

**The Air Force sprang into action to support the storm-ravaged Philippines after the devastating Typhoon Haiyan.**

# OPERATION DAMIAYAN

By Carlo Muñoz

**A**IRFORCE units based in the Asia-Pacific region played an integral but overlooked role spearheading initial rescue and relief missions into the Philippines, mere days after the worst typhoon in the country's history crashed onto its shores.

Less than 24 hours after Typhoon Haiyan ravaged large swaths of Visayas province in the central Philippines last November, washing away entire coastal villages and cities, aircraft and command and control units from USAF's Pacific Air Forces were in the skies and on the ground in the hardest hit areas.

While airmen assessed which airfields and landing zones would be best suited to handle the influx of C-17 Globemaster III and C-130 Hercules transports heading into the disaster zone, long-range, remotely piloted aircraft based at Andersen Air Force Base on Guam flew reconnaissance missions over Tacloban City, Leyte island, Roxas City, and other locales, surveying the damage and searching for survivors.

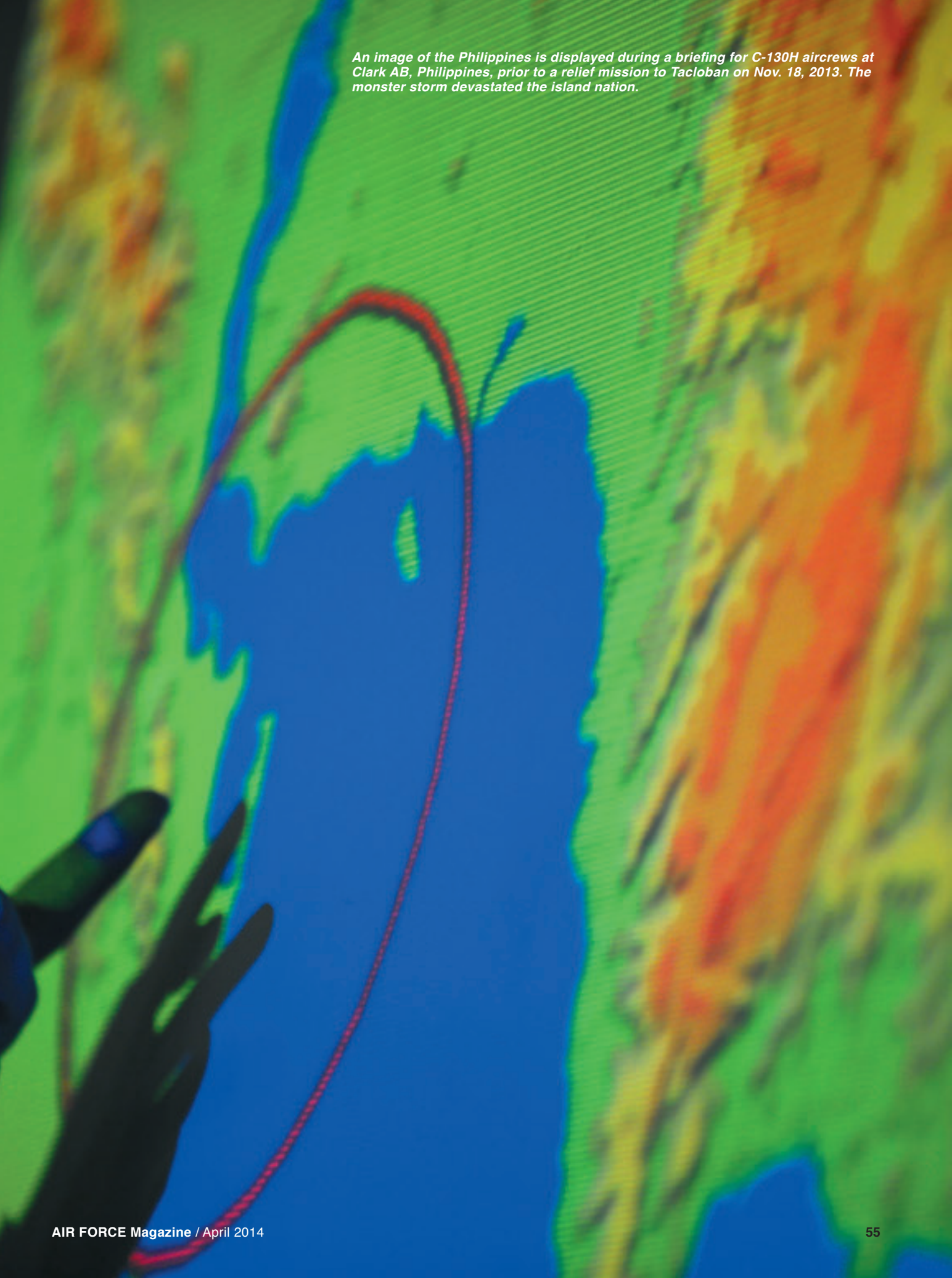
Once the joint disaster relief mission, dubbed Operation Damayan, reached full swing, USAF cargo aircraft were among the first US air assets to get wheels down in Manila and elsewhere in the Philippines, to begin ferrying tons of food, water, and supplies into the vast areas devastated by the typhoon.

While the humanitarian mission exemplified the rapid response capabilities of the Air Force and US military, Operation Damayan also stoked debate in Washington, D.C., and Manila on whether American air assets should return to the Philippines on a permanent basis.

Regionally, no US military assets have been based at the former Clark Air Base or at Subic Bay Naval Base since Washington handed over both installations to Philippine control in the early 1990s. But

USAF photo by 2nd Lt. Jake Bailey

*An image of the Philippines is displayed during a briefing for C-130H aircrews at Clark AB, Philippines, prior to a relief mission to Tacloban on Nov. 18, 2013. The monster storm devastated the island nation.*





**Some 670 refugees from Tacloban pack a C-17 during evacuation to Manila. The aircraft and its crew deployed from JB Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, for Operation Damayan.**

Damayan's success has come at a time when US-Philippine military cooperation is increasing, and the likelihood of the country hosting larger deployments of rotational forces in the near future is growing as the US continues to press engagement with allies and emerging partners in Southeast Asia.

### Rapid Response

Before Typhoon Haiyan cut its path across the Philippines, top Air Force commanders at PACAF knew the killer storm would be a big one—possibly the biggest ever to make landfall in the island nation.

Tracking the storm from various PACAF outposts scattered throughout the region, US officials began drafting plans on Nov. 7 for the massive disaster relief mission that was sure to come, according to a command spokesman.

Haiyan would hit the Visayas Islands the next day.

PACAF began spinning up its airlift and command and control systems in anticipation of a huge logistical challenge. The command's first move was to put on ready alert elements of 3rd Wing from JB Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, 15th Wing from JB Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, and the 374th Airlift Wing from Yokota AB, Japan.

As Damayan kicked off, three additional C-130 airlifters attached to the joint US-Bangladesh military exercise Cope South were redeployed to the Philippines, joining the growing Air Force presence in the country.

On the personnel side, Air Force command and control units from the 109th Air Operations Group and contingency operations specialists from the 36th Contingency Response Group were on the ground in Manila 24 hours after Haiyan passed through the country.

The main job for those units was to conduct damage assessments on the various landing strips and airfields closest to the hardest hit areas in the Visayas, determine which ones could handle the heavy air traffic, and set up the critical logistics chain to ensure supplies and aid got to the areas most in need.

"This is a 24-hour-a-day operation and our guys are motivated," said Col. Thomas Livingston, 36th CRG commander, according to a news release. "As we assist the Philippine forces in getting



USAF photo by SSgt. Ramon Brockington



**Capt. Dominique Haig briefs C-130 aircrews at Clark before a nighttime airlift mission in support of Damayan.**



people on the planes, you can really see the partnership building between forces to alleviate further human suffering.”

Aside from spearheading the airlift portion of the crisis response mission, the airmen on the ground were responsible for finding a way to get the thousands of survivors scattered throughout Haiyan’s path to safe ground. An integral part of the mission was PACAF’s unmanned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance ability. Several RQ-4 Global Hawks based at Andersen took to the skies above the Visayas.

The aircraft’s electro-optic and infrared sensor packages, traditionally

used to collect battlefield intelligence on potential targets in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, were now being used to find, fix, and track victims of the typhoon. Airborne imagery was used to assess damaged infrastructure and locate potentially suitable helicopter landing zones. These rotary wing aircraft picked up survivors and delivered supplies into the most isolated regions of the islands.

With the air logistics chain and evacuation strategy in place, and with Air Force fixed wing aircraft inbound, PACAF elements were folded into Joint Task Force 505, the US military force assigned to carry out Damayan.

Under the command of Marine Corps Lt. Gen. John E. Wissler, PACAF units and assets joined the Marine Corps and Navy units already ordered into the Philippines. More than 1,000 marines from 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, backed by the USS *George Washington* carrier strike group on station in Philippine waters, linked up with Air Force units on the ground in Tacloban less than two weeks after Haiyan made landfall.

Over the approximately three-week span of Operation Damayan, which ended in early December, nearly 300 PACAF airmen logged more than 2,000 flight hours, conducting a total of 239 airlift missions and ferrying more than 2,000 tons of food, water, and medical supplies into the Visayas, according to a PACAF after-action review of the operation.

The US and allied militaries involved in the mission deemed it a great success and a template for handling military-to-military humanitarian operations in the future.

Despite its success, some observers claimed the US response might have been faster and possibly more effective if American forces had maintained a sizable military footprint in the Philippines.



USAF photo by SrA. Marianne Santos

**A C-130 transporting airmen and equipment takes off from Andersen AFB, Guam, headed toward the Philippines to join the disaster relief efforts. Mobility aircraft were quickly on the scene.**



**MSgt. Derontae Spencer examines release paperwork that will allow a mobility aircraft to deploy from Andersen to Tacloban, one of the hardest hit cities in the Philippines.**

### The Clark Question

In 1991, the last permanently stationed Air Force assets left Clark Air Base in the Philippines, shuttering USAF's largest base in Southeast Asia.

The Navy followed suit a year later, handing over Subic Bay Naval Base to the Philippine government. The closure of the two facilities ended a large US military presence in the Asia-Pacific.

While Washington and Manila have continued to maintain strong military-to-military ties, engaging in numerous joint exercises and operations throughout the region, American forces have yet to re-establish a significant profile in the Philippines.

Currently, the only active US military in the Philippines have been a special operations task force supporting the Armed Forces of the Philippines in a campaign against the Abu Sayyaf Group and affiliated extremists in the southern part of the country.

Even a counterterrorism role creates controversy.

A group protesting the US counterterrorism mission, Patriotiko Mindanao, has been a vocal critic of the US-Philippine military engagement in the southern areas of Palawan and Mindanao. But that public outcry did not stop Washington and Manila from initially reaching a deal in 2012 to open up both Clark and Subic Bay to American air and naval forces rotating through the country, according to Philippine Undersecretary for Defense Affairs Honorio S. Azcueta.

The agreement would not allow permanent basing in the Philippines, but would grant US warships and military aircraft access to those facilities, as part of increased temporary deployments.

If forces had been stationed at Clark or nearby facilities during Damayan, USAF, in theory, could have saved valuable time and fuel costs getting assets to the Philippines from Hawaii, Alaska, and Japan. DOD leaders sought to downplay the relationship between the operation and basing discussions, however.

At the height of Damayan, DOD dismissed any notion the disaster relief mission would open the door to the Air



USAF photo by SRA, Marianne Santos

Force's return to Clark. "I'm not sure I would draw a direct linkage between our [increased] presence in the region and our ability to respond to these kinds of crises," George Little, then the Pentagon press secretary, said last November.

DOD already has "thousands of forward deployed American service members" scattered across the Asia-Pacific region, Little told reporters shortly after the first American units arrived in the Philippines. "I would not draw a direct causal connection between" the US-led disaster relief mission and bolstering American troop numbers there, he added.

The Pentagon and Manila have slowly explored the possibility of increasing the Air Force's presence in the country.

In recent years, US military planners have eyed deployment options in the Philippines and elsewhere in the region as part of the White House's plan to shift the military's focus from the wars in Iraq



**Airmen from Yokota AB, Japan, offload equipment from a C-130 at Clark. PACAF officials across the region began tracking Haiyan early in November, in anticipation of the massive relief effort that would be required.**

and Afghanistan to increased attention to the Asia-Pacific.

In December, US Secretary of State John F. Kerry announced \$40 million in military funding to the Philippines. The island nation received \$30 million in foreign military funding from the United States in 2012, according to news reports, and \$11.9 million in 2011.

Not all accounts are growing, however.

As the Air Force continues to cope with smaller budgets and massive force structure cuts under sequestration, service leaders have been forced to rebalance in the Pacific region while doing more with less.

The Air Force has had to sacrifice operations and readiness accounts, the coffers that finance missions like USAF's contribution to Damayan.

As a result, Air Force and Pentagon leaders are embracing a supporting and enabling role in emerging conflicts and crises, allowing partner nation forces to take the lead—whether it be disaster relief or combat support missions. In the Philippines, the US gradually handed off operations to its Philippine Air Force counterparts as Damayan wound down.

Closer cooperation with allies in these scenarios is all but assured in the long term. "Future joint forces will routinely employ more such combinations than ever before, with [international] partners as well as within ... to achieve efficiencies and synergies not previously feasible," stated the 2012 "Capstone Concept for Joint Operations: Joint Force 2020," by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey.

The success of Damayan sprang from cooperation at the highest levels of the American and Philippine militaries. Indeed, on Oct. 16—more than three weeks before Haiyan made landfall in the Philip-

## Quick Contingency Reaction

Weeks after Pacific Air Forces wrapped up its air operations in the Philippines, a similar portfolio of American airpower deployed to Africa, this time to help French and African Union forces quell violence in the Central African Republic.

As in the Philippines, the familiar force package of Air Force airlifters and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets stepped up for another support operation. The Pentagon deployed a pair of Air Force C-17 cargo airplanes, accompanied by small teams of airmen, into the strife-torn African nation late last year. Aside from the aircraft, an Air Force team was deployed to neighboring Burundi, tasked with coordinating logistics and transportation for roughly 800 Burundian troops headed to the Central African Republic.

A second Air Force team went into the CAR to assist French and African Union forces in their efforts to secure the main airfield in the country's capitol of Bangui.

Those American and Burundian troops joined the nearly 1,000 French troops on the ground, as part of the international peacekeeping force sent to the African country. The US officially ended military support for operations in the CAR on Dec. 30, 2013, but continued logistical support through January.

While the mission in CAR was not in response to a natural disaster as in Operation Damayan, the Air Force's expeditionary approach to the scenario was similar—a small footprint tasked with aerial supply, logistics, and intelligence.



**SrA. Dylan Porras, a loadmaster with the 535th Airlift Squadron, guides SrA. Christopher Follett, an air transportation specialist, as he loads equipment into a C-17 on the flight line at Andersen.**

ines—Lt. Gen. Lauro Catalino G. Dela Cruz, commander of the Philippine Air Force, visited Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam for a meeting with PACAF's commander, Gen. Herbert J. "Hawk" Carlisle, and discussed bilateral and regional military cooperation issues.

The two leaders conferred about future engagements between the two air services, with Carlisle noting USAF and PAF have a well-developed working relationship. The ties and cooperation were in no small part critical to the success of Damayan.

Regional alliances, such as those with the Philippines, have helped enable

DOD's Asia-Pacific shift, and fostering these relationships is a priority for both PACAF and the Air Force as a whole. Negotiations continue between the Philippine government and State Department representatives about possible bilateral deployments and exercises. Leaders on both sides have indicated the relationship between the US and the Philippines has only grown closer in the aftermath of the storm. ■



USAF photo by Capt. Raymond Geoffroy

*Carlo Muñoz is a defense and national security correspondent for BuzzFeed.com in Washington, D.C. He has covered US military operations in Afghanistan, South America, Cuba, and the Asia-Pacific. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "The JTAC Imperative," appeared in November 2013.*