

'Last mile' humanitarian logistics on a goodwill shoestring

By Walter Glass

As category five Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu on 13 March 2015, with sustained wind gusts of 250 kph, I watched the weather reports from the distant safety of our New Zealand living room, firstly in awe of the power of Mother Nature, and then in astonishment at the sheer scale of devastation across this small neighbouring country.

In the wake of Pam, 75,000 people of Vanuatu were left homeless, 95% of crops were destroyed, and the country was effectively flattened. Worst hit were the remote outer islands that were totally cut off and left with inadequate life support – no water, no food, no shelter, no shade – for the poorest people in one of the world's poorest nations.

When a humanitarian disaster of this magnitude and devastation occurs, natural or otherwise, there is an unusual determination to assist, no matter how small or large our individual contributions might be. This resolve is reinforced when the disaster is close to one's own backyard, as was the case for Vanuatu, hence the significant initial New Zealand and Australian aid and military uplift preparations and responses. The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) of the Vanuatu government was also well aware of the impending disaster, and other parties such as Red Cross, the UN and Aus-Aid also worked on their respective planned responses, mainly via Port Vila.



Photo by frankandpeggyphotography.com

'Last mile' humanitarian logistics – if goods cannot be moved by helicopter, access for the last mile is most likely to be on foot

Disaster relief via superyachts

Amongst these parties was a private donor consortium under Samaritan's Purse, a reasonably large US faith-based non-government organisation (NGO) that was given the demanding role of servicing the outer Vanuatu islands with water, shelter and medical services. This group of parties included LIFT Non-Profit Logistics, a disaster relief NGO logistics provider founded by Michael Rettig and based in Atlanta, USA; YachtAid Global (YAG), another US-based NGO founded by Captain Mark Drewelow, which coordinates the delivery of donated educational, medical and clothing supplies to remote communities via a mega-

yacht fleet it manages; and Kalera Yachting Services (KYS), a local Vanuatu firm owned by ex-pat Kiwis Sam and Jess Bell.

YAG found New Zealand to be an excellent logistics centre of gravity for its requirements, and called upon two of its fleet to respond: *M/Y Dragonfly* and *M/Y Umbra*. The 73.3 m *Dragonfly* was the first to respond to a general request for assistance put out by YAG. *Dragonfly's* owner had generously authorised his captain and crew to load medical supplies and other aid items onboard in New Zealand following Cyclone Pam. *Dragonfly* further welcomed aboard medical personnel and search-and-rescue teams, whose tasks included heading to the outer islands of

Vanuatu to assess the situation. The 50.6 m *M/Y Umbra* was called upon to act as a support vessel, and one of its first tasks was to organise much-needed supplies of water. While berthed in Auckland, a factory produced several thousand 10-litre water containers that were loaded aboard the *Umbra* prior to her departure from New Zealand.

En route to the islands, *Umbra* made freshwater while underway, filling the containers, and upon arrival in Aneityum, Vanuatu, immediately delivered the water to the remote villages on multiple islands via helicopter. The *Umbra* was invaluable with its support vessel configuration and capabilities.

'Last mile' humanitarian logistics

Not long after the Vanuatu aid response began, I was contacted by Steve Keats of Kestrel Liner Agencies in Florida. My company, Corporate Logistics, had worked with Kestrel back in 2007 and 2008 when I was asked to fix some significant logistics problems with the delivery of stadium seating to all the venues for the ICC (International Cricket Council) World Cup across six West Indian countries. Major changes in strategy saved the day and the ICC was exceedingly happy.

Steve Keats explained that he now gives time to assist his colleague, Michael Rettig of LIFT, and was working with the well-respected

Dragonfly – Vanuatu Disaster Relief 2015



M/Y Dragonfly was dispatched to Vanuatu to provide disaster relief after Cyclone Pam struck the remote islands on 13 March 2015. A video, which shows the work that the vessel and her crew performed and highlights the possible use of resources onboard yachts in such disaster zones, can be watched at www.youtube.com/watch?v=os5gfk315Qo&feature=youtu.be

The 73.3 m *Dragonfly* was the first to respond to a general request for assistance put out by YachtAid Global

Samaritan's Purse. They needed a New Zealand 'contact' to help get some roof-shelter product to Vanuatu urgently. Could I help? My answer was naturally 'yes' inasmuch as I could achieve.

In a call to Michael Rettig, he explained how LIFT was working with YAG in order to get water, food and medical support to the outer islands.

We coined the term and concept of 'last mile humanitarian logistics' during the project to cover the inherent problems in dealing with remote disasters, especially on islands, where access is very limited and the underpinning infrastructure is such that the availability of land-based equipment is unlikely.

Consequently, if goods cannot be moved by helicopter, access for the last mile is most likely to be on foot. This severely constrains the dimensions and weight of the goods to those which one person can comfortably carry in each trip, and in workable volumes that can be managed by the people given the circumstances.

For example, we figured that one person could manage one hammer, one shovel, one roll of roofing material, one bag of rice, and one 5-litre bottle of water.

Transportation links

Captain Mark Drewelow was in charge of coordinating efforts with *Dragonfly* and *Umbra*. Fortunately, Mark was in New Zealand, so I took the opportunity to meet with him before he returned to San Diego and was impressed with his pragmatic approach and genuine determination to help those in need.

I then contacted Mark Rayner of Ardex New Zealand at their Christchurch headquarters and found they had donated a 40 ft container of Butynol, a butyl rubber membrane used here in New Zealand for roofing and waterproofing, to Samaritan's Purse, but needed to get transport sorted to Vanuatu. Butynol is far superior to plastic sheeting and ideal for the outer island housing rebuild.

As a 'last mile' option, this product was perfect as it could easily be carried by an individual in its rolled form. It was also durable, had a long life if installed correctly, and could be used for a myriad of applications.

The main problem was transporting the Butynol from Christchurch across Cook Strait to Auckland or Tauranga for export, then to Vanuatu, then to the remote outer islands, without incurring exorbi-



Photo courtesy of Captain Mike Gregory

Disaster relief aid landed by M/Y Dragonfly, one of a mega-yacht fleet coordinated by YachtAid Global (YAG) which delivers donations to remote communities

tant freight costs which would make the project non-workable. I reached out far and wide to my logistics contacts network for assistance, and I was astonished and humbled by the offers of assistance – proof that the logistics sector has a big heart.

This was also a 'virtual' contact network – ultimately, there were dozens of people working in several countries, each giving freely of their time, organisational skills and physical resources, yet each only saw the names of the few people with whom they were in direct contact.

Interestingly, I physically met with only two people during the course of this entire project, and sadly would walk past nearly all of these great people in the street and not know them, such is the 'below the radar' nature of logistics.

Donators of transport

Ardex's transport provider, Toll, donated the cost of trucking from Christchurch to the North Island port of export. This was a significant effort as there were a few changes to shipping schedules, but the product sailed on time.

The generosity of the team at Swire Shipping in New Zealand and Australia was also staggering. Swire covered all FEU (40 ft container) costs free of charge (FOC) and the company has since provided further assistance to the aid effort with over

80 TEUs (20 ft containers) shipped as either FOC or at concessional freight rates. A truly generous corporate response!

I am especially grateful to Brodie Stevens, Tony Spelman, Jan-Hendrik Hintz, Natasha Ball and the other Swire staff involved. Swire came to the party on day one. I got a call from Jan-Hendrik who simply said, "Brodie told me to call you. What do you need?" I explained the situation and he promptly delivered.

A huge thank you

I've since heard from the team at Samaritan's Purse and Sam Bell that some of the rolls of Butynol

are being used to re-roof schools and a church in the Shepherd Islands between the islands of Epi and Éfaté in Vanuatu. Other rolls were transferred to the island of Tanna where they are now being used in the construction of 220 single-family homes.

I consider this to have been a very worthwhile project. Every participant stretched each dollar of goodwill so as to create two, and used their collective commercial logistics savvy, donor kindness and related expertise to do a massive job while also proving the 'last mile humanitarian logistics' concept. Thank you all.

Toll donated transport from Christchurch to Auckland for Vanuatu-bound Ardex Butynol - (L-R) David Hopping and David Shepherd of Ardex, Jordon Williamson of Toll, and Ardex's Mark Rayner



Walter Glass is the director of Corporate Logistics, a specialist logistics and market research consultancy company based in Palmerston North; to learn more about the work of the parties mentioned in this article, visit www.corplogistics.co.nz, www.samaritanspurse.org, www.gotlift.org, www.kysvanuatu.com and www.frankandpeggy.com