

## **City of Ottawa supervisor keeps water and hope flowing in quake-ravaged Haiti**

After the devastating January 12, 2010 earthquake ripped through the Caribbean nation of Haiti, killing an estimated 300,000 people and leaving more than 1 million homeless in a sea of dust and rubble, there was just one person Ottawa firefighter and aid worker Scott Barton felt he needed to call: Chris Hamilton.

Hamilton, a supervisor in the City of Ottawa's water department, is no stranger to natural disasters, having assisted Barton on previous relief operations by setting up water filtration systems on behalf of Samaritan's Purse Canada, an international Christian relief and development organization.

The pair first teamed up following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. At the time Barton was vacationing in Thailand; after being asked to go to hard-hit Sri Lanka to work alongside Canada's Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART), he discovered that there was no post-DART pullout plan, and contacted Samaritan's Purse to see if they would take on the challenge of providing relief to survivors. With access to clean water being the greatest necessity following any disaster, he called upon Hamilton's expertise to make sure systems were put in place to ensure survivors wouldn't go without this crucial necessity.

Since his six-week stint in Sri Lanka, Hamilton has undergone disaster relief training with Samaritan's Purse and has lent his assistance following the 2007 cyclone in Mozambique and the 2008 earthquake in China's Sichuan province.

"I'm on their DART team now," said Hamilton recently. "It's only when large-scale disasters occur that they get our people involved."

As major as those disasters were, they couldn't match the totality of destruction Hamilton saw in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake, which tragically occurred in the most populous part of the poorest nation in the western hemisphere. As soon as news of the magnitude of the disaster reached Hamilton, he knew he would be asked to put the knowledge he gained during his 17 years at the water division to use to help the people of the stricken nation. The telephone call from Samaritan's Purse came soon thereafter.

With the runways and airspace above the Port-au-Prince airport clogged with relief planes, it was two weeks before Hamilton and Barton secured a flight from Fort Lauderdale, Florida to Haiti, where John Dallman of Samaritan's Purse International was waiting with water-filtration equipment.

When their small, twin-engined turboprop taxied to a stop between two massive Canadian and American C-17 Globemasters, the two were impressed by the size of the international response; however, due to the extent of damage to road infrastructure (mainly from collapsed buildings and broken water mains) and the huge number of displaced residents crowding the streets and highways, aid was slow to trickle out of the staging areas. With so many countries involved, it was also a coordination nightmare.

Though apprehensive from reports of rioting in the chaotic streets of Port-au-Prince, Hamilton knew time was of the essence as the tropical sun took its toll on those struggling to survive in makeshift camps that sprung up wherever there was vacant land.

“The main Samaritan's Purse base was right outside of Port-au-Prince, and later another was set up near the epicenter (outside) Leogane,” explained Hamilton. “The first few days consisted of driving trucks back and forth between the base and sub-base for water and tarp distribution.”

At their disposal were 12 water filtration systems, each of which could produce 40,000 liters of clean water a day. Another 8 units were waiting on a barge near the city's heavily-damaged port, finally making it to shore a few weeks later.

“Distribution consisted of taking a unit and finding a camp so as to service a large number of people. We'd set the system up, then train someone to run it. The systems are pretty easy to use, so we were able to train locals to provide this essential service to their countrymen.”

Hamilton explained that although Haiti had lots of water sources in the form of springs, the water was not yet safe to drink, and tropical diseases would have quickly arisen and spread had they not delivered the filtration units in time – a death sentence for many of the weak or injured.

The sub-base camp in the coastal community of Grand-Goave was somewhat removed from the chaos of the capital city. Standing on a pristine beach under a mango tree, Hamilton had difficulty imagining that such a cataclysmic disaster could have happened so close by; the only indication that only miles away hundreds of thousands lay dead under rubble was the surreal sight of foreign warships on the horizon and the unnerving, daily aftershocks that were always followed by the cries of fearful women and children. Though their concrete structure was deemed safe by a structural engineer, for obvious reasons Hamilton chose to sleep on the building's roof.

Hamilton returned to Ottawa on February 20<sup>th</sup>, three weeks after arriving in Haiti. Samaritan's Purse International is in the process of setting up a permanent office in the country, headed by a multi-national contingent.

The contrast between Ottawa and present-day Port-au-Prince couldn't be greater; it's no wonder that after every disaster he's responded to, Hamilton goes through a period of adjustment.

“When you're in those situations, you focus on the task at hand and try not to think about it,” said Hamilton. “It's only when you get back that you spend a couple of weeks thinking of what you've done – you look at pictures and say, 'I really touched some lives’”.

Reconstruction of the shattered nation will take years, even decades, but the success of any vast undertaking requires passion and resiliency amongst the local populace, qualities Hamilton says the Haitian people have to spare.

“Haiti is a great country with a lot to offer,” said Hamilton. “The resiliency of the Haitian people in the midst of everything that was happening was incredible. You saw children smiling and people coming to work every day even though close family members of theirs were missing...I hope they get a sense of what their country could be – I think they see it.”

*\*Please invite your friends and family to join us at Andrew Haydon Park on Saturday, July 24, 2010, for a fundraising concert. Funds raised will go to the Canadian Red Cross, Haiti Earthquake Relief.\**