



Wings of Hope — A Mission to Haiti

by John Fiscus

It's an interesting thing about words and pictures. We use them in an effort to capture things so complicated and amorphous, but they never seem to be quite enough. There's still something missing, try as we might. Even gifted artists, who get closer than many, have their limits.

As a pilot, you know what I mean – in the sky you have seen wonders that only another person who has been there could really understand. I'm sure you've experienced that despite the pictures and words, you couldn't adequately describe to your friends or family the amazing nature of a setting sun from the top of the clouds. It's nearly impossible to completely relate the sense of true freedom and awe you

get when you launch out over a blue ocean vista, a majestic mountain range, a rugged canyon, or a sweeping green prairie. All the senses really have to come together for anyone to understand the totality of the experience and the only way to do that is to be there.

This truth is part of what makes writing this article difficult. I'd like to tell you what it was like to visit Cité Soleil in Haiti – one of the largest slums in the Western Hemisphere – and I'll certainly try, but it won't really feel like I've described it well enough. Since this is about much more than what it was like to be there, I'll start with telling you why I was there with 31 other COPA members.



A bird's-eye view of the mission flight over Haiti.

The Golden Parachute

It starts with Dr. Dick McLaughlin, whose chute pull close to the Bahamas during January 2012 brought some attention to what he was doing over in Haiti in the first place. In a way, the ordeal he shared with his daughter Elaine helped inspire the cause which brought the 32 people to Haiti a year and a half later. Mac and his daughter were on their way to provide medical aid in a part of the world where the need for even basic care is lacking, and thus quite dire. The spotlight hit the cause, some people with big hearts chipped in, it was all over the COPA forums for a while, and then things faded back out of the spotlight.

The good work didn't fade. Mac and a number of other volunteers continued to bring their skills to a part of the world hit by a trifecta of tragedy: earthquakes, disease, and death. They worked with the St. Luke Haiti Fund, a non-

profit organization dedicated to supporting the Haitians and their efforts to recover their great nation from the misfortunes that had claimed it. Quietly and steadily the effort continued to make progress.

Dr. McLaughlin spoke at M10 in Duluth the following summer, and it was there that an idea was discussed by Luke Lysen and Mac to further aid the Haitians. The concept needed legs and none of us had the time to make it happen, so things lay dormant for a while. Sometime during the winter of 2012, we revisited the idea and chose a goal: \$50,000 to purchase supplies and 10 volunteers to ferry them. The worst-case scenario was only that we'd fall short of our money goal, have fewer aircraft, and not provide quite as much aid, but hey, anything would help, right? It was decided that a campaign would begin on the COPA website, through The Flight Academy's marketing, and through a few articles here and there to get the word out. The initial response was heartening with more volunteer pilots than the 10 that were needed.

The money took a bit longer to roll in, but we had a few generous donors willing to chip in some hefty amounts right away, bringing in a little over \$12,000 by the end of our first week. At the end of the third week, we received a surprise from one very generous COPA member saying that if we could make it to \$50,000, they would match it with \$50,000 of their own. We were excited, floored, and a little concerned. Suddenly the stakes went up – we *needed* to make it to our goal now more than ever, since doing so would double the aid we'd already set out to provide.

The weeks rolled by and the donations continued to come in, inching steadily towards our target. Finally, with about a

The group of COPA members who flew much-needed supplies over to Haiti.



month to go, we made it ... and then it doubled instantly! I remember when word came in that we'd reached the goal and I felt a wave of relief, quickly followed by a new surge of urgency. The Flight Academy's part in this plan was to help set up the cross-country planning, flight plan filing, and to supply instructors for those who wanted one. I was a bit concerned we would run out of instructors. I was also concerned that the Haiti flight was going to come right at the end of one of our busiest times of the year: our Alaska trip taking place in mid-June, followed by Migration 11 a week later, and we'd go straight to Haiti from there.

Making the Flight

After a long day of flying on Sunday, 15 aircraft assembled in Fort Lauderdale. We had 14 Cirrus airplanes and one Eclipse jet for the trip. The loading process went quickly, and soon we were all gathered in a hotel to discuss weather and routing.

Later that evening, we spoke with Chuck Watson, a COPA member and lead scientist behind the computer models used to forecast extreme weather for the Caribbean region. We were fortunate to have his expert insight. We had a feeling about the weather, but his input confirmed it – we needed to be airborne as early as possible in an effort to beat some nasty storms moving in to Haiti. This meant rolling away from the hotel at 5:15 a.m. on Monday after a short night's rest with a quick breakfast at the Banyon FBO at FXE. They took excellent care of us.

Tired but eager, we set out from FXE just as the sun was rising on an already warm and humid Florida morning. Mac was in the lead with Chip Grant and me just behind him. We joined together for the nearly four-hour flight and stayed in loose formation the entire trip. The views were magnificent in ways that only the tropics can provide, and short of a few very minor deviations around buildups, the trip was uneventful.

Flying into Port Au Prince airport was similar to flying into other large airports without radar facilities. Basically, you enter their control zone about 30 miles away and start attempting to make contact with the controllers as soon as possible. It's rather unlike flying in the United States because you have to enter their control area (it isn't classified the same way), and just keep coming until they can hear you.

Due to terrain, we couldn't really reach the controllers until we were about 20 miles away, but that's par for the course at this airport. Tower informed us that we'd need to find an Airbus on a 15-mile final and follow it

in. We coordinated on the air-to-air frequency we'd previously set up, referenced waypoints on the RNAV approach, and fell into a two-mile trail of each other. The landing was easy and we taxied in to be lined up on a ramp near a Brazilian Air Force C-130 that had a rather unfortunate landing a few months earlier.

A Different World

Our handler on the Haiti side, Remmy, was immediately there with us, helping determine where to park and how to arrange the aircraft to be as out of the way as possible. The difference in how things are done there was immediately apparent. The first thing we noticed was the four armed UN guards stationed under the wing of the C130; presumably for the shade. There would be guards at the airport 24 hours a day until all of our aircraft left. About a half-hour later, we saw why. The airport's fence seemed to be more of a suggestion than a rule, and many people who worked at the sugar cane fields to the north needed to cross the airport to get back to their homes in the south. The fastest route was right across the runway. We saw teams of three to six Haitians walking by at regular intervals with machetes. While these guys posed no danger to us or our aircraft, it underlined the fact that anybody could access the airport. Having Remmy and the guards there was comforting, to say the least.

It took several hours for our entry customs and declarations to be completed, so most of us took advantage of the time by sitting in the shade of the downed Brazilian Air Force plane. We ate the sack lunches made for us by New Hope Community Church back in Florida, tried to make sure we were as covered as we could possibly be with sunblock, and reflected on the differences we'd already seen. Just as the thunderstorms started to blow in, we were loaded into two vans and carted off to see the first stop, St. Mary's hospital in Cité Soleil.

You've probably seen pictures on television or the internet of something like this area. They call it a slum. Impoverished. Destitute. Squalor. All these words and more describe the conditions in Cité Soleil. The photos give you a little taste of what it's like, but I can now tell you that it is nothing compared to what it's really like. This is the part where words would be just another set of inadequate representations of the truth. I've come to find that truth of this kind is something you have to go find for yourself.

Still, imagine it: Hundreds of thousands of people living with an almost complete lack of infrastructure after being hit with a series of powerful earthquakes. No electricity.



On the ramp at Port Au Prince airport, a Brazilian Air Force C-130 that had a rather unfortunate landing.



Small Haitian children escorting their “visitors” as they walked among them.

No running water or sewers. Shelters cobbled together from parts of shipping containers. No windows and often no doors – just a shack made from pieces of metal built by people desperate for some kind of protection from the weather. High walls everywhere helped to keep people safe as best it could. Garbage was everywhere, sometimes piled several feet high. Roads, or what passed for roads, were often choked with rubble or strewn with holes big enough to hang up a semi. Our expert drivers would be faced with an impassable route, turn around in a space you’d swear was too small to even fit half of the van, and move on to find the next possible route.

I noticed an interesting thing about the people as we drove towards St. Mary’s. They had a thinness that told of malnutrition and starvation. Children frequently ran naked, their families being too poor for clothes or the heat being too much for what clothes they did own. In spite of the fact that we were driving through the poorest part of this city of over two million people, and the fact that everyone was outside to watch us pass (it was too hot to be inside a windowless structure), we were safer than we thought.

Occasionally we’d find our path covered in rubble caused by mud slides, or washed out by the heavy rains. The maze of streets made keeping track of our location pretty difficult, but the local people helped us out. In one case, they guided us through a rubble strewn street.

GO FARTHER

INTRODUCING THE
BLUE KNOB
FOR THE CIRRUS
SR20-SR22



FOR MORE INFORMATION: WWW.TAMARACKAERO.COM 855.435.9824



Full Motion
Simulator Training
for Only \$99/Hour

New Lower Price...
Same Great Training!

You can now visit SimTrain's facilities in Atlanta or Las Vegas and train in the most advanced full motion simulator available anywhere for only \$99/hour*

simtrain
Train Like The Professionals

Atlanta, GA (KRYV)
Blue Sky Aviation • 866.562.2194
www.blueskyaviationservices.com

Las Vegas, NV (KVGT)
The Flight Academy • 866.557.1501
www.theflightacademy.com

Learn more at: www.SimTrain.net/movie

*\$99/hour for simulator rental.
CFII fees are additional.



The kids of Cité Soleil finding some fun time with author, John Fiscus.

In another, several people helped our drivers understand which streets were currently passable. In yet another, a couple of guys blocked traffic so we could back out of a dead end.

Even more striking to me, nobody asked us for anything. Back at the airport where our crew needed to pay “service fees,” I had learned something of the way things are done in Haiti, a by-product of wages that aren’t sufficient for a person to live on. It isn’t quite as much the result of abject corruption on the part of the folks we dealt with – rather it was an almost understood part of life. What few jobs there are don’t pay a livable wage and as a result most people charge

Garbage piled along the streets of Cité Soleil.



a “service fee” for their assistance. In a country where the average wage is \$400 per year, it’s understandable.

As we drove through this poorest of the poor areas of town, a place housing hundreds of thousands of people living every day in a reality most of us could scarcely imagine, nobody asked us for a handout. We passed people who had gone into the forests to chop down sugar cane or mangoes and were selling them on the side of the road. Some were selling wood and charcoal for cooking. I even saw a fellow with a tire repair outfit on the side of the road – it was just him, a crowbar, and a pump, but he was at work when we drove by. The official unemployment rate is over 40% in Haiti, but speculation is that many of this number have managed to employ themselves doing some service in the community.

The Hospitals and Housing

We finally arrived at St. Mary’s, a small hospital and housing development, and saw some of what our aid would help with. Common ailments or the results of poor nutrition are difficult obstacles in a world like this – doubly so, when considering the fact that many trained medical professionals were killed in the quake of 2010. With the aid of the St. Luke ▶



CIRRUS INSURANCE™

Have you taken the opportunity to obtain an insurance quote from the official insurance agency of Cirrus Aircraft?

✈ 10% Discount Available for Technically Advanced Aircraft with Training

✈ 5% Discount Available for AOPA Members

We can offer Rates and Terms that may not be available to other agencies

Travers & Associates

Aviation Insurance Nationwide

SINCE 1950

Over 1,000 Cirrus Pilots insured

ONLINE QUOTES: www.traversaviation.com or 877-963-9080



Local Cité Soleil people doing what they can to earn a living, selling produce and their services along the streets.

Foundation for Haiti, this place was established to help care for those in need.

Prior to touring the hospital, we took a walk through the area where the homes were being built. Many of the places are still fairly small, but they're sturdy and can easily house a family. They're even working on installing solar panels on a few homes – an ambitious project considering how much of a luxury electricity is.

As we toured, a flock of small children surrounded and accompanied us. They just wanted some human contact – holding hands, walking next to us, trying to chat with us even though we spoke different languages. A couple of little ones discovered that they could hang from my outstretched arms and had a great time doing so. The next thing I knew, I was a human jungle gym. They escorted us all the way back to the hospital.

We took a quick tour of the small building used to house and care for patients. Inside we saw young men and women in a common room filled with eight beds. They had taken ill or had been injured, but their ailments were not quite so serious as to be life-threatening. If that had been the case, they would be moved to a larger, better-equipped hospital. The next common room, with eight more beds, housed four small children and their mothers. Most of the children slept, and in some cases their mothers did too; they sat on stools by the beds with their upper bodies slumped onto the bed, and a hand stretched out to touch



The roads were sometimes impassable due to rubble and water.

the baby for reassurance. This sight of a mother's love and a child's struggle showed yet another facet of daily life in Cité Soleil. Sobered anew, we filed out of this section and over to the next, the cholera ward.

Cholera is a nasty infection but is entirely treatable ... if you live in a place where basic medical care is available. In Haiti, it's another story. The cholera outbreak of 2010 is slowly being corralled, but is certainly not yet contained. Normally, a few days of supervised care would get a person back on their feet, but that's hard to come by here. To date, the cholera outbreak has taken nearly 8,000 lives and put hundreds of thousands in hospitals. In the cholera ward at St. Mary's, we met six people whose illness hadn't progressed to a high threat level and thus they would be out in a couple of days. Upon

exiting, we washed our hands and shoes with chlorine water before piling back into our vans. Before the day was over, we saw two more hospitals and toured much more of the city.

I could write many more pages about what we saw and how it affected us, but I think I've made my point. Haiti is a country whose citizens are working hard to make their world a better place, but they've been dealt a bad hand by their country's economy, and devastated by a series of disasters. They're working to rebuild their community and to make a life for themselves. There are many obstacles, but the Haitians are proud of what they can do on their own. Organizations like the St. Luke Foundation for Haiti fill in the gap for now. The foundation is working to help rebuild and provide care, but that's just the start. They're also working to educate and train. Craftsmen, doctors, engineers, and even business administrators are being taught their craft right now in Haiti by the volunteers who spend days, weeks, and months of their lives helping out. Small businesses are being developed and run by Haitian citizens, homes are built by Haitian craftsmen, and hospitals are being staffed by Haitian nurses and physicians. This is ultimately the grand design of the St. Luke Foundation for Haiti – to put themselves out of work as the locals take over the process.

The Next Right Thing

There's still a lot left to do. Medical supplies and home building materials are hard to come by, and many simple tools we'd pop over to the store and grab can't be found in Haiti, but we can get them over there, and you can help if you have the ability. We've already decided that we're going to do this trip again and we're going to make it happen right after the CPPP in Florida. On Sunday, March 2, 2014, we'll be meeting at FXE for another supply run to depart for Haiti the next day.

Want to help? There's two ways you can make it happen:

- Volunteer to fly! Let us know you'd like to come and your requests for an instructor and we'll put you in the loop. The Flight Academy is going to handle all the flight planning and filing and will provide instructors free of charge to any who want one.
- Donate! The St. Luke Foundation for Haiti has a web site where you can learn more about what they do and make a donation earmarked for our next Haiti Relief Mission. In the dedication section of your donation, write COPA HOUSE and it'll be tracked. You can visit www.stlukehaiti.org to chip in to the effort. 

About the Author: *John Fiscus is vice president/chief pilot of The Flight Academy, a Cirrus training group with Platinum training centers in Seattle and Las Vegas. He has been teaching in Cirrus aircraft for 13 years and has flown them all over the world, including Europe, Mexico, the Bahamas, Canada, and Australia. He also teaches flight and ground sessions at the CPPP courses.*



The Midwest's Foremost...

WISCONSIN AVIATION

SR22 TS

Cirrus Platinum Partner Service Center & Standardized Training Center

Platinum CSIP on Staff

Transition/Recurrent Training

Rental Aircraft Available

Certified for CAPS Replacement

Avionics Service Avidyne R9 Upgrades

Pickup & Delivery Service Available

Madison (KMSN) 800-594-5359

Watertown (KRYV) 800-657-0761

WisconsinAviation.com/Cirrus



Aircraft Loans

Upgrading or Refinancing your Cirrus?

Low Rates • Flexible Programs • Terms to 20 Years • Experienced Staff - Over 4,000 Aircraft Financed

Call or visit our website for a quote today!

(800) 390-4324

AirFleetCapital.com

AIRFLEET CAPITAL INC