



Floating clinic a reality

Volunteer team assembles 12-metre river craft

Last fall it was a blueprint. This summer, it was a container full of boat parts shipping from Quebec to Gabon on Africa's west coast. Now, thanks to the hard work of CACHA volunteer assembly advisor Ron Duval and other Canadian and Gabonese team members, the floating clinic is navigating the mighty Ogooué River, bringing medical care to river and lakeside communities unreachable by road.



Presidential interest

On a compound next to the river delta in Port-Gentil, Ottawa-based Duval, a team of four Gabonese workers and the Gabonese boat pilot assembled the craft against a hard deadline.

"Within three weeks, interim president Rogombe was to inaugurate the boat in Lambaréné, 300 kilometres upstream, on Gabon's August 17th Independence Day," says Duval.

Lambaréné is the site of the famous Albert Schweitzer hospital that since 1913 has been training doctors and treating patients from all over the country. By far the fastest way from Port-Gentil to Lambaréné is by river, which is true of most other communities along the Ogooué and many throughout Gabon. Inaccessibility by road explains the excitement at the presidential level surrounding CACHA's floating clinic.

Delays

Finishing the boat for the inauguration seemed simple at the outset. But despite the high visibility of the project and the interest of the president, progress was delayed because of difficulties with the aluminum welding process.

But despite the delays, the team worked hard to ensure the boat made it to Lambaréné for the inauguration. "In this project, there was a lot of high tech for the unknowns and for the means available," says Duval. "So the best thing about it was seeing the pride of the people working on it as we brought it to completion."

Large and complex

Although pre-fabricated, the boat by its scale alone required a little bit more than an Allen key. Each of the two pontoons measures 1 meter high, 12 meters long, and weighs 220 kilos. The 9-metre side-walls are one piece, complete with aluminum framing, insulation, fibreglass covering and windows. The lower and upper decks, pontoons, staircase and guardrails had to be welded in aluminium. The whole had to be seaworthy.

Besides being seaworthy, the boat also needed to support the complex systems required by the clinic, including a surgery, dispensary and a salon that doubles as a consult room and pilot station. While the team had brought everything—cabinets, counters, furniture, solar panels, converters, electrical and plumbing systems—the inevitable hardware runs were time consuming.

The power of many

This pre-fabricated assembly proceeded without crane or pneumatic tools. The team employed

ingenuity, the lifting power of many, and battery-powered tools that Duval charged in his hotel room every night.

Emptying the shipping container, which sat a metre and a half off the ground on a flat bed trailer, required the combined muscle of the extended team borrowed from a nearby worksite. Resourceful workers devised an impromptu ramp.

The only assembly instructions were Duval's notes from tours of boat supplier U-Fab and other manufacturers. With no Internet access, Duval had to send any questions or problems to Canada via a friend he had met locally.

Dedication and ingenuity

During the assembly, Duval trained the local labourers, few of whom had ever used an electric drill or changed a battery pack.

"Although they started out with no experience, by the end of the week they were working at a rate I would defy anyone here to keep up. They all wanted to do a good job because they were both excited about completing the project and eager for the work experience."

Duval appreciated the ingenuity of the local workers, more than likely a result of having to do so much with so little. "We couldn't figure out how to bolt in a tie-down that was deep inside a C-channel rail on the bow. One fellow saw the problem, lashed two tools together and made it happen."

Welding

The aluminum welding posed a special problem. Although Duval had brought most supplies, others were still needed and hard to come by. The windy conditions in the river delta made argon welding challenging as the gas must stay around the weld until it has set. The welders ended up building a tent to protect the weld site from wind.

"The Gabonese welders were impressed with the quality of the Canadian welding in the pontoons, and wanted to prove to me that they could do just as well."

Local reaction

The people at Duval's hotel were curious about a Canadian who returned covered in dust every evening.

"They said 'You're not a fisherman but you sure come back dirty'," he recalls with a smile. "When they found out that we were building a boat to bring medical care by river, the reaction was overwhelming. They told me how much they needed it and thanked us over and over."

Experienced local river pilot Willy Remanda will be navigating the floating clinic on the Ogooué, where locals largely travel in pirogues, or wooden dugout canoes.

« Return to eNewsletter

[Unsubscribe](#) | © 2009 [Canada Africa Community Health Alliance](#).

Canada Africa Community Health Alliance (CACHA)
Suite 300, 100 Marie Curie
Ottawa ON K1N 6N5
Phone: (613) 234-9992