

Feature

Darmstadt to Dhahran: MEDEVAC Self-Deployment to Desert Shield

45th Medical Company*

Dustoff crews provided DEDICATED UNHESITATING SERVICE TO OUR FIGHTING FORCES.

The 45th Medical Company (AA), Stuttgart, Germany, filled a dire need for aeromedical evacuation assets in the early stages of Operation Desert Shield. The 45th, augmented by other elements of the 421st Medical Battalion, performed the longest helicopter unit self-deployment in the history of the US Army. This precedent setting movement from Germany to Saudi Arabia saved invaluable Military Airlift Command space and, more importantly, put medical evacuation aircraft on the ground performing their life-saving mission long before they otherwise could have been operational in theater. The story of this successful record setting self-deployment offers a chance to examine a unit and a concept on the cutting edge of US Army aviation.

*45th Medical Company, Wiesbaden, Germany.

Photographs courtesy of Capt Larry Connel, 236th Medical Company (Air Ambulance), Landstuhl, Germany.

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On Aug 12, 1990, the commander of the 45th Medical Company was summoned to the 421st Medical Battalion headquarters in Darmstadt, Germany. There, he was notified that a self-deployment to Saudi Arabia was being contemplated. Later that same night, the officers of the 45th were informed of the possibility of deployment. The aircrew selection process began, and training needs were identified. Early on, a requirement for extended fuel capability became apparent. Coincidentally, the battalion had just received its first External Stores Support System (ESSS) equipment, three more were immediately requisitioned. Though not enough for the planned deployment of twelve aircraft, an innovative plan began to take seed. This plan would become operationally significant in the course of the next few days as diplomatic clearances were obtained for some countries but denied for others. The need to perhaps provide a self refueling capabil-

ity was fast becoming a reality.

On Aug 15, the 45th Medical Company deployed crews and aircraft to the battalion headquarters at Darmstadt. There they were joined by other aircrews and aircraft from the other two companies in the battalion. These units are the 236th Medical Company from Landstuhl and the 159th Medical Company (AA) collocated with the 421st Medical Battalion headquarters at Darmstadt. Aircrews were selected based on total UH-60 experience, maturity, and area of expertise (ie, safety, maintenance, aviation life support, operations, and standardization). Leadership positions were identified and four forward support teams of three aircrews each were conceptualized. The personnel assignments would change slightly but the structure of the task force was now in place.

August 20 was selected for departure. Four days of intensive preparation ensued. Logistical concerns at



the different stopover points dictated that the 12 aircraft task force be broken up into two flights of six aircraft. The second flight of six would leave three to four days after the first, so all energies were concentrated on the first flight's aircraft and crews. Two ESSS aircraft were outfitted and training begun on the system. Intelligence briefings were scheduled and NBC requirements were identified. TACAN/DME and Global Position System (GPS) had been rush-ordered and installed. Desert TA50 items were procured and issued. Final POM qualification was completed. ASE desert survival, overwater emergency procedures, GPS, tactics and aircraft survivability equipment classes also took place. Forced consumption of water was initiated to preclude any dehydration problems. The outstanding support given by the staff of the HQ, 7th Medical Command, by the US Army, as well as the Nellingen, Darmstadt and Landstuhl military communities, during this pre-deployment period was critical to mission success. They truly gave the task force everything needed to "make it happen."

A slight snag occurred on Aug 19 when a problem with diplomatic clearances put everything on hold for 24 hours. The 7th MEDCOM staff made an all-night effort with embassies and Unified Command staffs to obtain clearances. On the afternoon of August, the problem was alleviated and the go ahead given for a 6:45AM departure on August 21. It was a humid, rainy morning as the six UH-60s lined up in trail formation. The two ESSS aircraft were chalks five and six because of the different take-off technique required for their heavy load. The ESSS aircraft were equipped with rescue hoists and were identified for overwater rescue operations. Their extended loitering capability was essential in that approximately eight hours of flight time would be over water with some legs in excess of 220 nautical miles.

The first day was the longest of the deployment, with crews logging 7.5

hours flight time. Brindisi, Italy was reached after a difficult flight due to low visibility through the Austrian Alps and down the east coast of Italy. The crews retired after midnight for an all too brief night's sleep before setting out the following morning. Two UH-60s from the 11th Aviation Group joined the MEDEVAC flight at Brindisi and greatly assisted the mission with SATCOM communication. Approximately four flight-hours were flown on the second day across the Adriatic Sea to Aroxos, Greece and then on to Athens, Greece. On the third day the flight proceeded to Rhodes and then to Paphos, Cyprus, involving four more hours of flight time. Refueling times, customs and diplomatic clearance problems again resulted in crews experiencing another 18-hour day. The fourth day brought with it the biggest challenge of the deployment.

The leg from Paphos, Cyprus to Cairo, Egypt was 312 nautical miles, no problem for the ESSS aircraft but out of the question for the non-ESSS UH-60s. Port Said, located 215 nautical miles from Akrotiri, was selected in planning to be the airport of entry due to Egyptian and international constraints on other locations. Port Said, however, has no fuel available. So

during the flight, the ESSS aircraft pumped fuel from their external fuel pods into the main fuel tanks. Upon landing at the hot and dusty coastal airstrip, the ESSS aircraft were positioned so that one of the non-ESSS aircraft was able to park on each side of it. Then, a unique hand pump and hose system devised during the planning phase, was safely grounded and pumped fuel from the ESSS aircraft directly into the main tanks of the modified aircraft. The simple but effective system worked flawlessly and should be looked at for standardized use. The flight, now with adequate fuel, continued on to Cairo West, about 60 miles west of Cairo. Further complications with flight clearances into restricted airspace necessitated a delay for the night.

The next day, August 25, brought the 45th Medical Company aircraft over the Red Sea into Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. The Saudi's graciously greeted our arrival. Another long route of about seven flight hours ensued the next day, taking the flight all the way to Riyadh. Riyadh was a bustle of activity and aircraft parking was at a premium, but we would remain there for two days awaiting further instructions and complete badly needed maintenance on the aircraft. The final desti-



The smile of a child in the middle of the war.

nation of Dhahran, which was even busier than Riyadh, was reached on Aug 27, 1990.

The second group of helicopters departed that same day from Germany. This flight followed the same route as the first group until Brindisi, Italy. During the flight one of the aircraft developed a significant rotor vibration. Upon inspection a blade skin separation was discovered. The next morning a repair was attempted after phone calls to AVSCOM. Maintenance

drilled over 30 holes with a hand drill and injected prop and rotor glue with syringes from our medical supply sets and allowed the repair to dry overnight with concrete weights. The field expedient repair brought the blade back into track. An Italian air sea rescue unit and other Italian Air Force maintenance personnel were instrumental in this successful repair. Their Sikorsky aircraft used many of the same tools and test sets, all of which were eagerly loaned to our mainte-

nance technicians. This was just another excellent example of the outstanding host nation support along the route. Italian, Greek, Egyptian and Saudi Arabian support consistently insured the success of the mission. Billeting areas, food, water, fuel, and weather information were eagerly provided at all stops. Fortunately the weather, though hot, was cooperative along the entire route except in the Alps. It is questionable whether the Alps could have been safely crossed in the fall or winter in that MEAs were above 15,000, making VFR flight necessary. Hunting through the Brenner Pass between Austria and Italy in bad weather is not recommended.

Experience from the first flight resulted in a change of landing sites. The 2nd group of aircraft proceeded on to Araxos, Greece then to Santorini Island, Greece, thus avoiding Athens which proved to be a great timesaver. From this point the flight joined up with aircraft from the 11th Aviation Brigade and proceeded directly to Megisti Island, Greece just 200 yards off the Turkish coast. A runway running literally from end to end of the island provided an ideal place for two CH-47 helicopters from the E Company 502nd Aviation Regiment to provide a much needed refueling stop. The Chinook unit flawlessly executed a "hot gas" operation allowing the entire flight of eight UH-60s to refuel in less than 30 minutes. We were then on our way to that day's final destination of Paphos, Greece. The 11th Aviation Brigade, using their SATCOM capability made all arrangements for our arrival, including the delivery of a new blade, greatly relieving our maintenance officer's production of gastric juices from using the "field repaired" blade.

A short nights sleep, a quick test flight with the new blade, and we were off to Port Said, Egypt. Once again the hand pump fuel system was used, sucking fuel from ESSS equipped aircraft into UH-60 "slicks," making the flight to Cairo West possible.



Medevac helicopter bringing patients for treatment to Navy hospital ship.



Self-deployed medevac helicopters.

The temperature was 95F and remained above 100F in the cockpit. After refueling and saying our farewells to the 11th Aviation Brigade, our crews proceeded on to Hurgado Air Base, Egypt for yet another refueling stop. Egyptian hospitality was out in force to greet us with food and drinks, as well as all requested services. It was getting late so an immediate departure was made across the Red Sea to Tabuk, Saudi Arabia as an overnight stop. The US Naval Blockade was very evident as we passed overhead, making crews a little nervous. The global positioning system and TACAN/DME were continuously proving essential for navigation and FIR reporting. Thanks to a US Air Force C-141 at altitude returning from Riyadh, the flight was able to report entering Saudi airspace to Jeddah. Flying VFR, low level, off airways made all communication difficult and pilots anxious about air defense systems that we passed over.

The next morning the flight traversed the Great Nafud Desert stopping at remarkably well equipped and efficient Saudi airfields, all of which seemed to be in the middle of no-

where. Once again the GPS proved invaluable. At all stops the Saudi Arabians proved to be gracious hosts offering their delicious hot sweet tea and food. Jet A-1 fuel was running about nine cents a gallon in contrast to the temperature now over 110F and off the scale in the cockpit. Riyadh again served as an overnight stop for the second flight as well as a maintenance catchup point. Haunted by hydraulic, electrical, and chip detector problems, maintenance was glad to



get a couple of hours to work out the bugs. Upon arrival in Dhahran, the first group of six aircraft were already performing missions. During these early days of Desert Shield, the 45th Medical Company was responsible for the entire XVIII Airborne Corps air evacuation mission. Aircraft were spread out over the entire AOR until more evacuation units arrived.

Miraculously, all 12 aircraft made the final destination of Dhahran. Some minimal maintenance problems occurred enroute, but through use of the circled red X and deferred maintenance, delays were short. From the beginning, all aircraft chosen for the flight were required by USAREUR to have a minimum of three hundred hours remaining to the next phase maintenance inspection, resulting in the selection of the best aircraft from the 421st Medical Battalion.

The excitement and sense of accomplishment generated by this self-deployment will forever be a source of pride for all involved. About 120 days into the mission, the 45th has flown over 1600 hours and in excess of 1000 patients without any incidents. ●

