

# MISSION TO

**F**RANCE'S intervention in Mali earlier this year—helping its former colony defend against Islamic extremists—didn't get the media attention lavished on the overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi or the crisis in Syria. But the Mali mission has so far proved successful, and likely because of the substantial help France got from the US—largely through the Air Force.

France sent fighter aircraft and troops to Mali, along with various ground vehicles and all the related gear. Al-

though France has cargo aircraft—and even KC-135 strategic air refueling aircraft to move its equipment long distances—mobility support is exactly what France received from the US, along with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assistance.

“We can emphasize the very substantial and helpful support the USAF is providing to the French in Mali in terms of ISR, air-to-air refueling, and logistic transport assets,” said a French Embassy spokesman. “The French air force possesses its own assets in those

three strategic areas, but not as widely as the USAF does.”

The US assistance was nothing less than essential in allowing the operation to proceed, the French official said.

The C-17 was the main tool used by American forces early in the conflict to transport French troops and cargo into Mali, and US C-130s have been used to move people and equipment around the country throughout the last 10 months.

The intervention has been effective at restoring civilian government and limiting the political power of potential

**The French got a big boost from USAF tankers and airlifters in this year's fight against Islamic extremists.**



*Two French Rafale fighters fade back after refueling from a USAF KC-135 over Mali.*



# MALI

By Gabe Starosta

terrorists in North Africa. In May, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves le Drian visited Washington, D.C., and expressed how satisfied his department had been with the Pentagon's—and mainly the Air Force's—cooperation in the critical opening months of the campaign.

In the early, most dangerous days of Operation Serval, the name given by France to the military intervention against terrorists in Mali, French fighter

aircraft relied heavily on American KC-135 refueling tankers to extend their missions.

Justine Leger, a spokeswoman for the French government in Paris, explained that French fighters staged their missions from N'Djamena, the capital city of Chad, separated from Mali by Niger. Mali's large size (about twice the size of Texas) made aerial tanking a necessity.

“The commitment of US tankers [contributed to] French combat aircraft capacity to perform the two hours of flight from N'Djamena to Mali,

achieve their missions, and fly back to N'Djamena,” Leger said. “Many of those missions needed not less than three or four in-flight refuelings in order to get a significant time over the engagement area. In that sense, the US assistance has been very helpful.”

She said the French engaged around half their own refueling fleet in the operation and that in the first six weeks of Serval, American C-17s flew 120 sorties transporting troops and equipment into North Africa in addition to the Air Force's tanking mission.



USAF photo by 1st Lt. Christopher Mesnard



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**A1C Anthony Ellsworth extends the boom and drogue on a KC-135 as French fighters position for a refill.**

The Air Force had three contingency response groups of the 621st Contingency Response Wing at JB McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., on call for just this sort of overseas pop-up situation.

### **A Dozen Vehicles Every Hour**

On Jan. 14, Col. Kevin Oliver and his roughly 100 people were preparing to rotate off alert status and hand the on-call duties to another CRG. Four days later, however, Oliver was in the south of France and, shortly after that, in Mali setting up the support elements of US assistance to France.

On receiving a formal request for help from the French government, USAF alerted the three CRGs. Their most basic mission—among a vast portfolio of responsibilities—is to open and set up airfields when new operations begin. A portion of Oliver’s 818th CRG deployed to an air base in Istres, France, on the country’s south coast, on Jan. 18. The entire group numbers about 175 people, with 100 on alert at a time.

The team spent four days mission planning and preparing to depart, but did so with only a vague idea of what tasks the Air Force would be asked to perform on their arrival, Oliver said.

“When we went out the door, we weren’t sure where we were going to go or what the requirements were going

to be,” he said. “In our mission planning phase, we looked at the various different airfields we could potentially end up going into in Africa to support the French.”

Oliver, now a division chief at the service’s air and space operations center (AOC) in Hawaii, said the Istres airfield was in extremely good condition and that American forces had operated out of that location in the past. His 12-man team’s jobs included confirming that the airfield could handle the weight and dimensions of C-17 airlifters; working out an aircraft parking arrangement with France to avoid bottlenecks; installing basic aircraft scheduling capabilities; setting up living quarters for themselves, maintainers, and flight crews; and establishing work space for aircraft maintainers and flight crews alike.

Crucially, the 818th was responsible for working with the French army to determine what equipment it needed moved into Mali and when. That process began with a large quantity of military vehicles.

“Every hour, another dozen vehicles would show up,” Oliver said. “Just looking at the marshaling yard there, they had enough vehicles to probably sustain an airlift flow for a month, easy. The challenge was that these vehicles needed to be certified to fly on US

aircraft, and that was part of what my team did.”

After clearing the vehicles for transport aboard C-17s, the Air Force promptly started moving them to Bamako, Mali’s capital. The airfield there was also in good condition, and France had already opened it for normal operations, making USAF’s job easier.

The team spent five days in Bamako. Their greatest contribution was helping to work out efficient aircraft parking and scheduling arrangements. USAF also sent one representative to a French transport control center in Paris to serve as the aircraft scheduler for all air traffic in and out of Bamako.

That involved planning for the arrival and departure of American and French aircraft, as well as C-130s operated by African nations and Russian-type airplanes flown by other parties contributing to France’s military intervention, including some larger than the C-17.

By the end of the 818th’s 30-day deployment, US aircraft had flown 190 sorties, transported 1,480 French troops, and moved 2,400 tons—almost five million pounds—of cargo and equipment into Mali.

That initial support was sufficiently helpful to the French, so the Air Force decided not to deploy either of the other



USAF photo by MSgt. Brian Bahret

**USAF SSgt. Merrill Slepica secures a Liberian truck in the cargo bay of a USAF C-17.**



USAF photo by MSgt. Brian Bahret

**SrA. Christopher Tolleson greets Liberian soldiers as they board a USAF C-17 on their way to Bamako, Mali.**

two American CRGs that had been activated in January.

“That really closed out what the French requirements were, so there was no need for a follow-on group to come in behind us,” Oliver said.

The 818th, encompassing specialists in communications, airfield operations, and security forces, also included two civil engineers with an unusual connection to the Mali operation. The engineers were part of a squadron within Oliver’s group tasked with building up the capacity of African partner nations’ air operations.

Coincidentally, the two airmen had recently been in Mali, giving them points of contact, a general familiarity with the region, and an increased level of expertise to share with the group.

Following an intense first month transporting troops and supplies from France to Mali, the operational tempo for intratheater airlift slowed down as expected, and the American support role changed from setting up major airfield procedures to moving people and equipment within Mali.

Those taskings are controlled from Ramstein Air Base in Germany by the 603rd Air and Space Operations Center, which manages aircraft sorties in both Europe and Africa.

Lt. Col. Lloyd Malone, deputy commander for manpower and resources

at the AOC, said the Mali mission has relied heavily on a fleet of C-130 airlifters assigned to the region.

“On a given day, there are approximately six C-130s that are available to support both [US] Africa Command [AFRICOM] and EUCOM [US European Command], ... and they are the ones that are presently working to support French requirements in Mali,” he said.

### Learning French

As the French or partner nations develop a need “to move troops or perhaps baggage, ... those aircraft are being tasked to support them, they are building the missions, obtaining the diplomatic clearances, scheduling the aircraft to support those requirements,” Malone said.

France begins by defining its own requirements, then passing them to US Army Africa, to be validated by AFRICOM. The geographic combatant command then assigns appropriate missions to the AOC at Ramstein. The 603rd follows through and executes them.

Becoming familiar with how the French do business has been one of the biggest challenges—but also among the best learning experiences—of this military operation, Malone said. France’s methods and time lines for setting

military requirements differ somewhat from established American protocols, forcing both sides to adapt, but there has been virtually no language barrier between the allied airmen.

“Really learning how the French develop requirements, their time lines, and how to integrate that into our process, that is an ongoing issue,” he said. “It’s not something that I can necessarily tell you, ‘It’s done, here’s the book, we’ve written it.’ But that is an ongoing issue in how we develop our capacity to support our partners like the French.”

It’s not commonly known, but American airmen are still involved in Mali, primarily providing intratheater airlift using C-130 aircraft. The Pentagon initially agreed to help the French military through the end of August, and a spokesman for the Office of the Secretary of Defense said the Pentagon was likely to agree to extend that assistance into the fall if officially asked to by France. No such request had been filed by Oct. 22, however.

As of Sept. 11, Air Force KC-135 Stratotankers off-loaded more than 14 million pounds of fuel for French operations in Mali, while airlift aircraft (C-130s and C-17s) moved or delivered more than 121 tons of cargo within the theater.



USAF photo by MSgt. Brian Bahret

**Liberian soldiers provide security as a USAF C-17 arrives to take members of their service to Mali.**

The service had also moved 334 passengers around Mali through early August.

The third major mission area where France needed assistance was in ISR, but Air Force officials at the Pentagon declined to discuss how the service met that request.

Said Malone, “The French are doing a wonderful job down there, and we’re just fulfilling whatever requirements they send to us and doing our best to make sure we’re good partners in their efforts to combat international terrorism.”

For France, the success of the intervention in Mali—but only with broad ISR, aerial refueling, and airlift support from the United States—has reinforced plans to expand its own aircraft inventory. This includes a variety of airlift and refueling platforms but in small numbers.

A French Embassy representative in Washington said France’s Armée de l’Air has 24 light airlifters, 53 C-130-class aircraft for tactical transport, and five larger A-340s and A-310s that are more comparable to the C-17. By way of comparison, the Air Force flies more than 200 C-17s.

Among tanker aircraft, the French fleet is made up of 14 C-135 variants, whereas the Air Force operates more than 400 KC-10s and KC-135s.

To become less reliant on American mobility assets, France plans to buy 50 more tactical transport aircraft—the A400M—and 12 tanker aircraft. The

French government has not yet selected its preferred refueling platform and is referring to the acquisition of those dozen aircraft as MRTT, or multirole tanker transport. However, the seminal aircraft company, Airbus, has had success marketing its own MRTT, based on the A330 airliner, to a number of countries, such as Australia.

### Prepare for the Unexpected

On the ISR side, recent reports indicate France has expressed an interest in purchasing its own fleet of MQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial vehicles.

For the Air Force, the Mali mission cemented some procedures and made others more efficient at the AOC in Germany, and Malone highlighted the value of this kind of operation in bringing allied countries such as the US and France closer together.

Stateside, the 621st has taken the lessons learned from the first 30 days in Istres and Bamako and updated its training and exercise plans, Oliver said. “The big thing [we learned] was to be prepared for nontraditional missions.”

“Typically the CRGs practice off-load, but as we found in Istres, the first mission when we got to Istres wasn’t really to off-load aircraft,” Oliver continued. “It was to prepare vehicles and equipment and passengers for on-loading and to move forward. That luckily is one of the things we had practiced in a previous exercise,

but it wasn’t something that was really instituted in the CRG mentality.”

The wing has also incorporated lessons learned from the experience in Mali into a biannual exercise called Eagle Flag, and Oliver said USAF began compiling a formal document of contingency response tactics, techniques, and procedures before his move to the PACAF theater.

That kind of manual on responding to crises could be particularly valuable to CRG personnel; most USAF officers do only one assignment in such a job, and continuity and long-term experience among first responders is often lost.

In Mali, the political situation has stabilized. July elections were a sign of relative calm in the north African nation—albeit with a continuing French military presence there.

With Malian extremists now mostly subdued and a new, democratically elected President in place, France will draw down its military presence as the year goes on, said Paris-based spokeswoman Leger. A United Nations peacekeeping force, officially called the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, will fill some of the gaps left by departing French troops. ■

*Gabe Starosta is the managing editor of the defense newsletter “Inside the Air Force.” His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “The F-35 Readies for Takeoff,” appeared in the April issue.*