

TIME MAGAZINE – “KENTUCKY AIR CONTROLLER AMONG AMERICA'S "MOST INFLUENTIAL" FOR HAITI AIRPORT WORK” by Chris Kenning -
Courier-Journal On-Line Edition, Louisville, Kentucky

May 6, 2010 – Hurlburt Field, Florida - Thirty hours after a devastating earthquake killed more than 200,000 people and brought Haiti to a standstill, Master Sgt. Antonio Travis unfolded chairs and a card table along the runway of Port-au-Prince’s battered airport and proceeded to direct the dozens of circling planes waiting to land.

With the control tower mangled, and no electricity or computer, Travis pulled out a hand-held radio and got to work. Within 20 minutes, he and his team of combat air-traffic controllers were landing humanitarian and military relief flights.

And that was only the beginning.



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Chief Travis is shown here with part of his Toussaint L'Ouverture International airfield team. US Air Force Photo

For 12 days, Travis’ airfield team ran the jam-packed Toussaint L'Ouverture International Airport 24 hours a day, reducing an initial four-hour hold time for incoming planes to less than 15 minutes by the third day — and guiding in millions of pounds of life-saving supplies of food, water and medicine.

“Within five minutes of getting on the radio, I had 43 aircraft wanting to land on a ramp designed for 10 planes,” said Travis, who is from Nelson County, Ky. “It was very daunting.”

The Kentucky Air Force air-traffic controller’s efforts have earned him a place on Time Magazine’s 100 most influential people of 2010 list. This week, Travis, 41, attended a New York gala to celebrate with the thinkers, artists, entertainers and leaders, including former President Bill Clinton, selected by the magazine for their impact on the world.

“His dedication and service — and those of his fellow men and women in the armed

services — represent the best of humanity,” according to a Time Magazine citation written by Chesley Sullenberger, the pilot who safely landed a damaged passenger plane in the Hudson River in 2009.

It’s not the attention Travis is accustomed to receiving.

“It’s very flattering,” said Travis, who grew up in Cox’s Creek, near Bardstown, and now owns a small farm in southern Nelson County. “When you do something like this, and go home knowing you did something to help, it’s a good feeling.”

A former Marine and an 18-year veteran Air Force combat controller, Travis is the chief enlisted manager of the Air Force Special Operations Center at Hurlburt Field, Fla.

He’s a member of the Air Force's 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, which is part of the Air Force equivalent of the Navy SEALs or the Army's Delta Force. Travis has conducted operations around the globe — including Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa’s Ivory Coast, South America and Kosovo.

While he’s worked in wars and conflicts, he’s also helped after Hurricane Katrina, coordinating flights and overseeing search-and-rescue teams that plucking flooded residents from rooftops in New Orleans.

“It sounds like an exaggeration, but any place something big has happened in the last 15 years, pretty much I was there,” he said.

After the Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti, he was among the first U.S. soldiers to set up at the airport. At that time, there were still bodies in the streets, and no one was around to run the airport, he said. The control tower was so damaged it was deemed to dangerous to use.

Travis’ team included about 29 personnel from the 23rd and 21st and 123rd special tactics squadrons, the latter based in Louisville as part of the Kentucky National Guard. He also headed up a search-and-rescue group, which conducted 35 rescues in the rubble. “There was a lot of destruction, a lot of death,” he said. “The first 4-5 days were a life-altering event.”

His biggest task was coordinating up to 175 fixed-wing aircraft landings a day in an airport that normally saw only 25, not to mention a constant flow of helicopters. To complicate matters, there initially was only one forklift at the airport to unload planes coming as far as Russia and Brazil.

“Everyone that had an aircraft was trying to get into Port-au-Prince, but we weren’t able to accommodate everyone,” he said. “I had crews running 12-hour traffic-control shifts, but for the first 3-4 days, with the exception of a power nap here or there, I didn’t get much sleep.”

With cell towers down and electricity spotty, he had to use his Blackberry at times to contact FAA officials in Miami. Still, backups were common. And a delay in unloading one plane could back up planes for hours.

At one point, the controllers were criticized by aid groups who charged they were giving U.S. military aircraft priority.

“The truth of the matter was, it was a first-come, first-serve basis, unless the Haitian government said something was a priority,” he said. “But we didn’t even have the right to prioritize.”

For those outside Port-au-Prince, Travis’ team set up four drop zones to fly in 150,000 bottles of water and 75,000 packaged meals to people who had no other means of survival.

By Jan. 25, his team was able to hand operations over to Air Force air traffic controllers with a portable control tower. After helping coordinate delivery of badly needed humanitarian aid, Travis returned to the United States on Jan. 27.

Travis said he never expected to be named to the list, which he said likely came about after Time Magazine reporter interviewed him in Haiti. While “flattering,” he said, “what we did was possible only because of the people who served with me.”