

Bird's-eye view: Pilot takes medical team, relief supplies to Haiti

By Taylor Tichenor
Special Contributor

On Feb. 12, a month to the day after the earthquake in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, my dad, Mac Tichenor, and I flew a humanitarian team and their supplies from Dallas to Jacmel, Haiti.

My dad is a volunteer pilot for Grace Flight of America, a nonprofit organization that helps people who need air transport for medical or humanitarian purposes. Their goal is to remove the burden of transportation from patients so they can get to specialized medical treatment not available to them locally.

My dad and I have flown several Grace Flights, helping to transport patients to their treatment city. On this trip, we took emergency medical technicians Scott Svendsen and Andrew Guest and about 200 pounds of medical supplies.

We had to save as much weight as possible to get the best gas mileage possible and also to have room for their supplies. My dad removed one of the plane's passenger seats, and he and I shared a suitcase.



COURTESY
PHOTOS

Mac and Taylor Tichenor flew two medical technicians to Haiti, along with 200 pounds of supplies for victims of the January earthquake.



We started our day at 4:30 a.m. and drove to Love Field airport to prep my dad's plane. We then flew to Houston, where we picked up our passengers and their cargo at the Grace Flight hangar at Hobby Airport. The next leg of our trip would be to fly to Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

After introductions were made, we started loading the supplies that the team was

bringing along. In one bag I remember seeing some baby diapers. Another was labeled "Ophthalmological Medicines." Each bag had many different supplies for just about any situation. We loaded several foam mattress pads.

After we loaded the plane we got on board and flew to Fort Lauderdale, where we rested, ate lunch, refueled the plane and picked up an emergency life raft for our flight over water to Haiti. We rented the raft for \$35, but had to leave a \$2,800 deposit (which was later returned to us). Then we headed off to our final destination: Jacmel, Haiti.

It took us several hours to get to Haiti because strong headwinds slowed us considerably. After we entered into Haitian air space, we had a difficult time understanding the controller because of his accent. It took several attempts from my dad's radio hails, but we finally understood our instructions.

We then flew over Haiti at several thousand feet lower than our cruising altitude. We flew right over Port-au-Prince, but I could not see how extensive the damage was. But we did see the port, with many ships anchored there, waiting to unload relief supplies.

The airport we landed in at Jacmel was on the south side of the island; our map showed that it was somewhat remote. But it was busy with planes landing and taking off, completing humanitarian missions like the one we were on.

The Canadian Armed Forces had set up temporary operations there to help manage the chaos, and they did a great job.



After we landed and taxied, we filled out paperwork. Then we unloaded our passengers and cargo.

While we were at the airport in Jacmel, we saw some relief workers sitting around waiting for a plane to take them back to the U.S. One of the main relief organizers approached us and said he had noticed the United Methodist cross and flame on my dad's T-shirt (his "Labors for Neighbors" shirt). He said he's noticed that it's often the Methodists who jump in when there's a need. It made me happy that the church was active in Haiti and other places where there are disaster situations.

We asked a few people if they needed a flight to our final destination of the day, Turks and Caicos in the British West Indies. No one seemed to need a flight, so we left. We spent about an hour in the air and landed at the airport in Turks and Caicos.

Again we went through customs, and then got our car and went to our hotel. It is quite different to go through customs at an international fixed base operator—where people can get a variety of different services for their plane—than an international airport. There was only one customs agent and we had to wait for her to finish with the people who had arrived before us.



We spent the night in Turks and Caicos and flew back to Fort Lauderdale the next morning. After we landed in Fort Lauderdale we had to return our raft and go through U.S. customs. When our customs inspection was finished we taxied to the fixed base operator in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., refueled and had lunch. Then we started for home.

We refueled in Alexandria, La., before returning to Dallas about 10 p.m. We had spent

14 hours in the air and traveled about 4,200 miles from Dallas to Haiti and back. It was a quick turnaround, with just an hour or so on the ground at each stop.

I was very glad I went on this mission trip to Haiti. What was most interesting to me was seeing all the international groups that had come to help the Haitian

people. I was glad to be a part it and see a small part of the relief effort, which brought hope to the people of Haiti.

Mr. Tichenor is a production assistant for UMR Communications and a member of Highland Park UMC in Dallas.

umportal.org

Taylor Tichenor, Apr 12, 2010

© 2010 UMR Communications