

Rewarding relief mission

HMCS St. John's back in Halifax after helping out in Haiti

By CHRIS LAMBIE

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Canadian sailors formed human chains with Haitians to pass heavy bags of food up to a waiting warship for delivery to towns stranded by hurricanes that caused massive flooding in the Caribbean nation.

For two weeks in broiling heat, HMCS St. John's ferried loads of critical supplies from Port-auPrince to 11 towns along Haiti's southern coast, where access roads had been washed away by four devastating storms.

The frigate's 205-person crew got a lot out of the experience, Cmdr. Brian Costello said Wednesday after his ship returned to Halifax.

"I think they've all actually found this to be probably one of the more

rewarding deployments they've ever done in that they were fulfilling a definite need that could not otherwise be filled and they were seeing face on the ground effects of food going into the hands of people ashore," Cmdr. Costello said.

There was a lot of manpower involved, he said. "We were working 12- to 18-hour days of people carrying (heavy) bags of rice and the helicopter was flying 12 hours a day. But my people went to bed every night tired but intensely proud."

Everyone from cooks to officers turned out to help with the loading, he said.

With temperatures hovering around 48 C once you factor in the humidity, crews worked for 20 minutes, then rested for 40.

"We had to be beating people down below, saying, 'Go take your rest period.' Everyone wanted to be part of this. It was so real and so immediate for them." The ship, which left Halifax on July 29, had been conducting counter-surveillance for drugs in the Caribbean Basin when it was sent to help Haitians.

"Most of the road and other

transportation infrastructure had been destroyed, so most of the communities that we were taking food to had not seen relief in up to two weeks," Cmdr. Costello said.

Partnered with the World Food Program in what the military dubbed Operation Horatio, the frigate's crew delivered 462 metric tonnes of rice, corn-soya meal, bottled water, water-purification tablets and other relief supplies.

The Canadian warship left once the World Food Program chartered its own helicopter and a landing craft.

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Five-year-old Ivan Spearman and his three-year-old brother Ethan hold flowers as they await the arrival of their mother, Lt. Jennifer Spearman, aboard HMCS St. John's at the HMC Dockyards on Wednesday.

(TIM KROCHAK / Staff)