

VOSH-OHIO MISSION INTO HAITI

Drums beating with people chanting in the night, roosters crowing, goats bleating, and the guard dogs barking. These are the sounds I hear as I lay awake in the early morning hours in our safe walled-in mission compound, wondering our next plan for evacuation.

I am a member of a 16 member optometric team who has just completed our mission work into SOLT mission compound. A mission we had planned with Father Glenn for the past year. VOSH-Ohio sends teams into underserved countries around the world to provide eye care to those needing these services, and this was our first mission into Haiti.

This was a mission that saw 2,556 patients and provided glasses to many of these patients. Most all of the school children were screened and adults from the surrounding villages presented themselves to the compound to have their eyes screened for distance acuity, examination by autorefractor, a health exam by an optometrist, selection of glasses if needed, and fitting of these glasses. Those patients with surgical needs have been identified and will be referred for further care.

Now that the mission is complete, how do we get home? The most devastating earthquake in 100 years has hit Port-au-Prince this week, one that we felt here in Hinche 75 miles from the epicentre. After clinic on Tuesday, the team visited outside the walled compound to see the garden. While visiting, the earthquake hit Port-au-Prince. All of a sudden the entire team experienced extreme vertigo. Not knowing what was going on, it was a strange sensation. We did not feel the earth shake; however, there were several bouts with vertigo. The carpenter member had remained at the compound and he reported the house moving and a calendar swaying on the wall. We soon found out of the mass devastation as Father Glenn invited the team over to his house to watch CNN. The news was terrible; I immediately tried to contact four people in PAP and was not able to find out their well-being. As of today, I still have not found out about two of these persons. As a medical optometric team, we have no supplies or organized talent to help those affected; however, the desire remains to help these people and our hearts go out to the beautiful people of Haiti.

Our stay at SOLT has been most pleasant in this country of need. Father Glenn has provided to our team delicious food, homemade bread, Haitian and Cajun cooking at its best, and his presence has enriched the lives of our team members.

This is a first time visit to Haiti for 12 of the 16 member team and a lasting remembrance is one of love and fellowship with our Haitian helpers in the clinic, members of the team at SOLT, and with the team members as we experience our next adventure to depart the country.

The location of SOLT required that the best way to get into the compound would be to be flown over the mountains to the mission. A missionary service provided four six-seater planes to lift the team. Because we carry over 5000 pairs of glasses, equipment, medications, and our own personal luggage, along with food for the team, our host sent a truck to deliver the supplies to the compound.

We found pleasant accommodations for the team amidst the poverty outside the compound. We housed in men's and women's guest houses. We had cold running water

and electricity. So the fans were welcome in the hot weather, along with the cold showers.

Father Glenn and helpers cooked our evening Haitian meals with usually rice and beans, along with his Cajun cooking. The second day two goats were butchered. Warm bread from the bakery, that gives bread to the children in the school, was delicious. The compound teaches 1300 children and feeds these children 2 meals each day. Lunches consist of cabbage soup or a porage. Huge gardens are planted to provide food for the children. Hogs, chickens, and goats provide meat and eggs. It is a well run compound. Father Glenn has built 90 houses for the Haitians and set up an organized program for these houses.

Now as we are on our final flight to the States, it is still hard to believe what has happened this past week. We had to make a decision how to try to get out of Haiti. I called our airlines and rescheduled our flights. I was told they would begin flying in five days and so I rescheduled the team for the first flight available, which was in seven days. E-mails kept coming in from family, friends, and organizations giving us advice on how to depart. Options provided to us would be to try to cross the border into Dominican Republic, since the PAP airport was damaged. Then we were told the border into DR was closed. We were told to go north and fly out of Cap Haitien and get a lift by missionary flight services. This would be a five-hour trip in a Tap Tap or Chicken Bus over unpaved roads to reach the port, and then a missionary service could get us out. Another option would be to have the missionary service fly in Pagnon, 13 miles away, to pick us up. Calls to the missionary flight service told us that they were only taking supplies and rescue equipment into PAP and would not offer their services to us for probably six days. Even though the border to DR was only a few miles away, it was cut off; going north was also not available for us. We felt we needed to get out soon. Reports told us of the unrest and violence in the capitol city of PAP. The US Embassy recommended that US citizens leave, and contact with the embassy provided that, starting on Friday the US would evacuate their citizens. This is our only option.

Quickly the team packed and we rented an air conditioned (meaning the windows open) van and started our venture. We decided that each team member must get out with only one suitcase. Glasses, medications, and some equipment along with all our duffels were left behind. Excess clothes, shoes, and personal items were left behind. We did take toilet paper, water, surgical masks, breakfast bars, and the team made peanut-butter sandwiches for the members, as we had no idea how long we would be at the airport until we were evacuated.

Luggage was piled high on top of the van and tied down with a frayed rope. The van was supposed to hold sixteen and a front seat was to be used by a Haitian guard. Well, that would be sixteen Haitians, not Americans. Four persons were to sit across with a jump seat. No way! Our idea of taking a guard in the front seat was abruptly stopped. We put two team members in that seat and three to four across each bench in the back, assuring that the only two skinny team members were distributed evenly. During the three hour trip I could hear "If you move this way, I could move my foot or shift to this cheek".

Travel over this road from Hinche to PAP had recently been completed to cut an eight to twelve hours trip down to three hours. Haitian roads are mostly not paved and have multiple rocks in the road bed. We honked and swerved the entire trip to miss goats,

horses, people, and other vehicles. The bumpy travel was extremely exhausting for the young as well as the older team members. Then our adventure began!

Arriving at PAP we were immediately into a traffic jam. All were trying to pass in the streets scraping vehicles just to get through. Fallen buildings, Haitians walking in mass, Haitians in tap taps and chicken buses over-loaded inside and on top, heading out of the city with furniture, suitcases, chickens, and animals, whatever. Haitians wearing masks, riding motor bikes with multiple people on each bike any way to get out. And we were trying to get into the city.

Our driver inquired the best streets to take in order to get to the airport. Finally we arrived. We found the terminal damaged and the tower not working. We disembarked to a crowd of men wanting to grab our suitcases. I finally consented on 3 helpers, as all suitcases were tied on top of the van. Three were tipped much to dismay and shouting of the others. We were led through the fence to another exhausting part of our journey.

This was Friday at 12:30 PM, 2 ½ hours after leaving the safe compound. We were instructed to stay in line and stand, as the terminal was unsafe to enter. We stood there for five hours, eating our sandwiches for supper and distributing our remaining food to the people through the fence, as we were on our way home shortly. The US had soldiers surrounding the airport. We were safe and going home.

After about five hours in front of the terminal, the team members were looking for a rest room. Men were instructed to stand between two buildings and women were allowed to enter a single very undesirable toilet within the terminal.

Then we were led surrounded by US troops to go behind the terminal where many cargo planes were arriving and departing. The noise level was only shouting level. We were again told to stand in single lines. I think back to our five days of clinic as we had our patients “stand in straight lines”. The only difference was the length of time we stood. Planes from all over the world were bringing in rescue teams, the dogs for body retrieval, all sorts of medical and rescue teams were arriving. Three patients with IVs were lying on gurneys on the tarmac waiting for smaller evacuation planes to arrive. We were interviewed by Portugal and French TV stations and some other radio station personnel. Again we stood for another five hours.

At 10:30 PM we were led out onto the tarmac to enter a US Air Force C 17 cargo plane. Probably around 100 people were strapped into seats along the wall and down the center in the belly of this plane. We talked to Brian Williams and Ann Curry. Katy Couric was also a member on this plane. We were treated well by providing blankets, pillows, and ear plugs to help with the noise level.

We needed to stop in Charleston to fuel up and then on to McGregor Air Force Base, as they had been commissioned by the government to deploy the refugees. When we boarded the plane, we had no idea where we would land. Previous flights had taken people into the Dominican Republic and Florida. Now a plan had been arranged with the Air Force base. Finally at 6 am on Saturday morning we arrived and bussed to the base. We had name bands placed on our wrists, given a health kit to shower, briefed by the air force personnel and taken to a gymnasium full of cots, We were provided food and telephones, if need to make arrangements to fly home.

I felt like a refuge; however, it was such a good feeling to be home, especially since my skills as a nurse to help others would be hampered in this situation. After obtaining airline tickets we were led into buses to take the people either to Philadelphia or Newark

airports for departure home. A state police was our escort with sirens going through each traffic light for our hour trip to the airport. We arrived at our final airport and home by midnight Saturday, two hours earlier than originally planned from our original flight one short week ago into Haiti. So much had happened after that 30 second shaking of the earth that will be remembered by many people for their entire lives.

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