

# Our Man in Port-au-Prince

A recent college graduate joins ADRA, and ends up seeing the U.S. invasion of Haiti.

by Joel Sandefur

I was on my way to Haiti via the Dominican Republic. It was early September of 1994, a few months after I graduated from La Sierra University with a B.A. in French. The U.N. embargo on Haiti was at its tightest: no flights in or out. The only way for me to get to Port-au-Prince and my job with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) was to travel overland by bus from the Dominican Republic.

I had exactly three qualifications to go work for ADRA/Haiti: I had a U.S. passport, I spoke French, and I was willing to go. I was all for feeding the hungry, though I had no idea how it happened in real life. What was clear in my mind was that I absolutely had to beat the invasion. I wanted to be in Haiti when the troops waded ashore or dropped from the sky. Here are excerpts from the first month of a diary I kept during my year as the logistics officer of ADRA/Haiti.

## SEPTEMBER 14

It is my second day in Haiti. It's overwhelming. I am beginning to wonder about my choice to come. It was one thing to say "I'm going to Haiti." But it's quite another to actually be here. I was

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prepared—at least I thought I was. I knew all about the filth and the crowding and the rigors of the embargo. It's one thing to know about something and another to live it.

Tonight is the first night of the curfew, seven to seven. This morning the helicopters dropped leaflets in Creole with pictures showing people the proper procedure for throwing down their guns.

The rumor is that the Marines land tomorrow. We're all keeping our radios handy. Why the hell did I come here? I'm not really sure. It's hot, filthy, the electricity rarely works. My spirits are at a low ebb.

## SEPTEMBER 15

War and rumors of war. Saw a U.S. destroyer just off-shore. A group of Haitians were gathered on the beach pointing and staring. The airport is supposed to close today, maybe tomorrow. Rumor has it they're parking shipping containers on the airport runways to keep planes from landing. The ambassador said the invasion is going to happen, but didn't know when. The mood among the expatriates is odd. Everyone is nervously anticipating something, but they're not sure when it will come. All anyone knows is that it will be soon. Some say this weekend, some next week, others that it's all a bluff.

There doesn't appear to be much hostility toward

Americans. I don't understand why not. A lot of places with a lot less reason to hate the U. S. than Haiti have us as enemy No. 1. Here it's not the case. The guy at the appliance store (who didn't have any washing machines, but did have rows of refrigerators) told me everything would be OK if we would just lift the embargo. He was very much against the idea of an invasion. I told him that it wasn't me personally who was invading. He agreed. It was nothing personal.

## SEPTEMBER 16

Today I drove for the first time. It's like nothing I've ever done. There are no traffic rules. Generally people seem to prefer the right hand side of the road, but there isn't much to hold them to it. I kept having to resist the urge to use my blinkers—a futile gesture. Suffice it to say, I did things on the road today that would have landed me behind bars in the U.S.

I drove through Kuwait City today, a section of road along the waterfront lined with black-market gasoline vendors. Most of it gets sold out of one- and five-gallon cans. The customers are mostly upper-class Haitians. They look terribly out of place in their Mercedes and Land Cruisers. It's something to see a man dressed in an expensive suit and an old woman dressed in rags haggling over the price of one gallon of diesel. It is a sick kind of economic empowerment of the underclass. One match could send the place sky high. The embargo hasn't shut down the gasoline industry—only forced it underground, nominally at least. Rumor has it that there's a pipeline running across the border with the Dominican Republic.

Just heard a cryptic message on the radio: "VIP coming tomorrow for high-level meetings. Expect a long weekend." My theory is it means Jimmy Carter is coming tomorrow. Just a guess. Something needs to happen quickly. This place is strangling to death. I'm all for peace. But a quick invasion is better than a drawn-out peaceful resolution. Clinton seems to have committed himself to an invasion. It is a strange feeling, a bit surreal, to think that the place they're talking about in the news, is right here; that the news isn't going to happen on the news, it's going to be live—right here in Port-au-Prince.

It happened about 1:30 a.m. I was sure the "show" was starting. Planes flew low overhead. People tell me they were dropping leaflets and radios. They also say the Haitian military went around roughing people up and confiscating the radios.

This is a shadowy, fantastic place. In my four days here, I have yet to see overt evidence of voodoo, though I imagine the decorations on the tap-taps (Haitian fixed-route taxis) are voodoo inspired. It doesn't mesh—that place I'd read about and seen in the movies—and this place. I really don't see how I'm going to last a year here.

## SEPTEMBER 17

Won't be long now. Jimmy Carter, Colin Powell, and Sam Nunn are/were here today. There is hope at least that this thing will end without fighting. The shooting, though, has been going on for a couple of nights, some of it machine-gun fire. It's hard to say what the shooters were hoping to accomplish with their firing. They were probably just spooked—shooting at anything that moved or appeared to move. It's a little unnerving to hear shooting so close by, but I'm beginning to get used to it. It's kind of funny, actually, the thought of some Haitian irregular trying to shoot down a U.S. air force plane with his World War II vintage M-1 rifle.

I stopped today at the Baptist Mission of Rev. and Mrs. Turnbull, Americans by birth but Haitian residents for the past 46 years. Here are some of the things he told me, the best-known foreign missionary in all of Haiti:

- 250,000 people will die when the U.S. troops land.
- Aristide's followers will rise up and kill all the evangelical ministers they can get their hands on.
- The army will slaughter Aristide's people.
- Aristide worships a demon.
- Carter and friends have already left the country in failure (not true).
- Bill Clinton is the anti-Christ.

Turnbull was a pathetic example of a particularly troubling brand of missionary mentality—a paranoid, half-crazy do-gooder ensconced in his own personal fiefdom. The Baptist Mission itself was well put together and clean, though.

## SEPTEMBER 18

Haitian TV is showing a movie, *Vietnam Nightmare*, interspersed with live broadcasts from the square in front of the presidential palace (what does one call the palace where a ruling junta resides?) where an anti-U.S. demonstration is going on. A not-too-subtle political statement.

I can barely follow what the announcer is saying.

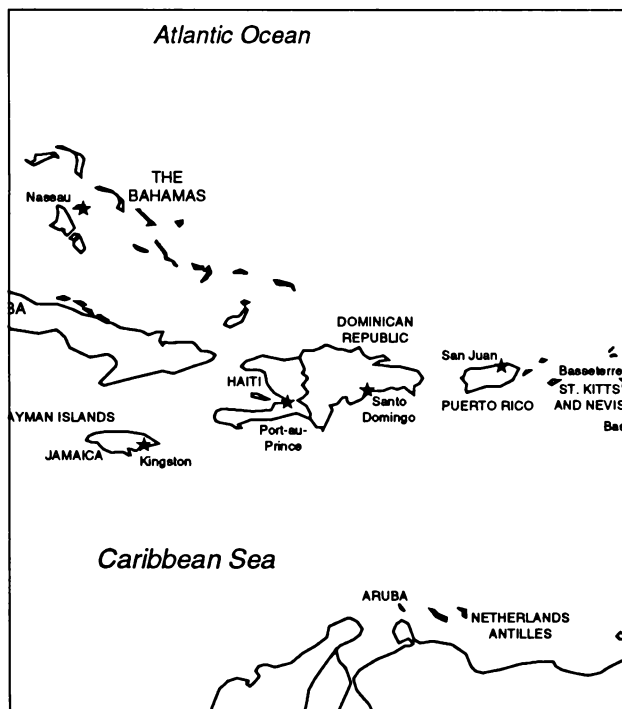
Creole is a little like French, but not quite close enough. Something about “Swing” (the U.S. ambassador) and “quitter” (French verb to leave). That would mesh with the rumor that Swing is being expelled from the country as an undesirable foreign national. It’s absurd really. Here we sit just a couple of miles from the action, almost totally ignorant of what’s going on, while thousands of miles away in Honolulu, my parents can watch it all live on CNN.

I’ve been living on Haitian-made cookies, “Shabisco” brand. They taste like a cross between graham crackers and cardboard. Now, Haitian TV is showing a crude music video. I couldn’t make out the words to the song except for “Cleentone” and “mourir” (to die). The video is a montage of pictures from previous U.S. military interventions, looped Haitian crowd scenes, and clips of Clinton.

No invasion. Cedras has agreed to leave. The troops land tomorrow under much better conditions than we’d expected. The planes were already on their way.

## SEPTEMBER 19

Thanks to the ambiguity of the political situation, I get most of the day off. No one is certain what’s going to happen as the Americans land and take control. Some think there will be violence. So far, there’s been no evidence of that. Port-au-Prince is more or less shut down. The market stalls are empty. Foot traffic is sparse. Everyone seems to be taking a



wait and see approach.

Surprisingly enough, we were able to get all the way down in front of the airport, one of the places where the troops are helicoptering in. The sky was full of choppers ferrying soldiers in from the ships off-shore. There was a crowd of Haitians, thousands of them, on one side of the street in front of the airport. The atmosphere was positively carnival. On the other side of the street, facing the crowd, were 50 or so soldiers armed to the teeth in full camouflage battle gear. All the while the helicopters kept landing. Every so often, the crowd would charge over toward the fence to see what was going on on the runways. People crawled all over each other to get a better view. The sight of dozens of helicopters flying low in formation is truly spectacular.

The vendors—sugar cane mostly—were doing land-office business. The soldiers were dug in along the airport’s perimeter fence, sometimes only feet from the crowd. It was as if they were attractions in a zoo. The Haitians would come right up to the fence and point and laugh. Meanwhile the soldiers were deadly serious, weapons ready, scanning the crowd for any threat, thinking “Beirut.”

I’ve driven by two Haitian military posts today. In both cases, men were sitting out in front, not in uniform, but armed, ready to blend in and disappear. I wonder what they must think of all this.

## SEPTEMBER 27

Our Cap-Haitien warehouse was *décbouké* (looted, liberated, literally uprooted). They even took the pallets. Some of our feeding centers have even been hit. Johan Van Bignoot, the ADRA country director, says our warehouse here in Port-au-Prince might get hit tonight.

We got a call tonight over the radio that something might be going down at the warehouse. Armed with a radio, flashlight, and mace, Van Bignoot and I drove up there to take a look. It was a bit unsettling. Do I really want to take that kind of risk for ADRA? Is it worth any danger to protect a warehouse from what is euphemistically called “popular distribution” or “auto-distribution.” During the day, Haiti is confusing and aggravating. At night it becomes menacing. I am not a paranoid person, but I cannot help getting the creeps driving down dark, narrow streets at night. You feel alone until the glare of the headlights reveals that the streets are actually crowded with people, many just standing around, acting like they’re waiting for something to happen. As very few good things happen in Haiti, that can be scary.

## OCTOBER 11

Generals Cedras and Biamby, along with the hated police chief Michel François, should be leaving Haiti soon. I've heard that there are thousands of people out cleaning up the streets for Aristide's return on Saturday. People go around crowing like roosters—the Lavalas' (Aristide's party) mascot. We are apprehensive about the weekend. In Haiti happy people are as likely to loot as angry ones. Any overabundance of emotion leads to *déchoukage*.

## OCTOBER 13

Last night our warehouse was broken into. They were professionals. They smashed a hole in the perimeter wall and the warehouse wall with an old truck axle, battering-ram style. Unfortunately for them, they bumped into a big stack of soy-fortified bulgur. They were still able to get away with 10 tons of stuff—mostly vegetable oil. They know how to go for the most valuable food. Our guards—Haitian soldiers for hire—fired on (or more likely over) the thieves with their M-1 rifle. The looters fired back. I think the guards decided to quit. Their gun jammed and they can't get a replacement or reinforcements. The U.S. has taken away the army's weapons, and the people have looted their police stations. Tonight at 1 a.m. we are supposed to get looted again. The U.S. army doesn't seem much interested in helping protect us. As one Captain Mckorcle told me, with no hint of irony, "the U.S. army isn't in the security business." And to think, just a month ago I was in Colorado worried about my brother's bike being stolen out of our garage.

## OCTOBER 14

Tonight Port-au-Prince is in the streets. The city is one gigantic, raucous party. Aristide comes back tomorrow. His picture is everywhere: hanging from cords strung between trees, painted on walls, screened on t-shirts. The last few days have seen a massive, haphazard urban beautification project. People have been cleaning the streets and dredging the gutters. The roads are lined with conch shells and rock gardens in the shape of hearts. The people have spelled out messages in fluorescent rocks to their beloved Aristide. The whole thing is gaudy and very temporary. The trees planted alongside the road are not trees that will take root—only branches that will turn brown in a matter of days. One wonders if the euphoria Haiti feels today will suffer the same

fate. But for now Haiti is in the streets getting drunk and dancing lewdly. It's a party. Parties aren't reality. That comes after the long weekend. Haiti is reveling in the moment, in the return of an exiled president who has never proven himself to be much of a statesman. Haiti is happy because something momentous is happening. It is the happening that matters now.

## OCTOBER 15

Today ranks among the strangest of my life. Overnight, the warehouse was looted once again. They were still at it when we got to the office. The looters were climbing in and out of the hole they'd knocked in the warehouse, scurrying back and forth like rodents. Our presence didn't faze them much. They would stop and look at us, then retreat back through the hole in the perimeter wall. They stood there just off our property watching us, waiting for us to turn our backs so they could resume their plundering. They weren't much frightened of us, only a bit inconvenienced by our presence. They really acted as if they were entitled to what they were stealing. A blind man pled with us to give him a sack of food because he hadn't had a chance to take anything like the others. Our workers filled in the breach with pallets and 50 kilo sacks of bulgur. The looters pushed against the makeshift barricade as those inside worked on reinforcing it. At one point our two Haitian military guards fired shots in the air (apparently they had found bullets somewhere). That scared the looters off for a minute.

The U.S. military showed up at noon and took it upon themselves to try and repossess the stolen food. They had two Humvees full of stuff they'd confiscated waiting when we got back from lunch. They then acted like it was our responsibility to go out and find our food and take it back. Two of us rode with three soldiers in a Humvee to where they'd found stolen vegetable oil not 300 yards from our compound. People were squatting in abandoned buildings. It was a pathetic scene, families living separated from one another only by sheets hung from lines stretched between the walls. The U.S. soldiers burst into the dwellings and started overturning bundles of clothing. Not surprisingly, almost every one revealed a carton of USAID vegetable oil. The Haitian-American soldier who was with us ordered the people to load the stuff into the Humvee. They did it with surprisingly little complaint. They gave us looks that said, "we'll be back for it tonight."

I went with one soldier into an unsearched building. First, he yelled for the woman inside to get

out. She did. It felt like a scene from a Vietnam war movie—searching for Vietcong weapons. The soldier started overturning mattresses and clothing piles with his M-16. He was about to flip over one mattress when I spotted a baby, a newborn lying asleep on the bed. Apparently the mother had been in such a hurry to get out that she had left it behind. I yelled at him to stop. “Good call,” he said.

The next 11 months in Haiti were not as eventful as the first month covered in my journal excerpts. The food kept moving out to the people who needed it, in spite of bandits on the roads, pirates on the seas, and roads that tore our delivery trucks apart. ADRA distributed in the neighborhood of 18,000 metric tons of U.S. Government-donated food during the year I was in Haiti. That translates to several hundred thousand people receiving food from ADRA on a regular basis.

As I read through my journal for that month, I had to resist the temptation to edit my reactions. Mostly, it was a case of “if I only knew then what I know now.” Though it took several months, I did manage to get

over the initial shock of Haiti. Over time, my perspective became more positive. I started to see that there was more to Haiti than filth, stench, heat, humidity, and indescribably mind-numbing poverty. It took me months of complaint and frustration before I began to see the beauty of Haiti—the fundamental gentleness of the people, the richness and complexity of Haitian culture. In reality, Haiti was not the violent, intimidating place I had been led to expect by too many zombie movies and news reports about machete-wielding mobs. The crowds milling about on the streets of Port-au-Prince at night were socializing and bartering with street vendors, not waiting to burn and loot. Voodoo was far less about zombies and sticking pins into dolls and far more about people trying to make sense of depressing realities and searching for a measure of control over their lives.

Will Haiti ever pull itself out of the abyss of poverty? Is there any hope for Haiti’s future, beyond mere survival? I don’t know. What I do know is that my time in Haiti touched me deeply, and that I pray that some day a small piece of good fortune will fall Haiti’s way.