

Joint effort gets relief flying

Christmas gifts — some 450,000 pounds of them, took to the skies over Christmas, headed for famine-ravaged Ethiopia.

Five DC-8 73 aircraft were fitted at cost to the Canadian Emergency Coordinator, African Relief. They left Mirabel and Halifax airports fully loaded, each with some 90,000 pounds of blankets, food and medical supplies.

The airlift represents the largest of its kind for Air Canada. Coordinating such a massive project put demands on many departments including flight operations, maintenance, crew scheduling, not to mention cargo employees both in Canada and overseas.

"From a planning point of view, this was a very nerve-racking operation," admits Bruce MacCoubrey, Director, Cargo Service, Montreal. "We virtually committed our whole cargo fleet, and any mishap would have severely disrupted our entire operations."

MacCoubrey and his team

took care of the many logistical aspects of the airlift. Along with government authorization, they also had to obtain rights for the aircraft to fly over war zones. As well, they had to coordinate the refueling and maintenance of the planes at their destination.

Due to the 17-hour flying time to Ethiopia, a stop was made in Brussels for re-fueling and crew rest. In total, each plane was out of regular service for approximately 40 hours.

Another planning consideration was crew allotment. A total of eight out of 38 cargo crews were assigned to the airlift. All were willing to give up their Christmas vacation to take part in the project.

Claude Constantineau, Sales Management and Development Director, Cargo, was involved in organizing the delivery of goods to Mirabel. A CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) representative acted as liaison on behalf of some eight relief organizations, including: World Vision Canada, Oxfam

Canada and Cardinal Leger and Ethiopia Airlift Group.

Jean-Guy Roberge, Cargo Terminal Services Manager, Mirabel, oversaw the assembling of goods onto pallets — 90 in total. Such an undertaking took more than a week.

"But it was thanks to all the employees who loaded the pallets and worked behind the scenes that the aircraft left on time," says Roberge.

"Maintenance went out of its way to accommodate the demands of the cargo operation," adds MacCoubrey. "Despite the pressures of servicing the regular scheduled flights, they were willing to disrupt their work plan to ensure that the DC-8 fleet was in tip-top shape."

London employees were also involved. Two cargo agents and one mechanic were sent to Ethiopia to handle the unloading of goods and to perform a maintenance check.

Although Mirabel handled the majority of the goods destined for Ethiopia, Halifax assembled nine pallets for the flight that departed on December 24.

Bernie Miller, recently-appointed Vice President, Cargo was on hand to thank all those who had contributed to Nova Scotia's share of the emergency-supplies.

"It was one of those moments when I felt extremely proud to be part of the Air Canada team," said Miller. "Participating in such a worthwhile endeavour made this Christmas a very special one for me, as I am sure it did for many other employees."



Cargo Station Attendant Jean Brunelle didn't have to worry which side was up. The box was filled with blankets.



Muscle power was required to load the pallets onto the aircraft. Shoving, from the left, are Cargo Station Attendants Jacques Messier, Jean Brunelle, Pierre Carriere and Jean-Pierre Roy.



Food supplies included hundreds of pounds of high-protein cereal.



On hand at the Halifax reception for the Ethiopia-bound DC-8 (dubbed 'Blitzen') are, from the left: Bernie Miller, Vice President, Cargo; Mayor Ror Wallace and Reverend Russel Hatton.



The flight crew on the December 24 departure were, from the left: Captain Max Stefansson, Second Officer Dave Inch, and First Officer Wayne Birkett.



Cargo flight A092, loaded and ready to set out for Addis Ababa.