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Haiti: Boots on the Ground Perspective

Colonel Buck Elton

Buck Elton is the Commander of Joint Special Operations Air Component-Haiti. Small Wars Journal inadvertently received an e-mail update from Buck to his family and friends. SWJ asked if we could publish his insightful account and he most graciously agreed. What follows addresses many issues now appearing in the press – here is a boots on the ground perspective.



On Jan 13th I deployed with a few hours notice to Port au Prince to command a team of Air Commandos from Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field on a Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief mission in Haiti. We launched from Hurlburt within a few hours of notification without knowing what to expect at the airfield due to very limited communications with anyone in Haiti. We landed at 7 pm EST and had the Port au Prince airfield under our tactical air traffic control (ATC) 28 minutes later.

I am the commander of the Joint Special Operations Air Component-Haiti. I lead a force of 220 airmen (down to 164 now) executing ATC, airfield security, rescue, critical care evacuation, special operations surgical teams, aerial port duties, humanitarian airdrop surveys, planning, and DZ control, rotary wing ops command and control, communications specialists and logistics professionals. Most of us operated non-stop without sleep for the first 40 hours. We had no showers for the first 9 days; I slept 9 hours in the first 4 days. We are still eating only MREs, mosquitoes everywhere and absolute carnage outside of the wire. The stench of rotting bodies in the rubble makes driving in some areas difficult. Buildings are destroyed everywhere in the city and parts of the country. There are 59 confirmed and 37 reported (unconfirmed) US fatalities and up to 150,000 Haitian citizens reported dead or missing. Over \$780M has been donated and another \$1.2B has been pledged by the international community. 690K refugees occupy more

than 600 shelter villages because homes are destroyed or unsafe. Aftershocks occur daily, up to 5.0 and 6.0 in strength. The US Navy hospital ship Comfort is operating at maximum capacity and has all 1,200 racks filled with patients. The 2d Brigade Combat Team from 82d Airborne Division is here with soldiers to assist the UN and local police with food distribution and security.

Total DOD Boots on the Ground are over 5,000. The US Navy Carrier Carl Vinson is here with SH-60 and H-53 helicopters, and C2 aircraft flying day and night bringing aid to the airport. Two Marine Expeditionary Units are here, along with the Coast Guard and a small Air Force team now running the airfield. Rescue teams are still pulling survivors out of rubble, after being trapped for more than 12 days. Violence is remarkably low and the Haitian people are grateful, humble and very resilient. The Government of Haiti (GOH) is doing the difficult job of rebuilding, providing basic services and attempting to coordinate the massive amount of international aid flowing into the country. More than 30 nations and hundreds of NGOs are assisting the GOH. USAID is the lead agency for US humanitarian response in Haiti.



For the first week, we were virtually the only people in country who had communications, food/water, transportation, tents and security. We completely ran the international airport with a small force normally organized, trained and equipped to command and control special operations air. But we became the focal point for the evacuation of 12,000 American citizens, the primary casualty evacuation center coordinating hundreds of evac flights, our surgeons performed 14 major operations in their field hospital, mostly amputations of crushed limbs, our security held back rioting crowds and fence jumpers for the first several days, our pararescue jumpers saved 13 lives conducting confined space rescue missions with Fairfax Country Urban Rescue, the best in the world. Our security teams flew aid in to crowded landing zones and secured the LZ to distribute aid. Our Special Tactics Combat Controllers controlled an international airport 24/7 from a card table in the grass next to the runway for 12 days without a single incident, controlled almost 1700 fixed wing flights and 800 rotary wing flights from the infield with tactical radios until we handed the job back to Air Force air traffic controllers in their portable FAA tower (with air conditioning) on 25 Jan. We coordinated and planned 3 airdrop missions from C-17 aircraft. Our Joint Special Operations Forces distributed 43,800 hand cranked radios to allow disaster survivors to receive news and information regarding international relief efforts and public safety messages. And we provided internet and phone service to virtually every arriving unit and aid organization that showed up here without a plan.

I was interviewed by Katie Couric, Brian Williams, Al Roher, BBC, Reuters, French TV 24 and did two telecon interviews with 250 reporters. I coordinated directly with Senator John Edwards to arrange the evacuation of 28 critically injured Haitian citizens to Florida. John Travolta showed up in his Boeing 707 last night, but I went to bed and had a few airmen go get a picture with him. I briefed SECSTATE Hillary Clinton, former POTUS Bill Clinton, and more 3-4 star Generals than I can count. I had a problem with where we were taking US citizens and asked a National Security Council staffer to help me out. He emailed Janet Napolitano on his BlackBerry. She authorized me to move any US Citizen to any US location, overriding guidance I got from the Joint Staff and the US Air Force. I had to threaten an international flight crew that I would tow their 737 into the grass if they did not immediately depart the airfield (they had been on the ground for over 7 hours while aircraft were diverting due to no available parking) I told 50 reporters that if they didn't move their cars away from where an aeromedical evacuation flight was supposed to park I would bulldoze all the cars into the grass and off the ramp. I ordered the evacuation of 54 orphans on a C-17 against the specific direction of the American Consulate General here at the Embassy, but with the full support of the DHS, INS, NSC and ICE. I met with the Haitian Secretary of State for Agriculture and convinced him to allow airdrop resupply of humanitarian aid.

We took some heat at the airfield early on for the large number of diverts international flights were executing. Most aircraft were arriving without enough fuel to hold for a few hours, some with only a few minutes to hold before diverting for more fuel. We had 40-50 diverts a day for the first few days because there were no flow control measures to meter the number of aircraft that wanted to land here. The runway only has a single taxiway to the ramp and it is located at midfield. This makes it a single aircraft operation for takeoff, landing and taxi because all arriving and departing aircraft must use the runway to back taxi. The max aircraft on the ground is 12, but we only had enough material handling equipment to offload 3 at a time. The first night we hotwired a 6K forklift and provided the only means to offload military aircraft, until we flew down our own 10K forklift from Hurlburt. We had to hand off load a Chinese A330 because we didn't have the proper equipment. It took over 8 hours and they blocked half of the ramp because their pilots wouldn't taxi where we directed them to park. We pushed small civilian aircraft out of the way, threatened international aircraft with fines and threatened to tow aircraft into the grass unless they complied with our instructions. We were landing over 250 aircraft per day without phones, computers, or electricity and people were complaining about the log jam at the airport.

The Department of State DipNote blog has the [best summary of the air traffic challenges](#) we had. It is the transcript of a telecon interview I did with about 120 reporters from the Embassy here in Port au Prince. As a typical over reaction to the international "outrage" over not getting into the airport, the Air Force dramatically cut back capacity and has scheduled slot times well into late Feb. The AFSOC force has completely turned over control of the airfield operations to the USTRANSOM Contingency Response Group and the newly arriving Air Expeditionary Group. We are now landing just over a hundred aircraft a day, including small aircraft we park in the grass, and there are many times during the day and night when there are only a few aircraft on the ramp. We can do much better.

Our team of Air Commandos from Air Force Special Operations Command acted decisively and proved responsiveness, creativity, courage and competence can allow you to accomplish just about anything. I have many stories to tell, but not time to type them yet. We are wrapping up our Special Ops portion of this massive effort and should be heading home shortly, but you never know.

Buck

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