragged tents. Stagnant heat in the mid to high 80s amplified the stench of garbage and the sewage filled canal running through the area.

"There's no running water there, no sanitation," Colonel Beeker said. "You could even see people taking baths in the street with a pan of water. The 'bathrooms' are just right out in the street in front of everyone."

The emotional gut-checks continued as the team arrived to augment Haitian missionary Robinson Remedior and his staff. The range of injuries and subsequent infections from wounds left untreated for more than a week had a jarring effect on the team members.

"We saw children with deep gashes in their skulls, arms and legs; some were missing extremities," Colonel Beeker said. "All we really had to help alleviate the patients' agony was a local anesthetic as we used saline syringes, gauze pads and antibacterial ointments to clean the wounds."

Patients swarmed to the clinic as Colonel Beeker and his friends helped triage or transport some 2,500 infants, adults and

senior citizens that week. Colonel Beeker said he used his Air Force self-aid and buddy care training to clean and bandage wounds.

Each day they journeyed between the hotel and the clinic amidst rivaling gangs, gunfire, and desperate citizens wielding machetes along the roadside.

"We had three unarmed bodyguards working at the clinic who accompanied us wherever we went," Colonel Beeker said.

During their outreach in the Cité Soleil community clinic, he remembers stepping around remnants of cinderblock houses, human feces and pigs eating garbage as naked, shoeless children ran in the streets.

The colonel said despite countless stories of loss and pain, the singular sense of hope in the Haitians had a tremendous impact on him.

"I noticed the small things ... you'd see students sing, dress up as best they could and tote Bibles to church," he said. "There is an unbreakable spirit in so many of the people there."

"From a civilian perspective, I was so impressed with the effort that the military put forth," said Starnes, a Moroccan native who obtained U.S. citizenship in 2001. "As I stood next to the Air Force and Army members who helped feed the children, protect the people and return the city to some sense of normalcy, I said to myself, 'I am proud to be an American.'"

REMEMBERING AT HOME

The team continued to work until their planned departure.

"It was a long journey, but certainly worth it," said Colonel Beeker.

Once home, the images of Haiti continued to haunt him.

"I came home really upset because I wanted do more," he said. "The things we saw in one week they live every day and they don't get a break. Trying to help all the people in need there, you feel like a grain of sand on the beach." 🐦



photo courtesy of Lt. Col. Greg Beeker

Small clinics operated all over Haiti after the quake. Lt. Col. Greg Beeker, a staff member at the Pentagon's Crisis Action Team, took leave and joined a friend in Haiti to help at one. He said his Air Force self-aid and buddy care training was valuable there.