

Former paramedic spending holidays helping in Haiti

By Christina Commisso
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

This Christmas will be like none other for John Saunders.

The former paramedic is swapping a snowy December landscape for the tent cities of devastated and diseased Port-au-Prince, as he spends the month in Haiti aiding victims of the cholera outbreak.

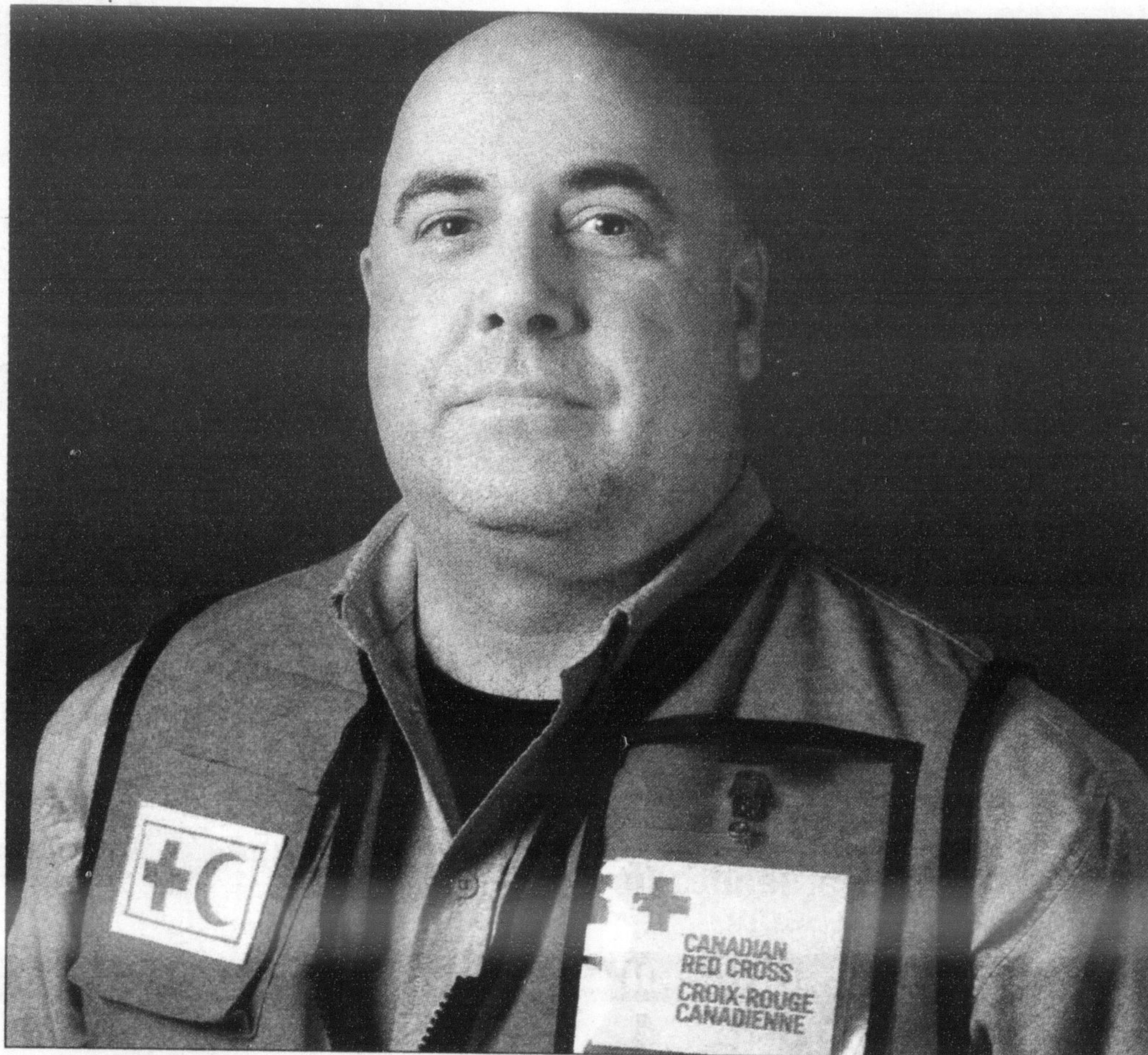
Asked if he'll miss celebrating the holidays with loved ones, the Miltonian said: "If nothing else, maybe this is my family's gift to Haiti. That's a nice and supportive way of looking at it."

Saunders is one of two Ontarians who last week deployed to the Canadian Red Cross's new field hospital in Haiti's capital. "Think M.A.S.H episode, but without the military," he said, describing the mobile medical unit.

Saunders is no stranger to disasters. Following 9/11 he travelled to New York and assisted emergency teams in remains recovery. Four years later he once again found himself on the front line, this time assisting the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

In his first mission with the Red Cross, the 45-year-old will spend his days overseeing operations at the hospital, which includes about 40 beds.

Since October, about 1,800 Haitians have died of cholera. Caused by unsanitary living conditions – mainly fecal to oral transmission – the disease causes severe vomiting and diarrhea, which if not treated leads to dehydration and eventually death.



FAMILY'S GIFT: John Saunders is in Haiti aiding victims of the cholera outbreak over the holiday season. He calls it his family's gift to the devastated country.

The local Lion's Club member knows he's embarking on "a complex emergency."

"Part of the challenge is that there's so lit-

tle area to build transitional homes. So many people are opting to have space to live rather than space to build." Saunders explained the country's post-quake infrastructure means little separation between living quarters and washroom facilities.

"Public education is absolutely essential," he said. Part of that education is the importance of separate washroom facilities, hand-washing stations, and the proper disinfection of buckets that might come in contact with human waste before it is used to carry drinking water.

The cholera outbreak is the second in a string of disasters that have the impoverished Caribbean nation in less than a year. January's 7.0-magnitude earthquake killed 230,000, injured 300,000 and left one million homeless. October's cholera outbreak was followed by Hurricane Tomas in early November, which brought flooding to the quake-ruined country.

"As any one would be after living in transitional housing for almost a year, the level of frustration, basically wanting to see things happen faster, is there," said Saunders. "We recognize that people have suffered extreme loss, in some cases twice. We recognize that some people will be numb, some will be angry and some will be trying to do everything they can to help."

Saunders said following the devastating earthquake, the Red Cross received an outpouring of support from the Haitian community. Now that he's on the Red Cross's roster, the next time disaster strikes, Saunders will be given the opportunity to again help overseas.

In the meantime, the Milton resident said he hopes to return from Haiti with an eyewitness account of Canadians' donations at work.

"Everything the Canadian Red Cross does is because of the generosity of Canada, whether it be the outpouring of support we saw at the beginning of the year or the continued support we receive."

Saunders said every single large-scale disaster he's been a part of has been life changing in one way or another.

"If nothing else I'll be coming back with a new-found appreciation of how good we have it in North America and a reminder that the rest of world doesn't have it as good as us so count those blessings on a regular basis."

To donate to the Red Cross, visit www.redcross.ca.

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