

# AMBULANCES TO HONDURAS

With violence flaring down south, a new charity does a little bit of good.

Alexander Cwalinski

Weekly news reports of the continued and increasing violence in Mexico, coupled with travel advisories from the US State Department, have acted as strong deterrents to would-be travelers to the Latin nation. Top travel agencies and cruise lines have followed suit by indefinitely ending their destinations at the once popular port cities of Puerto Vallarta and Mazatlan. Even major universities have begun issuing warnings to students on travel to Cancun and other seasonal vacation spots. However these warnings had little effect in stopping two teams, totaling seven people and representing five different countries, from driving two ambulances right through the heart of Mexico.

With logistical support from non-profits, UK-based Go Help and US-based Grower's First, and a donation of two ambulances from American Medical Response (AMR), the two teams began their journey on 4 October 2011 from San Diego, California to Siguatepeque, Honduras. The journey, which is being dubbed the first annual 'Mesoamerica Charity Rally', ended successfully with the hand over of the much needed ambulances to the Hospital Público Santa Teresa del Municipio de Comayagua and the women's clinic Centro de Salud "Mario Boquín" de Siguatepeque.

"It's for the children," said Arizona native and Baylor University Graduate, Murray Johnson. "At the end of the trip, though we walk away with amazing adventures, stories and friendships, the bottom line comes down to the fact that we are able to follow up our passions for travel with an incredible gift to a very worthy cause."

The idea for this charity rally came to Johnson in 2009, following the completion of his first Go Help organized charity rally, the 'Roof of the World Rally'. The annual driving event begins in London and took Johnson's team over the Pamir Highway, the second highest highway in the world, to the Central Asian nation of Tajikistan. After five weeks of near death experiences with two other teammates in an ill-equipped station wagon, Johnson arrived at the finish line. There he met up with Go Help trustee, Ryan Walker, an automotive and aeronautical engineer currently working on his PhD in Integrated Vehicle Health Management at Cranfield University. Two years later, both found themselves speaking broken Spanish at police checkpoints and shady border crossings, while driving ambulances adorned with California license plates and colorful logos.

"We should not have crossed into Mexico at midnight," said Johnson, recalling the trip's initial setbacks, "but we had to catch up with the other team because they were three days ahead of us." The same could be said for their crossings into Guatemala and Honduras. "Our best laid plans had to be continually altered as the success of the journey relied on our constant adaptations to the changing situations," explained Johnson.

"Both ambulances had well over three hundred thousand miles when we got them," said Walker, whose ambulance suffered a power steering failure in Oaxaca, Mexico. "Apparently, when we drove through the mountains, we drove right through a cartel stronghold on our way to meet



with the other team because the police were shocked that we had come out alive after telling them where we came from.”

Other than the power steering and an attempted break-in, the aptly named teams’ ambulances ‘Imix’ and ‘Chupacabra’ encountered fewer than expected mechanical problems. A missing passport, a hurricane, multiple mudslides, and a washed out bridge at the Guatemalan-Honduran border are a few of the many mishaps that delayed the arrival to the destination by a week.

At key areas along the drive, many locals and officials had consistently warned the teams to never stop for anyone seeking help, especially at night. This was apparent when the team approached a small town at 10pm and encountered a man lying down in the middle of the road next to his small motorcycle. Johnson hurried around him without stopping, and immediately after, a vehicle appeared from behind bushes to attempt to stop them and followed them to the other end of town while flashing its high-beams, trying to persuade the team to pull over.

The team sped through the town over large potholes, around garbage, and past broken down vehicles. “They were looking for victims,” said Johnson, recalling the change from when they had driven the same road only hours before. Though with a lawyer-turned-amateur boxer, a former Force Reconnaissance Marine, three fluent Spanish speakers, and some experienced adventure travelers, the teams were more than ready for most any situation.

Although the rally took three weeks to complete and all expenses came out of volunteers’ pockets, the journey was well worth it according to Walker, who said, “The ambulances will serve an area with a population size of nearly 400,000. So I’m happy to alleviate the need a bit, but they’re still very short on medical supplies and equipment.”

The adventurers were greeted at the finish line with receptions at both of the hospitals. National media outlets attended as officials from the Honduran government, hospital administration, as well as local civic and business leaders attended the ceremonies as the keys were officially handed over to the hospital staff.

“The trip was a huge success and the gratitude of the Honduran people was shown by the hospitality they showed us,” said Johnson, about the reception and media attention surrounding the handover of the ambulances to the hospitals.

“It completely made up for our failed original attempt.”

In the August prior to the rally, Johnson and three other teammates, including former Roof of the World Charity Rally teammate William Lowry, made a failed first attempt to drive one ambulance to Honduras, but Mexican authorities denied passage beyond Sonora, Mexico. Lowry, who currently studies at University of Sussex and could not participate in the second and successful attempt, said of the initial trip, “Despite our failure, it actually was a lot of fun. We couldn’t secure a permit for the ambulance because the officials did not know if they could allow us entry, so instead we stayed in Puerto Peñasco for a few days in the Mexican sun enjoying the local food, drinks and culture.”

The rally’s overall success was due in part to assistance from Go Help, a non-profit whose mission is to improve the lives of people in developing nations through employment, education and healthcare initiatives. Go Help’s fundraising arm operates other adventures through the event platform Charity Rallies, which the Mesoamerica Charity Rally will now fall under.

Grower’s First, a non-profit committed to assisting agricultural communities in developing nations through training, educating and collaborating with locals, was another essential factor in the rally’s success.

“They put us in contact with the hospitals of greatest need in Honduras,” said Johnson, of Grower’s First. “I was blown away by how professional and helpful they were and by the scope and effectiveness of their projects.”

Stuart Jameson, a former singer and actor, said of his first charity rally, “Over those three weeks I’ve made incredible friendships and witnessed tremendous hospitality from the locals. I’m really looking forward to next year’s rally.”

For next year, the two teams are planning to add eight teams to their roster. This addition would mean ten total vehicles will be driven from San Diego and donated to communities in Central America.

“We are going, whether they’re ambulances, buses or regular cars. Right now, we are looking for additional adventurer volunteers and donations of services and items to make next year’s rally a huge success,” said Johnson.

## Alexander Cwalinski

The author is a former Force Reconnaissance Marine, with deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan. He has devoted much of his time in non-profit and charitable work. He is currently studying journalism in the State of New York.

To find out more about the Mesoamerica Charity Rally and the other Go Help rallies, please visit: [www.charityrallies.org](http://www.charityrallies.org).