

BRIDGING THE AID GAP

The kinder face of the business and general aviation communities was revealed when they came together in AERObridge after the 12 January 2010 earthquake in Haiti

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As the spectre of economic recession has hung over the globe in recent years, the lavish side of business aviation has often been seen as a symbol of corporate excess and greed.

But business aircraft operators showed an entirely different face to the world when, in the days and weeks following the 12 January 2010 catastrophic earthquake in Haiti, they joined together with the general aviation community to provide critical passenger and supply transportation to and from the impoverished island nation.

Co-ordinating the complicated Haiti operation was AERObridge, which stands for Aviation in Emergency Relief Operations. Formerly known as Corporate Aviation Responding in Emergencies (CARE), the organisation was first activated in 2004 when Hurricane Katrina swept through the US Gulf Coast.

A National Business Aviation Association-endorsed group of aviation specialists, AERObridge ensures that aircraft are positioned to respond during disasters, and assist government and non-government organisations (NGOs) with moving people and supplies to where they are most needed.

LIFE-SAVING AID

In the case of Haiti, that meant finding creative ways to transport life-saving aid to people in remote areas, including hard-hit Leogane, located near the epicentre of the earthquake.

"Because bridges were out and there were deep fissures in the road, there was no way to

get supplies into this area via ground transport. With no airstrip, we used the national highway to conduct 150 flights into Leogane," says AERObridge president Marianne Stevenson. "We brought in supplies and personnel, and the fuel from the aircraft tanks was pumped out to run generators at the hospital. It's very fluid and very creative."

Operation Haiti, which lasted for three months, involved more than 715 flights, 3,800 passengers and more than 636,000kg (1.4 million lb) of critical supplies. AERObridge made Florida's Fort Lauderdale executive airport its primary staging area in the USA, and within days of the catastrophe established a secondary staging area in Santiago, Dominican Republic.

"Aircraft could fly into Haiti, and then, if they wanted to spend three or four days doing missions, they would overnight in Santiago before flying the final leg to Fort

Lauderdale," says Stevenson.

She says AERObridge used "everything from four-seater piston-engined aircraft to Boeing 727 and Airbus A319 aircraft and everything in between", meaning that Gulfstream, Cessna, Bombardier and Dassault products were all involved.

"In fact, it was one of the Dassault demonstration planes that ferried Yale doctors into Cap-Haïtien," says Stevenson. "We matched the aircraft with the requests for medical personnel and first response teams going inbound and requests for people coming outbound."

Stevenson describes a particularly memorable mission involving the transport of newly adopted children to Miami.

"At the request of the State Department, we brought out 42 orphans and everything went fine. The following week we were to bring out 46 orphans, but on Friday mid-day before the



AERObridge assists in moving people and supplies to where they are most needed

Saturday flight, Haitian officials notified the US embassy that all 46 children would require a Haitian visa to exit the country. The US Embassy processed the paperwork for the children by the 5pm cut-off on Friday (which was a big effort). The children were brought to the airport on Saturday but did not yet possess the visas. Since we were co-ordinating with the charter company and the personnel offloading the inbound supplies, all were alerted to the need for a very slow turn. A four-hour turn allowed the visas to get to the embassy personnel and be delivered. We were also balancing the need for the children departing with other requests for passengers outbound while trying to maintain the financial donor's desire to help orphans."

After the Haitian disaster, AERObridge realised that there were things it could do faster and better. In March, with the assistance of NBAA, AERObridge attained tax deductible status. It also started identifying and developing five staging areas in the USA with the components for a rapid response available.

Various aviation companies have stepped forward to assist the group. FlightTrack is donating its software. Jeppesen is providing navigation aids and charts to any aircraft that flies under the AERObridge banner in a future emergency. "JetNet has been instrumental

"Fuel from the aircraft tanks was pumped out to run generators at the hospital"

MARIANNE STEVENSON
AERObridge president

with a financial donation so that AERObridge could help the people in Haiti and move forward as an organisation," notes Stevenson.

But AERObridge welcomes further assistance. "If there is anybody in the industry who thinks they have a product or idea that would help make the emergency response more effective, we would love to have their participation. We still need to have the ready fleet rounded out and have as many aircraft as possible listed that already know they'd be inclined to donate. Financial donations are also critical and would be very much appreciated."

She has no doubt that the industry will step up to meet the need. "That's the thing about our industry – most of the corporations and individuals that have aircraft are not looking for the recognition or anything other than being civically minded and assist where they can, and it's each of the individual pilots, aircraft owners, people working at the fixed-base operators, people helping to load the planes, people receiving the materials in-country and everybody working in a complete chain that makes our systems possible" ■



With no way to reach the hardest-hit areas of Haiti via ground transport following the earthquake, AERObridge provided critical passenger and supply transportation