



Photo by Peter Kuitenbrouwer, National Post

A Haitian baby orphaned by the 7.0 earthquake that hit the island nation on Jan. 12, 2010, sleeps on the chest of an Air Canada crew member on a relief flight from Port-au-Prince to Ottawa.

'Today I am a caregiver'

Flight crew welcomes 24 tiny new immigrants

BY PETER KUITENBROUWER

As flight attendants demonstrated the safety features of Air Canada's Airbus A330 jet on the tarmac in Port-au-Prince early this morning, a two-year-old boy identified by his wristband as Kendy Joseph, and cradled in the arms of a ticket agent, let out a wail that stood in for the heartbreak of all Haiti.

Four hours later, the toddler and 23 other tiny immigrants -- several of them needing hospital care -- arrived in Ottawa aboard an Air Canada "relief mission" jet.

Air Canada had originally planned Flight 2151 to bring evacuees to Montreal, but the federal government asked the airline to change its destination to Ottawa after Foreign Affairs cleared 24 Haitian children for adoption.

"Today I am a caregiver," Lisa Holowach, Air Canada's government services manager, said aboard the jet. "We found out yesterday afternoon that we were going to be

transporting orphans, so there was a need for caregivers. Everyone wants to help out as much as we can. Our hearts go out to the people in Haiti."

The Air Canada staff wore "Mission: Haiti" T-shirts, which on the back read, "Lespwa. L'espoir. Hope."

The Airbus A330 left Toronto for Haiti on Saturday afternoon, sagging with antibiotics, generators and food and bristling with medical personnel, including 15 doctors and nurses organized through Montreal's Jewish General Hospital.

"I cancelled my clinics for two weeks," said Dr. David Morris, a reproductive endocrinologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, part of the group going to help an Israel Defence Force hospital in shattered Port-au-Prince.

Air Canada brought its own doctor and nurse,

supplemented by two doctors and two nurses from the Canadian army, to care for the orphans on the trip home.

Immigration officials cut red tape in Haiti and Canada to speed processing of orphans who already were matched with families in Canada, in order to clear space at orphanages for children left without parents by the 7.0 earthquake that devastated Haiti on Jan. 12.

Air Canada invited journalists to fly aboard the aid voyage.

Jackie Dupont, an Air Canada staffer, stayed up until 1 a.m. on Friday baking tiny blueberry muffins and small slices of banana bread and lemon loaf. She filled an overhead bin with a bankers' box of baked goods for the orphans.

At 10 p.m. on Saturday the plane touched down at sultry, smoky, pitch-black Toussaint-Louverture airport in Port-au-Prince -- whose concrete terminal shows wide cracks and has been abandoned. U.S. Army forklifts unloaded the plane's aid supplies. At 2 a.m. a convoy of airport-shuttle style white buses pulled up. Canadian Embassy staff handed the babies, who wore shorts and T-shirts, and some bare feet -- to the airline staff.

During the flight Samantha Moise, 10, who sat next to her brother Junior Moise, 9, stopped every flight attendant who came by with snacks, and soon amassed a shopping bag, on the seat beside her, loaded with plantain chips, cheese sandwiches, raisins and cookies. Mary O'Neill, a volunteer on the flight, smiled. "She's not used to having plenty to eat," she said.

Other Air Canada staff stood, bouncing babies in the plane's aisles.

One man changed his baby's diaper three times, then asked a female colleague to take over for the fourth change. Doctors fussed over several babies with distended bellies.

As she sat with Kendy Joseph, 2, on her lap wrapped in a blue Air Canada blanket, Louise Theriault, a ticket agent in Montreal, said: "We don't often have the opportunity to do something good like this."

The boy refused all food and water, and looked around furtively, refusing to smile before sleeping; when the flight landed in Ottawa doctors determined he was dehydrated and an ambulance rushed him to hospital.

In Ottawa government officials welcomed the orphans at the hangar intended for visiting heads of state.

A throng of journalists shivered as airline staff carried to the tiny new Canadians down the metal stairs to the tarmac in the frosty winter dawn.

After a medical and document check, the babies went into the arms of their adoptive parents, with Red Cross workers handing out tiny snowsuits from a rack in the hangar.

Along with the orphans Air Canada evacuated 116 Canadian citizens from Haiti, most of them of Haitian origin, plus 18 Montreal police of Haitian origin (on a fact-finding mission) and some embassy staff.

The flight landed precisely on the schedule the airline had set. "We were lucky to get fuel in Haiti," said Duncan Dee, the airline's chief operating officer, who took charge of the mission. He said the fuel truck driver was going off his shift, but Air Canada bribed him with a case of Coca-Cola.

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