



VR-53 FLIES HEROES HOME

Story and Photos by Wendy Leland

Business as usual for Fleet Logistics Support Squadron (VR) 53, based at NAF Washington on Andrews AFB, Md., centers around transporting cargo and passengers within the U.S. or from detachment sites overseas in the C-130T Hercules. In September 2005 the Capital Express added a new mission to its repertoire, and now transports a special kind of passenger as the primary East Coast provider of aeromedical evacuation (AE) flights for service members who return home from overseas for medical reasons.

Injured and ill personnel from forward theaters such as Afghanistan and Iraq are evaluated in-theater and transported to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany if further treatment is necessary. Patients who need to return to the U.S. for recuperative leave or long-term treatment near their home of record, and need medical or nursing support while en route, are flown from Ramstein Air Base to Andrews AFB. “For those whose final destinations are on the East Coast, we’ll take them on the next leg of their journey,” LCdr. Lane Boland said. “When we see them they’ve usually only been out of Iraq or Afghanistan maybe three to five days.”

Although medical evacuation is not a typical mission for Navy VR crews, they effortlessly flexed to fill the need. “With what’s going on overseas, the Air Force has been stretched thin on their C-130s, so the Air Force and the Navy worked out that the Air Force could forward deploy more C-130s if we picked up the aeromedical evacuation mission for them,” CO Cdr. Ken Deakin explained. “At first we were going to break it up between all the squadrons within the [Fleet Logistics Support Wing], but since most of the major hospitals are right here in D.C., we said we would take it full time, and have all the other squadrons help us out.” The other C-130 squadrons—VRs 54, 55, 62 and 64—are also participating in the mission, some operating from Travis AFB, Calif., and Scott AFB, Ill., and others sending an aircraft and personnel to operate side by side with VR-53 out of Andrews.

The Capital Express AE flights are one-day missions made up of many short hops, depending on the destination of each patient. Stops can be anywhere along the East Coast, from MCAS New River, N.C., to Fort Benning, Ga., to locations as far away as

Pilots LCdr. Lane Boland and Lt. Travis Hayes prepare to board a Capital Express C-130T on the tarmac at NAF Washington.



Above, on a 22 February aeromedical evacuation mission from Andrews AFB Md., VR-53 personnel utilized an aircraft of sister squadron VR-62. Left, members of the launch and recovery team from the 375th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron (Provisional), Det 1, prepare the C-130's cargo area before the patients are loaded. Many of the patients arrive from overseas the night before the flight and stay overnight at a local medical facility. The 89th Aeromedical Staging Facility at Andrews prepares them for the AE flight and loads them on the aircraft, under the direction of the Medical Crew Director from the AES(P) Det 1. Facing page, Air Force personnel guard the ramp as they carry a patient on a litter onto the C-130.

Tampa, Fla., or Fort Drum, N.Y. “As a pilot it’s enjoyable to hopscotch all over the American south and to fly into bases and places where I wouldn’t normally go as a Navy reserve pilot,” LCdr. Alex Ellermann said. Each stop is just long enough to offload patients and transfer their records to waiting medical personnel, and refuel the airplane as needed. “We’re typically talking between 25 minutes and 40 minutes on the ground at each one,” stated Ltjg. Nate Dickinson. “It’s a lot of short legs which is a very different type of flying for us, we’re used to very long legs.” The days can be long and the number of stops can be challenging, as flight engineer AM1 (AW/NAC) David Cobb explained. “When you’re doing seven or eight stops in a day, by the end of the day you’re pretty beat from the shutdown and constantly going up and down. And then you look at the guys in the back and it makes it all worthwhile.”

On VR-53’s AE missions, the typical C-130 aircrew of a pilot, copilot, flight engineer, and loadmasters is augmented by two Air Force flight nurses and three medical technicians who provide patient care throughout the flight. This integrated flight crew is the epitome of joint operations, and demonstrates the flexibility of the military reserve force. The Capital Express is comprised entirely of Navy Reserve Force personnel, with 142 full time support personnel and 87 drilling selected reservists, while the Air Force medical personnel are part of the 375th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron (Provisional), Det 1, which comprises 46 Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard members. “It gives us the opportunity to really work hand in glove in a very purple kind of way with our Air Force counterparts,” LCdr. Ellermann said.

Prior to an AE mission, the Hercules will be spotted on the Air Force side of the base. A five- to eight-

person launch team of plane captains and mechanics travels to the Air Force side to prepare the aircraft for launch. Whereas on a standard cargo or passenger mission the loadmasters would prepare the cargo area and oversee the loading and unloading of cargo or passengers, on an AE mission the loadmasters clear the cargo area, creating a blank canvas for the Air Force crews to set up as needed for the patients on each particular flight. A few hours before takeoff, members of an Air Force launch and recovery team descend on the C-130's cargo area, preparing the stanchion straps to hang the proper number of litters and accompanying gear, setting up monitoring equipment, and prepositioning supplies. Preparations are completed within minutes, as AVCM (AW/NAC) Bobby Shaw described, "They're so efficient at it, we'll just have all the straps and stuff available and hanging down and they'll come and clip them in, zoom, zoom, zoom. They are very good at what they do."

During the preflight, the flight nurse who is the flight's Medical Crew Director briefs the aircraft commander and other Navy crew members on specific aspects of the day's mission, such as how many patients are ambulatory and how many are on litters, and who is scheduled for which destination. The crew is alerted to patients with special needs that may have an impact on the flight. For example, in some cases a patient's wounds may require that the cabin be kept at low altitude, or the crew may request that they be alerted to upcoming turbulence so they can adjust the level of medication for a patient's comfort. "With the patients in the back there's a lot of motivation for nice smooth landings and nice smooth airwork," Ltjg. Dickinson said. "I know a lot of them are in quite a bit of pain, and I want to make their quality of life as good as it possibly can be."

From the aircrew members to the support personnel at Andrews to the air traffic controllers along the route, "The one single focus that

continued on p. 15





Above, copilot LCdr. Lane Boland prepares to brief an approach to Lawson AAF, Ga., during an AE flight from Andrews AFB, Md., on 22 February. Right, loadmaster AEC (AW/NAC) Stephen Stearns observes a patient being transferred to a waiting ambulance on the tarmac at Lawson AAF. On an aeromedical evacuation flight, the C-130's usual aircrew of two pilots, a flight engineer, and loadmasters is complemented with a five-person medical team from the 375th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron (Provisional), Det 1. Facing page, as patients are offloaded at Augusta Regional Airport, Ga., members of the in-flight medical team transfer patient records and medications to local medical personnel.



on it for them. They're as motivated as they can be to do whatever we need. It's raining, it's cold, and they're out there getting that airplane ready to take these guys where they need to go."

The AE flights also give the maintainers a sense of participating in a broader mission. AM3 Michael Johnston said, "When we're at home here on Andrews we never really see the big picture, all we know is the plane leaves, is gone for one or two days, and then it comes back. This is a good sense of hey, these planes aren't just leaving and coming back and we're fixing them so they can do it again. We're actually supporting a great cause."

everybody's on board with is taking care of the patients," according to XO Cdr. Mike Clark. For example, if asked how many space-available passengers can go along on an AE flight, OIC Cdr. Mark Bailey explained that "although that's an aircraft commander decision, we'll go to the medical folks and say, 'what's best for the patients?' If the answer is 'zero,' zero it is. The patients are the priority all the way around."

At each stop the aircraft is met on the tarmac by local medical personnel who will take the patients to their ultimate destinations. "As the second loadmaster when we pull in I'm the first one off the plane for engine shutdowns, making sure everything on the outside is secure, ABH1 (NAC) Nick Goldstein said. "Once the engines are shut down, the ramp comes down and I'll assist in backing the ambulance up to make sure it doesn't get too close to the aircraft, and chock it."

Although the Air Force medical team oversees the loading and offloading of the patients, the Navy crew members are eager to help in any way possible, whether carrying patient bags or carrying litters. ABH1 (NAC) Goldstein continued, "we do whatever we can to help them out. The quicker we get them on the bus and get them home the quicker we're on the road to get the next guys home." In a matter of minutes, with practiced ease, the patients are offloaded, the ramp is closed, the engines are started, and the Hercules takes off for the next destination.

The squadron has exceeded a 98 percent mission completion rate, thanks to its dedicated maintenance personnel CMDCM (AW/NAC) William Gary Watson explained that the maintainers "are an extremely motivated group anyhow. The Herc world is a tough world for a maintenance guy—four airplanes with sixteen engines flying for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Our main bread and butter is hauling beans and bullets and boats and trucks, so now we start hauling heroes and it puts a new perspective

More than a professional duty, the AE mission has a personal impact on the members of VR-53. "This is probably the only mission I've ever flown that I hope gets canceled every time, because that means hopefully somewhere a few days earlier some people didn't get hurt," LCdr. Boland said. "But as long as there are people out there who do need to get home who have these injuries, we're going to give them the best support we can to get them home as quickly as possible."

Although seeing the injuries of their fellow service members can be a sobering experience for the aircrew members, they are proud to fulfill this important mission. LCdr. Ellermann explained, "Sometimes you'll see somebody who six months ago was a model young soldier, and they've gone from someone who was out there serving us, to somebody whom we are now serving. And that's a very powerful experience."

From the wardroom to admin to maintenance, squadron members are aware that their efforts are directly impacting the well-being of other military personnel. Lest they forget, a whiteboard on the wall in Maintenance Control proudly proclaims "Heroes Hauled Through Your Efforts," with a running tally of the number of passengers. As of March the Capital Express has brought 569 heroes home, and each and every member of the squadron has played a part in touching these people's lives. Cdr. Clark concluded, "It's a mission you wish you didn't have to do, but we're very honored to do it." ✈️

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