

In April a massive earthquake shook Nepal, killing more than 8,000. USAF sprung into action to help.

# Airlift to Nepal

By Jennifer Hlad, Senior Editor





**J**ust hours after a devastating earthquake hit Nepal on April 25, 2015, airmen all over the world sprung into action. By May 26, the US Air Force had flown 171 sorties, airlifting 800 tons of cargo and more than 860 passengers in and out of Nepal on C-17 Globemaster IIIs and C-130 Hercules airplanes, all part of the massive joint effort to help survivors in the remote country northeast of India.

Airmen, equipment, and supplies from Air Force bases in Japan, Guam, Hawaii, and Alaska contributed to the effort, helping deliver aid quickly to those who needed it. Commanders said the mission underscored the importance of joint training and international partnerships while giving airmen a unique opportunity to use their skills in a mission they said was immensely rewarding.

More than 8,000 people died when the 7.8 earthquake hit Nepal, and thousands more were trapped in the rubble or displaced as entire villages were flattened. As the casualties mounted, the Nepalese government declared a state of emergency, clearing the way for an international humanitarian response.

Planners at the 618th Air Operations Center (Tanker Airlift Control Center) at Scott AFB, Ill., received an initial notification from US Transportation Command around noon on April 25 that the US Agency for International Development would be asking for help transporting urban search and rescue teams, said Col.

Brian Lindsey, one of the directors of operations at the TACC.

They immediately began looking at what that mission would require and what countries US airplanes would need to fly over to reach Nepal, said Brian Erts, division chief of the special assignment airlift division. It typically takes 21 days to get diplomatic clearance to fly into Nepal, Erts said, and the planners also needed to secure 55 separate clearances for the airplanes to pass through other countries' airspace on the way there.

"Because Nepal is not a standard place for air mobility aircraft to go through, just finding routes" was a challenge, Erts said.

### ON THE FRONT LINE

Additionally, the lead planner needed to determine what had to go on the aircraft, the most effective route, and the logistics of an air refueling so the first airplane could get to Nepal quickly.

"There were a whole lot of different constraints ... to include could we even land anywhere in Nepal, and if we could, what kind of services they would have," Erts said.

Planners also didn't know the condition of the airfield after the massive earthquake, Lindsey said.

Sixteen hours after the initial notification to the 618th AOC, the first C-17 left JB McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., for Dover AFB, Del., to pick up 70,000 pounds of equipment, some 70 passengers, and six search and rescue dogs. The crew ran into

problems with loading and maintenance, finally making it back to New Jersey 24 hours later, said Maj. Jeremy Kahoe, an aircraft commander with the 6th Airlift Squadron, 305th Air Mobility Wing.

Kahoe and his crew had been scheduled as backup to fly a mission to JB Andrews, Md., that weekend, but instead were chosen to fly the C-17 from New Jersey to Al Udeid AB, Qatar, where another crew would fly the airplane to Kathmandu, Nepal.

The mission included meeting a tanker from McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst over Scotland for an air refueling, because the flight was about 15-and-a-half hours long. The crew was excited to be able to participate.

"This was the first support that the US was giving to this effort, so we were involved at the front line," transporting a team from Fairfax, Va., to begin the relief effort, said Maj. Greg Gaudet, a pilot on the mission.

The second C-17, from the 437th Airlift Wing, flew from JB Charleston, S.C., to March ARB, Calif., to pick up another urban search and rescue team and two trucks full of heavy-duty equipment. From there, the crew flew back to Charleston, where another 437th AW crew flew the airplane to Ramstein AB, Germany. There, Lindsey said, an Air National Guard crew from the 164th Airlift Wing in Memphis, Tenn., agreed to extend its original mission so it could fly the aircraft to Kathmandu and back.

"It reinforced my faith in the Total Force concept that we have here, because when

*Residents pick through the rubble in Singla, Nepal, after the earthquake last April. Entire villages were destroyed.*







USAF photo by A1C William Johnson

**An urban search and rescue specialist and her dog board a USAF C-17 at Dover AFB, Del., bound for Nepal.**

we asked, the Guard responded,” Lindsey said. “They responded with flying colors.”

Even as Air Mobility Command was coordinating the first two flights into Nepal, the Pacific Air Forces staff was planning how they could help in the response.

“One of the challenges of this [area of responsibility] is that humanitarian assistance, disaster relief missions are the most likely missions that we’ll ever do,” said Brig. Gen. Michael A. Minihan, who at the time of the earthquake was the deputy director of air and cyberspace operations for PACAF. “We were working hard within hours [of the earthquake], because we knew the big role that we would play.”

Still, the military does not respond without a request from USAID and the State Department, he said, and works directly for those agencies in a whole-of-government approach in such cases.

Partnerships with other countries are also critical in humanitarian assistance disaster response missions, he said, and to prepare, the Air Force does specific training and exercises with other countries, focused on those types of missions.

“There is no way that the United States military could do this alone,” Minihan said. “The partnerships are essential to mission success.”

In this case, airmen knew immediately that “the heart of the Air Force response would be C-17s and that [there would be an] enormous need for strategic airlift,” but the response also would require a tactical airlift capability, personnel recovery, medical personnel, and the 36th Contingency Response Group out of Guam, he added.

Capt. Brint Ingersoll, the 36th CRG’s operations officer, said the unit had seen news reports about the earthquake and knew they might be asked to help, but the USAID team had to get to Nepal and assess the needs on the ground before any other US groups got involved.

Once those teams arrived, Ingersoll said, they asked the military for rotary lift to take supplies out to the affected areas and airfield



USAF photo by SSgt. Alexander Martinez

**Brig. Gen. Michael Minihan (r), in charge of coordinating the joint US air component part of the disaster relief effort, and Royal Thai Armed Forces Gen. Surapong Suwana-adth walk to the flight line at U Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield, Thailand. US and Thai armed forces worked together to support the Nepal government and people after the quake.**

logistics to expedite aid supplies through the airport in Kathmandu. The Marine Corps provided the helicopters—transported along with their crews to Nepal by Air Force C-17s—while more than 30 airmen from the 36th CRG were tasked with providing airfield logistics.

## A CHAOTIC ENVIRONMENT

However, getting the aircraft, marines, and airmen into Nepal was still a challenge. The country’s only major airfield was swamped with civilian and military aircraft from all over the world, and the airfield managers had to ration slot times. The 36th CRG finally arrived on May 5, one day before US Pacific Command stood up Joint Task Force 505 to support the humanitarian efforts.



USMC photo by SSgt. Jeffrey D. Anderson

**A Nepalese soldier helps evacuate an injured civilian near Chericot, Nepal, after a magnitude 7.3 aftershock struck on May 12.**



The 36th CRG's first challenge: finding a place to put their forklifts, tents, generators, and other equipment at the crowded airport. Next, they had to coordinate with the authorities on the ground to begin helping.

"In a chaotic environment, there's no clear boss walking around with a flashing sign saying, 'I'm in charge,'" said Col. Lee Anderson, commander of the 36th CRG. But the unit takes pride in its ability to go into a situation like that and make it work, he added.

The airmen built an operations center, got communications working, and reached out to the World Food Program, DHL, and Nepalese authorities to help speed up the flow of cargo.

"Within 24 hours, I think we had done a pretty good job of building a nest, getting operational, and engaging and interfacing with the other people on the airfield," Anderson said.

In U Tapao, Thailand, Minihan—who had been selected as the Joint Air Component Coordination Element director and 618th Air Expeditionary Task Force commander—was overseeing the airpower portion of the joint military effort. There was already an Air Force presence there, augmented with air mobility assets, including C-130s from Yokota Air Base in Japan and KC-130Js from MCAS Iwakuni, Japan, Minihan said.

The 36th CRG was the main Air Force effort in Kathmandu, along with a small contingent of airmen at the marine headquarters there, and some pararescuemen.

"We had all the right kind of airmen in the right kind of places to be able to coordinate, along with the Marine partners and the other services, to make sure that there were absolutely no gaps in the capabilities of what was needed for the operation," he said.

The CRG off-loaded more than 4.2 million pounds of cargo from 94 aircraft, sending 360 truckloads of supplies to 13 Nepalese districts.

Two airmen who are native Nepali speakers and an airman who speaks a Hindi dialect similar to Nepali volunteered for the relief effort, adding another element to the international coordination and helping other airmen communicate more effectively with local authorities and the injured, Anderson said.

Having those airmen on the team "was enormously valuable," he said. "Language barriers, culture barriers, trust barriers, all of that fell away relatively quickly."

One of the native Nepali speakers, SrA. Manoj Khatiwada, said at the time that he wasn't sure how he would react to seeing the destruction in the city where he was born and raised.

"I am happy that I am here, but I am sad to see this happen to Nepal," said Khatiwada, an aerospace medical technician with the 21st Medical Operations Squadron.

Airmen with the 36th CRG were able to help a Nepalese team work on and repair the runway in Kathmandu when it was closed for a few hours each day, Anderson said.

Then on May 12, about a week after the 36th CRG arrived in Nepal, a 7.3 aftershock rocked the country. Buildings in Nepal are mainly brick and mortar, and when they come down, "they come down badly, just as a pile of bricks," Anderson said.

Civilians who were inside the airport when the aftershock hit came barreling out onto the runway, unsure as to the safety of the building.

Ingersoll said, "As soon as the earthquake happened, they broke down doors," adding another dynamic to an already chaotic situation.

The team that had been working on the runway went back out with the Nepalese team to make sure the airfield was still safe for traffic, while other airmen used the supplies they had brought to set up a casualty triage center on the flight line.

The marines launched UH-1 Hueys and MV-22 Ospreys to the affected region, and MSgt. Joe Damian, an independent duty medical technician-paramedic, joined one of the crews to help injured Nepalese citizens being medevaced from remote sites to the triage point at the airport. Damian ended up flying casualty evacuation missions with the marines for the next two days on nine sorties.

Navy corpsmen, Nepalese ambulance crews, and medics with the USAID search and rescue teams pitched in at the triage point, Anderson said. CRG airmen treated 59 injured victims.

"It really sounds small, but it was enormously powerful just to be able to set up a tent to use as a triage site," Anderson said. "Sometimes the small things are big."

Yet as the task force was working to help earthquake victims that day, a helicopter carrying six marines and two Nepalese

**USAF Capt. Clark Morgan and members of the Civil Aviation Authority in Nepal repair damage to the runway at Tribhuvan Airport.**





USAF photo by SSgt. Melissa B. White



USAF photo by SSgt. Melissa B. White

soldiers disappeared. It was later found to have crashed in the mountains.

Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said he was devastated to hear that everyone aboard the helicopter had died. “This tragedy is a reminder of the vital but dangerous role that American service members play in delivering humanitarian assistance and disaster relief,” he said.

## DRIVING THROUGH FOG

Capt. Damion Liu, an acting aircraft commander with 535th Airlift Squadron at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, was in Guam on another mission following the aftershock when he learned his unit was being rerouted to assist with the relief efforts.

Liu flew to Thailand, where he transported Marine helicopters to and from Japan in a C-17 before getting the chance to go into Nepal as one of the last US flights into the country, he said. Flying conditions into Nepal were very hazy, and the approach was steep because of the mountains around the airfield.

“I’ll always remember that approach,” he said. “We could see a little bit, but it’s kind of like driving through a fog. ... You could see the city start to come through, and then you’re doing your best to redirect your eyes and trust your instrumentation to lead you to the runway.”

Liu said he and the crew had planned to load about 45,000 pounds of cargo onto the airplane, but ended up leaving Nepal with 107,500 pounds of cargo instead, including 22 passengers from the CRG, five vehicles, and lots of supplies.

Despite the C-17 being on the ground for just two hours and 41 minutes, he said the crew was “pumped” to help in the relief effort.

“Our whole crew was extremely eager to get into it, to be part of the mission ... because that’s what we do,” he said. “There’s just that want to go over and help.”

Ingersoll said assisting in Nepal was the “single most rewarding experience” he’s had in 15 years in the Air Force. MSgt. Corey Long, a ramp coordinator with the 36th CRG, agreed.

“I think everyone takes a lot of pride in being able to work in Nepal. Situations like that are the reason I stayed in the Air Force and continue to serve,” he said.

The mission wasn’t the first time the Air Force has played a key role in a disaster relief situation, but it was unlike the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Anderson and Long said.

One of the biggest challenges in the Philippines was the weather, Long said, and there was not a good flow of information

**Above: Airmen from the 36th Contingency Response Group and US marines prepare to unload a UH-1Y Huey helicopter from a USAF C-17 at Tribhuvan Airport, Nepal. USAID disaster responders requested rotary lift to take supplies to remote areas of the mountainous region. Above left: SrA. Manoj Khatiwada, a US airman born in Nepal, with pallets of relief supplies at Tribhuvan.**

there about aircraft coming in. In Haiti, Anderson said, airmen “slept in tents next to the runway and didn’t have a shower for 10 days.” However, in Nepal, the team stayed in a hotel in Kathmandu, which still had power, water, and other services.

“In Nepal, the chaos, the devastation, was 100 miles away. In Haiti and Tacloban [in the Philippines], the devastation was 10 feet away. It creates a very different lens for what you’re doing as a responder,” Anderson said.

The short notice made the mission different from most other missions AMC flies, said Ertz, the supervisor of the planning shop at the 618th AOC.

“We do fly a lot of missions that are ... anywhere from presidential support to USO tours, Marine units deploying around the world. So we do get a lot of missions going to a lot of out-of-the-way locations, but very rarely do we actually have an impact where we are saving lives and delivering such urgently needed cargo,” he commented.

The mission showed the importance of being ready to go anywhere at any time, to “always be ready for the unexpected,” said Gaudet at JB MDL. It revealed how critical “soft power” and working collaboratively can be, Ingersoll and Anderson said.

“It comes down to relationships and understanding other people,” Anderson said.

Maj. Gen. Lawrence M. Martin Jr., assistant deputy undersecretary of the Air Force for international affairs, said responses like the one in Nepal—including more than a dozen other nations—“don’t just suddenly happen.”

Partner countries “utilized their air mobility aircraft to transport relief supplies into the country and evacuate citizens from the disaster zone,” Martin pointed out. “A lot of work had to be done to develop those capable partners before they were ready to respond to this contingency.”

Minihan said it was inspiring to see the airmen’s response through it all.

“The airmen don’t need to get up for a mission like this. They’re up for it every single day,” he said. “Their attitudes and their efforts not only project airpower precisely, when called on, but their attitudes are a force multiplier itself. They bring an attitude that ensures mission success no matter what the challenges are.”