



Marsh Harbour, Abaco, was one of the hardest-hit areas in the Bahamas. Dorian left 1.5 billion pounds of debris behind. Little has changed since the hurricane.

Lifeline of the Islands

Boaters, industry associations and boatbuilders all became first responders in the days — and weeks — after Dorian devastated the northern Bahamas

When Hurricane Dorian leveled entire towns on Grand Bahama, Abaco and the northern out islands Sept. 1, South Florida's boating communities, along with many industry groups, were eager to respond. But the Category 5 storm, with 185-mph winds and gusts exceeding 200 mph, dumped up to 20 inches of rain and sat over the islands for 40 hours. Dorian then took two days to move up the Florida coast, forcing hundreds of good-Samaritan boaters to delay relief efforts.

As private flotillas organized post-storm, reports came in that the Coast Guard was turning away small boats, fearing they might end up stranded and have to be rescued. Sean Quinn, his son Brandon and a friend were determined to get to Walker's Cay — one of the northernmost islands — despite rumors of debris fields and piracy. Quinn, who had been running to and from Walker's Cay from Palm Beach for nearly 35 years, loaded the cockpit of his Jupiter 31 center console, *Tuff Cookie*, with 3,500 pounds of food, water, fuel and medical supplies.

"Marsh Harbour and Hopetown were devastated, so I knew there was nothing I could do there," Quinn says. "But I knew everyone on Walker's Cay. We reached them by sat-phone and found 165 were still on the island. Everyone was alive, but water and food were going fast. We felt like we had to go."

On the morning of Oct. 5, Quinn stopped loading *Tuff Cookie* when the "bilge pumps kicked on"; hours later, it was the first American boat to make it to Walker's Cay. "We unloaded the supplies and looked around the island," he says. "About 90 percent of the roofs were gone, but there were no serious medical issues. We didn't feel like we had to evacuate anyone."



Regal president Duane Kuck (right) has been involved in relief efforts for several months after seeing the damage firsthand in the days following the storm.



Damage remained widespread on the outer islands months after the storm. Relief workers including Gary DeSanctis (center, left) volunteered in Freeport, and others (right) donated equipment to Hopetown to assist with reconstruction.



The three returned home and arranged for a trip back Oct. 8 with another load. In the meantime, Quinn was contacted by hundreds of other boaters on social media who read about his trip. The next day, he says, an “onslaught of boats” loaded with supplies left Palm Beach in convoys. Most focused on the smaller outlying islands where help might take longer to arrive.

Southeast Florida Navy

With the Bahamian government overwhelmed and non-governmental organizations focusing attention on the larger islands, private boats became the link between Florida and the smaller islands.

“You’ve heard of the Cajun Navy? This was more like the Southeast Florida Navy,” Quinn says. “A helicopter can carry half as much weight as a boat, and a small airplane [can carry] a few hundred pounds. We were the lifeline of the islands during those first few weeks.”

Donation stations launched by churches and private

groups sprang up across Florida, as news broadcasts showed images of destroyed communities with thousands of islanders missing. It was a humanitarian crisis closer to home than Haiti or Puerto Rico for thousands of Floridians who have family or have spent time in the islands.

Billionaire Carl Allen pressed his superyacht, *Gigi*, into service, running relief missions between South Florida and Walker’s Cay. His Go Fund Me account raised \$200,000 during the first week. Allen vowed to match contributions to \$500,000. The 240-foot motoryacht *Laurel* was used to transport construction goods and food from Florida, rescuing 60 abandoned dogs in Marsh Harbour on its return trip.

Boaters from outside of Florida also lined up to help. Gary DeSanctis, president of Active Interest Media’s Marine Group, which publishes several boating magazines, gathered his editors after the storm to see if they could organize a flotilla. A volunteer firefighter in New York’s Westchester County, DeSanctis felt the call to get to the Bahamas.

The Marine Group’s South Florida contacts advised caution, warning about unnavigable channels and no dockage. The group threw its efforts behind Hope 4 Hopetown, which raised \$300,000 in less than a week (and was up to \$458,885 at press time) for rebuilding the Abacos.

DeSanctis also was a member of Sheep Dog Impact Assistance, a group of military veterans and first-responders who perform search-and-rescue missions after natural disasters. The group of 12 — Marine Corps, Air Force and Army veterans, plus another firefighter — assembled in Miami 10 days after the storm, initially expecting to help in Florida. But when the storm hit the Bahamas and missed Florida, they changed plans.

With sleeping bags, tools, and food and water for a week, the group was prepared to sleep on the deck of a barge. Instead, they boarded a cruise ship transporting hundreds of other relief workers. Joining them were firefighters, doctors and nurses, animal rescuers and grief counselors. When the group reached Freeport, the evacuation had been finished for nearly a week. Neighborhoods were mostly abandoned, looking like war zones — collapsed houses, fetid water and the stench of raw sewage.

The Sheep Dogs made contact with a Baptist church, and for the next few days they cleaned out the church and put temporary roofs on 25 houses in the neighborhood. They also cleared out three homes of elderly, handicapped people near the church. That involved removing furniture and clothing, and cutting away walls and floors to salvage the structure. Located on higher ground, the neighborhood had been hit by 3-foot floodwaters, making some homes salvageable. Other parts of the island, where water as deep as 20 feet flooded houses and businesses, were in ruins. There was no electricity.

“Despite all of that, the people were amazing,” DeSanctis says. “Here we were, taking everything they owned and throwing it out on the street. Their gratitude for us being there was beyond anything I’d ever experienced.”

Marine Industry Involvement

Dorian’s onslaught was even more extreme in other parts of Grand Bahama. Dr. Alison Thompson, founder of Third Wave Volunteers, brought a group over right after Dorian hit. They started in Freeport and made their way east to High Rock, where much of the destruction had occurred. “We had to cut through miles of electrical wires and chainsaw through trees to just to get through,” Thompson says. “It was like a huge bomb exploded. Everything was just gone.”

The group passed out solar lamps and joined with churches in Freeport to distribute food. In marinas, they siphoned gas from boats and used it to get vehicles running. They eventually made it to Sweetings Cay, where the Coast Guard had dropped off supplies for the remaining locals.

Backed financially by the National Marine Manufacturers Association and other industry groups, Third Wave plans to stay in the Bahamas for the foreseeable future, bringing in volunteers with different skill sets to help in the recovery. Thompson, who spearheaded efforts in the 2004 tsunami

in Indonesia and 2010 earthquake in Haiti, says the group will remain until the islands recover. Its Bahamas Strong relief effort had funded the transport of 5,000 tons of supplies to Freeport by late September. “We love the Bahamas and want to bring it back,” Thompson says. “There’s always hope, but it’s just not there right now.”

With Dorian out of the daily news cycle, other groups plan to be involved for the long haul. Regal Boats CEO Duane Kuck, whose wife, Cindy, has family ties to the Abacos, flew to the Bahamas before Dorian had passed up the Florida coast. He had to get special permission from flight controllers in Orlando.

“We did helicopter operations coming out of Nassau and landed on Elbow Cay, Man-O-War, Green Turtle Cay, Treasure Cay and Marsh Harbour,” Kuck says. “The destruction was exactly what you’d expect with a Cat 5 storm. It took down everything in its path.”

The Kucks’ chartered helicopter evacuated more than 20 people during its first day and continued to fly rescue missions for the rest of the week. Weeks later, Kuck was still involved in relief efforts, but from his base in Orlando.

“Where I’ve been able to help most is here,” he says, adding that he and Cindy threw themselves into relief efforts for two weeks following his visit to the Bahamas. Cindy’s father grew up on Abaco, and her first cousin lost a marina and waterfront restaurant in Marsh Harbour to the storm.

“You hear about disasters, but unless you’re thrust into the middle of it, you don’t understand how many moving parts there are,” Kuck says. “Everything’s so urgent — you try to problem-solve as you go along.”

Establishing a 501 (c)(3) called First Orlando Foundation for donations (firstorlandofoundation.com), the



The hardest-hit areas were uninhabitable and abandoned after the storm.

Kucks and their “loose band of brothers and sisters who care,” as Kuck calls them, also started the Love Abaco group (loveabaco.org). They first coordinated evacuation flights and air-dropped food and supplies. The group then connected with other volunteers — homegrown outfits such as theirs, but also international groups, including Samaritans Purse and Medicorps. Missionary Flights International had DC3 cargo planes that could transport large amounts of supplies. “They helped us with that, and we helped them with the helicopters to make sure their medical teams got back and forth,” Kuck says.

First Orlando Foundation also established the Abaco Forever warehouse in Ocoee, Fla., to store donated supplies. After two weeks, the effort transitioned from rescue to relief. First Orlando still sent food and medical supplies, but it began to focus on construction supplies by week three.

“Transporting goods by aircraft is not inexpensive, but

we’ve continued to do that,” Kuck said nearly four weeks into the effort. “We want to make sure the goods get where they’re needed. We also still need to get people back and forth.”

The group partnered with Water Mission to provide a helicopter to move a 30,000-gallon-a-day clean-water machine to Abaco and smaller filtration systems to other islands. It also has carried generators to the islands. Donations of generators made sense for turning the lights back on, but accessing and paying for fuel presents a dilemma for islanders. The Kucks are involved in a group called Fuel Relief Fund for those issues.

Finding fuel also has been a problem for boaters trying to move supplies to the smaller out islands. “Boats can get in and out of Grand Bahama,” says Paul Berube, owner of the Boater’s Exchange, a dealership in Rockledge, Fla. “But it gets tough when you try to get to the Abacos.”

Berube and the dealership’s co-owner, Jerry Butz, im-

mediately threw themselves into the relief efforts. They took over a 501(c)(3) charity called Project Light of Brevard and started fundraising and collecting supplies. The dealership solicited help wherever it could, including participants of its Bahamas and Back Tournament. The participants donated about \$35,000 and plan to transport building supplies on their boats, forming a

work party for Green Turtle Key.

Project Light of Brevard also has received 50,000 pounds of donated items. “One church donated 50,000 disaster-relief meals, along with pallets of water,” Berube says.

Years to Rebuild

Jerry Gilpin, a broker at Denison Yachting in Fort Lauderdale, grew up on Walker’s

Cay. After Hurricane Dorian, Gilpin organized the rescue of friends on nearby Guana Cay but then became active in relief efforts. His family owns two warehouses in Stuart, Fla., and he has been behind the transport of 100 pallets to the Bahamas.

Like Kuck, Gilpin says it was initially about “improvising” relief efforts, but now he has a network on smaller islands sending

requests for specific items. Instead of private boats and aircraft, barges are transporting construction goods to the islands. “A core group on each island is trying to get infrastructure up and running,” he says. “They’re hampered by no electricity and little man power because so many people evacuated. It’ll take years to get things back to normal.”

Five weeks into it, Gilpin had yet to return to his job as a yacht broker. He has become one of the “go-to guys” in South Florida for supplies. “People like me, who know a lot of people in this effort, are getting the calls,” he says. “They tell each other, ‘Call Jerry, he can get it there.’ There are a half-dozen of us down here that are moving the big assets.”

Gilpin’s boss at Denison Yachting, Bob Denison, also has been behind the relief effort from the beginning. Denison organized a GoFundMe page and funneled clients’ offers to help into donations for the fundraiser.



This Freeport church was stripped to the studs to save it from rotting. Flood levels were up 20 feet on some parts of the island.

“South Florida is the hub for the recovery efforts,” Denison said six weeks after the storm. “A bunch of industry people have been making big sacrifices with their money and time. Many companies have pushed their differences aside and are working together.”

Denison cited Atlantic Yacht and Ship, HMY, MarineMax and Bradford Marine as leaders in the effort. In the early days of the recovery, NMMA, Maverick Boat Group and Contender Boats each donated \$10,000. The Marine Industries Association of South Florida joined an effort called Mission of Hope to fund a relief ship. Brunswick Corp. donated \$50,000 to the American Red Cross. Volvo Penta of the Americas also donated \$50,000, a Volvo generator and construction equipment, for a total value of \$100,000.

“That will help with cleanup and reconstruction support in the Bahamas,” says Ron Huibers, president and CEO of Volvo Penta of the Americas. “Duane Kuck shared with us that the island nation will be in need for a long time to come.”

Kuck plans to be involved for the foreseeable future. “I’ve been super-impressed with the response from so many people stepping up to help,” he says. “We’re in it for the long haul. The situation is obviously different between the outer islands and metropolitan areas. We’re ready to help fill in the blanks as needed.”

The Sheep Dog Impact Assistance crew planned to head back to Freeport this month for another stint. “We’re looking at 10 days, with twice the volunteers,” says retired Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Lance Nutt, the Sheep Dog founder. “We’ll be back in that same community, focusing on repairing more homes. The idea is to help the people get back on their feet so they can recover their lives.” ■