



COURTESY PHOTO, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN HEALTH SYSTEM

A University of Michigan Survival Flight crew with a Haitian patient is shown Wednesday in a hangar at Willow Run Airport.

'JUST MIND-BOGGLING'

By Bill Chapin

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As a member of the University of Michigan Survival Flight crew, Wilson Bowers has seen plenty of small-scale disasters.

"In our business, you see a lot of horror stories," said Bowers, a Jackson resident.

None of them quite prepared him for the large-scale disaster he saw flying over Port-au-Prince on Wednesday. One of 20 flight nurses with the medical transport program, Bowers was among a team dispatched to Haiti as part of relief efforts after last week's devastating 7.0-magnitude earthquake.

The 24-hour journey ended Wednesday night, when the crew landed at Willow Run Airport in Ypsilanti along with two seriously injured patients, who are now being treated at the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor.

Bowers spent about two hours on the ground in the Haitian capital and did not leave the airport, but the trip was still "emotionally and physically draining," he said.

"You see it on TV, but to actually go down there and participate ... it's just an overwhelming experience," he

said.

The university's Survival Flight jet had been on standby since last week, having been identified as a "preferred provider" by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The team members were called into action Tuesday afternoon and took off from Willow Run about 7 p.m. They spent the night in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and by mid-day Wednesday were making their final approach toward Port-au-Prince.

"There's a lot of media coverage, but until you actually see the big picture, the three-dimensional picture ... it's quite catastrophic," Bowers said. "Our approach was right over the main area of devastation, so you're flying along and you see a neighborhood where there's a block or two of houses standing, and the next block over ... it's just complete rubble."

The plane had to abort three landing attempts because of congestion at the airport, which is handling more than 10 times as many flights as it did before the quake without the benefit of radar or its quake-damaged control tower.

Bowers described the situation on the ground as "controlled chaos" with "planes

coming and going, heavy machinery moving pallets of supplies (and) military from all around the world."

The group was asked to park the jet in the grass to leave room for the larger jets to park on sturdier ground.

Dispatched to transport a single victim, the crew determined the jet could accommodate a second patient. University of Michigan Health System declined to release details on the patients, their injuries or financial arrangements.

"The patients have injuries that require complex care that's available at few medical centers in the country, among them UMHS," the university said in a statement e-mailed to employees. "... We are proud to play this small role in the world's response to the massive tragedy in Haiti and to offer our air medical transport and our care to these patients."

Bowers, who graduated from Jackson Community College's nursing program in 1984 and has worked for Survival Flight since 1998, said he, too, was glad he was able to help out.

"To be there, it was just mind-boggling," he said.

— AnnArbor.com contributed to this story.