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# Air Force rescue personnel support NEO weeks before the fall of Kabul



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23rd Wing Public Affairs

**MOODY AIR FORCE BASE, Ga. (AFNS)** -- In a classified briefing in mid-July, the 23rd Wing commander waited until the intel Airman finished her briefing before telling the room, "The hair on the back of your necks should be standing up; this is not the Afghanistan we all knew." Ready to deploy the forces for the operation, Col. Russell Cook, **HH-60 Pave Hawk** rescue pilot and Flying Tigers wing commander, used his young A-staff to synchronize the Secretary of Defense's Vocal Order to deploy a Personnel Recovery Task Force, including rescue units from **Moody Air Force Base**, **Nellis AFB**, Nevada, and **Davis-Monthan AFB**, Arizona, to provide combat search and rescue during the U.S. non-combatant evacuation operation at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan.

"I knew this was going to be different — all of the assumptions and experiences from the past in Afghanistan were invalid," Cook said. "I spoke with the leadership before they left and made sure they understood that. By the time they walked out the door, I was 100% confident that the team was ready to execute their critical life-saving mission in the most challenging of environments."

The deploying Airmen, led by Lt. Col. Brian Desautels, 71st Rescue Squadron and PRTF commander, were posturing to go into HKIA without any hardened base support. The only food and water they could expect were the palletized water bottles and meals ready to eat they would carry. As a real-world test of Agile Combat Employment, more than 170 multi-capable Airmen were set to deploy into a highly-contested airfield and airspace, establish security, and remain on alert to provide personnel recovery support to Americans and allied partners during the NEO.

"I have been on eight deployments, all with rescue," Desautels said. "This is by far the most dynamic."

CSAR is part of the personnel recovery mission. "It's the ability to report, locate, and support isolated friendly forces and recover and reintegrate them under friendly control," said Maj. Aaron Gordon, 23rd Wing A3, director of operations and HH-60 rescue pilot. Unlike many other Department of Defense assets, they are equipped to rescue downed Combat Air Forces aircrew in highly-contested environments, under fire and behind enemy lines.

The U.S. Air Force PRTF included: operators, maintainers and support personnel for **HC-130J Combat King II** aircraft with the 71st RQS, 23rd Maintenance and 723rd Aircraft Maintenance Squadrons from Moody AFB; Guardian Angels from the 58th Rescue Squadron and HH-60s from the 66th Rescue Squadron from Nellis AFB; and a 355th Wing advance echelon team from Davis-Monthan AFB. Of note, a GA team from Davis-Monthan AFB's 48th Rescue Squadron was already forward deployed in support of the 83rd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron, which has had an enduring presence in Afghanistan and provided personnel recovery support for AH-64 Apaches, CH-47 Chinooks and UH-60 Black Hawks for a U.S. Army task force.

## COVID-19

The main limiting factor for deployment was vaccination status for **COVID-19**. The DoD recently mandated the Pfizer vaccine after it received FDA approval, however at the time of the spin-up, deploying Airmen were faced with the possibility of not being able to exit the aircraft depending on the transient country's requirements and COVID-19 protocols. This was the main concern for commanders and became very apparent as a readiness issue for deploying forces. Given the option to deploy or pass the opportunity to the next able Airman, nearly three dozen Flying Tigers volunteered to receive the first shot of the Moderna vaccine and to receive their second dose downrange.

Within 12 hours, the 23rd Medical Group conducted more than 100 rapid COVID-19 testing and laboratory diagnostic analyses, ensuring the first airlift was launched within 32 hours of the deployment order.

Medical professionals "provided just-in-time COVID-19 vaccinations to 33 Airmen to meet the CENTCOM and AOR specific 100% COVID-19 vaccination requirement," said Col. Ronald Merchant, 23rd Medical Group commander. "Additionally, the 23rd MDG completed all medical, dental and mental health reviews over a 72-hour period with 100% of the deploying forces completing their screening requirement."

One fully-vaccinated breakthrough case was identified during testing prior to debarking at the deployed location, and the person was put in isolation while close contacts of the individual quarantined in a guarded area away from other Airmen. An Azerbaijani guard with an AK-47 was just one of many unique aspects to this nearly two-month deployment.

## Launch

The initial order from **Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin** was received Friday, July 16, around 1 p.m. EST with the official DEPORD given around 6:30 p.m. The following day, the State Department announced Operation Allies Refuge, which was directed by the president for relocation flights for Afghan nationals and their families eligible for U.S. Special Immigrant Visas.

Throughout the first 24 hours, Moody AFB's wing, group and squadron commanders, as well as the lead wing A-staff — made up largely of captains and majors — led spin-up operations and logistics, processed personnel through PDF-lines and loaded cargo onto Internal Slingable Unit containers, generated aircraft and began crew rest. The first batch of deploying Airmen arrived at the Deployment Control Center Saturday night, many with their families. The key-spouse network led family support and provided snacks and care for spouses and children.

"The Flying Tigers are always ready to fight — it showed as the whole wing came together and worked through the weekend to ensure our warfighters and their families were 100% prepared and supported," Cook said. "None better."

When the Louisiana native assumed command of the Flying Tigers, May 27, he said, "Growing up in south Louisiana I was enamored with the Flying Tigers, who at the time were at England Air Force Base. What struck me then, and what strikes me now, is when the world is in turmoil, the Flying Tigers are ready — they're the first out the door and the first to fight."

The Flying Tigers have a long storied heritage of volunteering and deploying at a moment's notice, ready to attack, rescue and prevail, but this deployment was remarkably different. The Afghanistan many of the Airmen had deployed to before provided Bagram and Kandahar Airfields as hardened bases with many forward operating bases and airfields in the country under U.S. control, but the U.S. had recently evacuated the last, largest and longest-held base at Bagram Airfield July 2.

This would be a true test of ACE without centralized command and control (C2) in a highly contested environment. Fortunately, Cook has been leading the ACE lead wing concept since he took command empowering an organic A-staff to synchronize operational planning. Calling it the next step in his 2015 study on resiliency in C2, Cook wrote one of his two graduate theses on the subject. He asserted that an "organic design is an evolutionary concept for C2 of airpower." He wrote, "Through networked peer-to-peer communication relationships, organic staffs are both producers and consumers of data."

He also asserted, "Providing contingency authority to subordinate and coordinated commanders places airpower firmly in the dominant construct of mission command." Cook not only efficiently used his A-staff, but he placed mission command directly on a squadron commander. Desautels would be coordinating directly with the forward commander of U.S. Forces - Afghanistan, a Navy rear admiral who looked directly to him. Cook even asked, "Are they used to you not being an O-6 (Colonel) yet?" It didn't matter, Desautels said. "The two-star pointed to me and said, 'I'm looking at you to give me the best CONOP possible on all those assets.' It was very unique."

The highly effective PRTF deployment of all personnel and organic airlift was executed in less than 72 hours. The original three chalks on C-17s would've all launched within 48 hours, however the final one was delayed due to maintenance and pushed to Monday morning, canceling a base-wide Airfield Assault 5K/10K run. In hindsight, HKIA would become the airfield assaulted one month later.

## **Alert**

The first chalk arrived to HKIA within 96 hours on July 20. The first few weeks in country were mixed with COVID-19 restriction of movement, quarantines, and establishing security and operations in the 83rd ERQS tactical operations center on the NATO ramp. For nearly four weeks, the PRTF of pilots, loadmasters, special mission aviators, maintainers, support personnel and GAs from the expeditionary rescue squadrons and aircraft maintenance units remained on alert. As the Taliban swept across the country and the last major cities fell, such as Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz, by mid-August the Taliban were rapidly progressing into Kabul.

"We started posting our guys at different locations. GA provided an assessment in our barracks, and maintenance personnel would stay there 24/7 with their weapons and armor patrolling the building," the PRTF commander said. "That's what allowed me to sleep. It allowed me to rest. That was really appreciated."

Desautels had just worked for 27 hours straight and been asleep for only 1 1/2 hours when he awoke to explosions and rapid gunfire on Aug. 15. He and the others on crew-rest sprinted out of their barracks joining aircrews and maintainers pulling the plugs, starting the engines and scrambling to flush the aircraft as HKIA's civilian terminal had been breached by thousands of local civilians and potentially Taliban forces, which overran Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, among other allied security forces.

"I'll never forget that feeling or sensation that we felt, like we were launching aircraft to save our lives," he said.

Hordes of people covered the runway, beginning from the civilian terminal and began swarming across to the NATO ramp, he said. "It was impressive to see the discipline of U.S. forces not to use lethal force when they were facing insurmountable odds, against an unknown threat with known weapons."



The most unique thing about this deployment that caused stress back home, he said, was the 24/7 news of HKIA, because that was the only place the deployed Airmen could be in Afghanistan. Families and spouses watched with the rest of the world, as the iconic video of a C-17 took off among a swarm of desperate Afghans who resorted to holding on to the outside and wheel chamber of the departing airplane. Not caught on video and less than a minute later, both HC-130J Combat King II took off on a sliver of remaining runway. With seconds to spare, they were airborne skimming just 10 feet above the crowd.

"I was able to contact the CFACC (Combined Forces Air Component Commander) and received authorization to take off from the taxiway, if needed," Desautels said. "The strategic message: we would have a runway." The aircraft, Fever 11 and 12, remained outside the threat, loitering for 13.1 hours and aerial refueling twice with **KC-135 Stratotanker** and **KC-10 Extender** tankers, from McConnell and Travis AFBs respectively.

Pararescuemen from the 58th and 83rd ERQS secured the NATO ramp, while 66th and 71st ERQS operators and maintainers secured the PRTF barracks and joint operations center and Role 2 medical treatment facility. The Role 2, with U.S. and Norwegian military medical professionals, was close to executing their "Alamo Plan" (to collapse into a safe and hardened structure) based on the real but unknown threat, but they were directed to remain open to support casualties. To stay open, the senior enlisted leader of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan Forward said he needed people to cover security. PRTF pilots, maintainers and support personnel donned their vests, helmets and M-4 rifles and manned defensive fighting positions.

"One of our captains was on the rooftop taking effective sniper fire," Desautels said. "Every enemy combatant was taking every opportunity to incite more chaos in what was already a chaotic event."

After this moment, priorities shifted to force protection to ensure all personnel on HKIA were safe, which meant lockdown and having a round chambered, he said. After the surge of people, they needed an assessment of the airfield as Navy Rear Adm. Peter Vasely, commander of USFOR-A FWD, was talking with leadership in Washington, D.C. and CENTCOM. Reinforcements by the U.S. Marine Corps 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division, and several National Guard units deployed into HKIA beginning Aug. 18-19, bringing the number of U.S. forces from less than 1,000 to almost 6,000.

"I crossed the runway with a small security detail, about 100 yards from the Taliban with gunfire going off," Desautels said. "Single digit hours after regaining the perimeter, we determined we were going to go over there."

The initial plan was to go over at 2 a.m., but instead they were delayed until 9 a.m. crossing toward the unsecured side in broad daylight. "I didn't even think about it until later and how intense it was, and how close we were and unsecure and on the fringe," Desautels said. "I filled the role of being a pilot and an engineer with the Afghan Chief Aviation Authority for Afghanistan (the FAA equivalent). We wanted to get to the south ramp to determine the feasibility of the southside of the terminal to receive passengers and to operate civilian aircraft from that particular ramp."

Over the next 11 days, PJs treated Afghan civilians for injuries caused by the amassing crowds and heat — including four urgent and 19 non-urgent patients. In one harrowing instance, a 58th ERQS PJ carried four children to safety after their parents were trampled. Outside the gates, 66th and 71st ERQS Airmen escorted American citizens, coalition partners, green-card holders, dual citizens and at-risk Afghans with U.S. SIVs. They identified and rescued one at-risk Afghan, who was one of the first female Afghan Air Force pilots, along with her AAF husband and toddler.

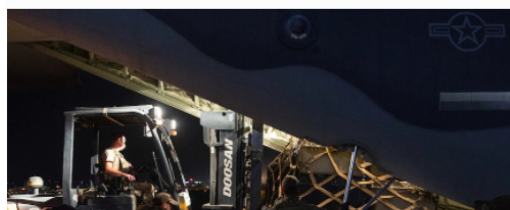
A simultaneous effort by retired veterans, contractors and former instructors of Moody AFB's 81st Fighter Squadron were stateside working tireless operations to help get the Afghan Air Force pilots and maintainers — who had lived and trained in south Georgia — safely from Afghanistan. They took photos of the wall of graduates to provide photos

and trained in south Georgia – safely from Afghanistan. They took photos of the wall of graduates to provide photos with names to the PRTF and Marines running security. Community leaders and congressional staff members helped them successfully get U.S. visas. The process wasn't smooth nor without catastrophe, but after many attempts and controlled movements, they were evacuated to other locations.

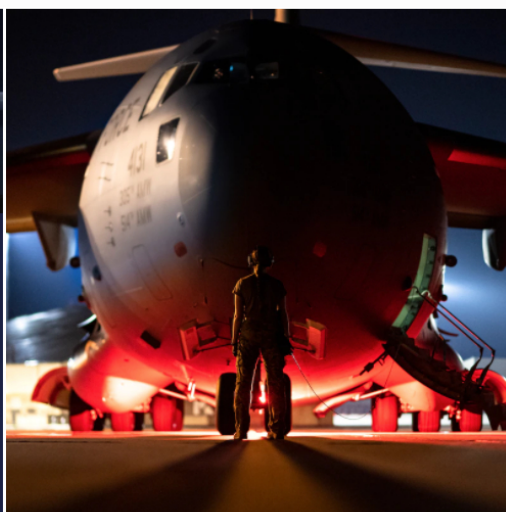
PRTF Airmen spent a lot of their free time helping at the gates, since the Marines were tasked with providing security. "They would help the Marines out with medical care for evacuees and pulling AMCITS in the crowd and usher them to the front. The critical gap was never filled because it was an arduous task just to get people through," Desautels said. "We coordinated with the USMC JTF-CR commander, to help fill that critical gap." Airmen also built shelters for Afghans, distributed food and water, cared for children and soothed babies as they were waiting for evacuation flights. In all, PRTF Airmen helped evacuate more than 500 people.

In addition, while most embassies had already evacuated, Desautels said he personally coordinated security and flights with the Ambassador of Pakistan for 458 Pakistanis from their embassy, as well as liaised with the Ukrainian defense attaché to evacuate close to 150 Ukrainians and Afghans.

As a steady stream of C-17s entered HKIA, PRTF personnel started tracking military and commercial flights into HKIA. "The data they were tracking was pivotal to managing airflow/airspace and requests for additional airlift support based on the numbers they got through the gates," Desautels said. On one occasion after they received an intel tip, five people onboard one of the commercial flights intended to hijack the aircraft. "Our team worked to get them clear of the NATO ramp, relocated to the north side away from friendly forces, then ultimately onto the south side where the situation was handled," he said.



23rd Wing deployed a Personnel Recovery Task Force, including units from Moody; Nellis AFB, Nev.; Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz.; to provide combat search and rescue during the U.S. non-combatant evacuation operation in



## ISIS attack

The Defense and State Departments both sent messages to American citizens and commanders warning of an imminent attack at the gates Thursday morning, Aug. 26.

"Many of our Airmen had just been pulling AMCITs, coalition partners and SIVs at Abbey Gate," Desautels said. "The harrowing work speaks to the "Airmen of Rescue," who live for the mission to its core." The Airmen rescued about 50 people before 2 p.m. while the Marines provided security.

The sewage alley near Abbey Gate was packed with over 10,000 people when it was bombed around 6 p.m. local time. The terrorists then engaged with small arms fire.

time. The terrorists then engaged with small arms fire.

"I was able to get full accountability in minutes of all the personnel in our organization, then worked with the GA squadron commanders to determine their feasibility to support the Role 2," he added.

"I'd like to think the deployments I've had over the years prepared me to be the most effective commander I could be," he said. One of those lessons came from pararescueman Chief Master Sgt. Alan Lankford, who shared how important accountability was when his unit came under attack in 2011 at Camp Bastion, Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

"You can't provide support without having accountability," Desautels said. "From day one, we did drills, exercises and Primary, Alternate, Contingency and Emergency plans for accountability. I was so proud of the PRTF to get full accountability within minutes. Once accounted for, I told them to find out where they could help."

Outside the Role 2, PJs were providing initial trauma care to two dozen casualties, and the PRTF sent five additional PJs to the Marine Casualty Collection Point, which treated close to 20. Other rescue Airmen supported further CASEVACs on HH-60G Pave Hawks and Army CH-47 Chinooks. An additional team was postured on a HC-130J to CASEVAC patients out of HKIA to a higher level of care, but were not needed because a C-17 with a Critical Care Air Transport Team had been alerted.

"There were lots of very badly injured people hurt ... lots of blood," he said. "The surgeons were worn out. Many died on the operating table."

Eleven Marines, one Navy corpsman and one Soldier were killed in the attack. Seventeen service members were wounded and received care at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center at **Ramstein Air Base**, Germany, before being transported to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. One Marine was still in "serious but stable condition," according to a U.S. Marines spokesperson, as reported Oct. 6.

More than a thousand service members attended the ramp ceremony of the 13 KIA at HKIA. Ramp ceremonies have historically never been shown before, but this one was mistakenly uploaded and then removed on the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service. On social media, veterans and servicemembers shared the photos and memories of their own experiences at ramp ceremonies, as the fall of Afghanistan has been more emotional for many who have served there.

"We paid our respects as they ushered them to the C-17 Freedom Flight," Desautels said. "Somber moment for everyone."

#### Off Alert

The day after the bombing during an operations and intelligence update at Moody AFB's command post, Col. Chris Richardson, 347th Rescue Group commander said, "That's what the men and women are doing that serve beside you. They're kicking ass."

To maintain alert until all U.S. forces were out of Afghanistan, the PRTF relocated to Pakistan to ensure they could provide CSAR capabilities as the final manned aircraft exited the AOR.

"Our ability to start off in a TOC in a small operations center for the 83rd to support a team of 10 people, where we got our Initial Operational Capability, and then to move into a JOC where we could have everyone brief for 100 people, and then from there we collapsed back into the 83rd ERQS TOC as we prepared for our retrograde plan — ultimately relocating to a separate location out of country to hold alert for the final days — to put the whole force forward in another country," Desautels said. "That whole thing was very high risk, nobody else would move there, and we went



another country," Desautels said. "That whole thing was very high risk, nobody else would move there, and we went. Pretty impressive."

The last American military aircraft flew out of Kabul around 11:59 p.m., Aug. 30, meeting the Aug. 31 deadline negotiated with the Taliban and U.S. officials. Soon after, Desautels sent a message, "Mission complete. Off alert as of 2135Z per CFACC actual."

That others may live

The U.S. Air Force led the largest NEO in U.S. history — in 17 days the DoD evacuated approximately 124,000 people, including 6,000 Americans. The rescue Airmen from Moody, Nellis and Davis-Monthan AFBs were there weeks prior, ready to — Rescue, That Others May Live — and their life-saving stories of heroism and bravery will continue to be documented. In early September, Moody AFB's Flying Tigers, families and community leaders welcomed home the returning Airmen who were waving the American flag out the top of the taxiing aircraft.

"This deployment is probably a bigger life impact," said Lt. Col. Maxwell Miller, 71st RQS director of operations. "Marking the event is a significant event for the base, for the Air Force, and really for the military who have served in Afghanistan." This year was the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, when the U.S. homeland was attacked by Al-Qaeda terrorists and in response, servicemembers were first deployed to Afghanistan, commencing operations Oct. 7, 2001. For twenty years, with the help of coalition partners, U.S. Airmen, Marines, Soldiers, Sailors, Coasties, Guardians and government civilians have done their sacred duty, well and faithfully, to protect America.

Mission complete

Editor's note: This article has been thoroughly reviewed for operational security by U.S. Central Command as of Oct. 6, 2021.

AFWN	USAF	AF	Air Force	Moody AFB	ACC	Air Combat Command	CSAF	combat search and rescue	Afghanistan	deployment	HH-60
Pave Hawk	nellis afb	Davis-Monthan AFB	Personnel Recovery Task Force	PRTF	Agile Combat Employment	Ace	HC-130J	Combat King II	H-64		
	Apaches	CH-47	Chinooks	UH-60	Black Hawks	Operation Allies Rescue	KC-135	Stratotanker	KC-10	Extender	

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