

Managing Amid the Chaos

Sean Blane and Nicolas Pypops went to the Canadian embassy in Port-au-Prince following last year's devastating earthquake in Haiti to provide emergency consular support. The management consular officers on rapid deployment quickly realized the definition of their role was pretty broad.

Processing some 500 people for evacuation to Canada each day, with the support of partners from Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Canadian Border Services Agency, the MCOs also pitched in on other tasks—everything from serving meals and marshalling volunteers to caring for orphans in a makeshift nursery.

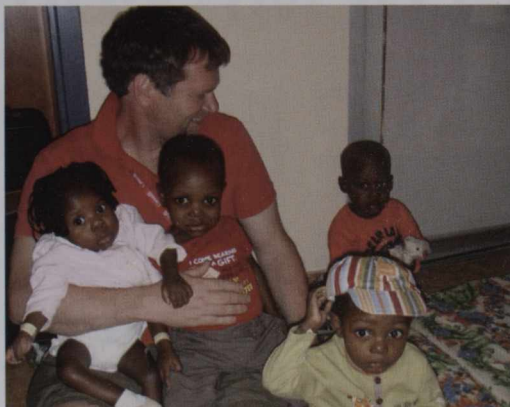
"It was like a scene from a movie, with people waving passports, saying 'I'm a Canadian' or 'I know a Canadian' or 'I want to be a Canadian,'" says Blane, 44, recalling the scene at the mission gate on his first and subsequent days. "There was every kind of imaginable situation. The routine was absolutely zero."

Pypops, 29, an operations officer who confesses to being "an action junkie" and was deployed to Haiti from a single assignment as a deputy MCO in Miami, says that, in such situations, "you can never actually plan. You have to just be able to go with whatever is put in front of you and somehow manage."

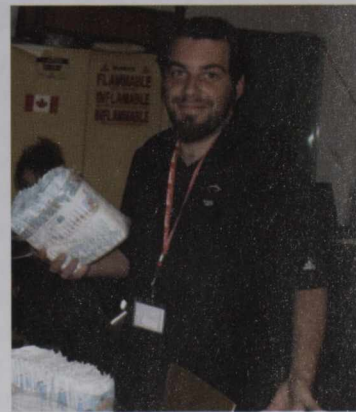
Blane, Pypops and the other MCOs quickly became close, working out of the embassy garage and sleeping just a couple of hours each night—whether at the embassy, in tents or in a crowded apartment. Amid aftershocks and distant gunfire, they diapered infants, comforted people who'd lost loved ones and wrote out emergency passports—using car roofs as desks.

"It became beyond chaotic," says Pypops, a "diplobrat" whose mother was an MCO posted in Haiti in the 1980s and who was herself evacuated during the upheaval surrounding the transitional government of Gen. Henri Namphy.

"As consular officers, we typically get one or two complex cases a year. During the Haiti deployment, we were getting 10 before lunch," adds Blane, now an MCO in Boston. He calls the Haiti deployment "one of the most intense, wonderful experiences of my life." One particularly memorable moment was returning to Canada carrying a baby boy, whom he handed over to his adoptive parents. "I still smile every time I think about it."



Sean Blane helps care for infants in the makeshift nursery for orphans.



Nicolas Pypops unpacks diapers, among supplies brought in from the Dominican Republic to prepare for the arrival of the first group of orphans at the mission.

Family First

With a first posting during a civil war—in Côte d'Ivoire—Sherri van de Hoef quickly learned about the distress families feel in international emergencies.

It's a lesson she's never forgotten. The position she held in Abidjan from 2002 to 2004 as a management consular officer (MCO), amid outbreaks of violence, curfews and evacuations, was a suitable preamble to special assignments with DFAIT's Family Liaison Assistance Group (FLAG).

Back in Canada from her Abidjan posting, van de Hoef was brought into the new unit following the 2004 Asian tsunami. At FLAG, she served as a contact point and provided case-management services for families affected by the tragedy. She co-led FLAG following the Haitian earthquake last year and led the unit during the various international emergencies this past spring.

"We're the face of the department for a lot of Canadians and their families in a crisis," explains van de Hoef, director of the MCO Renewal Team,

which is working to build capacity in the MCO stream, which includes helping MCOs respond to the growing number of emergencies.

FLAG, which van de Hoef calls a "case-management SWAT team," deals with situations involving deaths, children's issues, arrest or detention and high-profile cases. Members work closely with officers on the ground, other government departments and service providers to ensure information and support is available for people who, often, feel helpless, separated by vast distances and bombarded by news reports.

People caught up in emergencies are reassured "just knowing they have someone who will help," explains van de Hoef, who has a degree in