



Maintenance team keeps rescue helicopters flying

by Master Sgt. Bill Huntington
442nd Fighter Wing Public Affairs (deployed)

9/9/2005 - **JACKSON, Miss.** -- As Air Force rescue helicopter aircrews plucked survivors from flooded New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina, they drew upon adrenaline to keep going during the 10- to 12-hour missions.

However, to keep their HH-60 Pave Hawk aircraft flying, they relied on a concerted effort by Air Force Reserve Command, Air National Guard and active-duty maintenance crews. The maintainers worked 24 hours a day to sustain the monumental rescue effort that began as soon as the Airmen arrived.

Reservists from the 920th Rescue Wing, Patrick Air Force Base, Fla., arrived here at 10:10 p.m. Aug. 30, less than 36 hours after the storm passed. They immediately began flying into the devastated city and saving people.

"We got here and there was not another soul around," said Chief Master Sgt. Jeff Curl of the wing's 308th Rescue Squadron. "At first we thought we were in the wrong place, but we just dropped our bags and sent the helicopters on to New Orleans." Other units began operations as soon as they arrived, and the ramp soon became a beehive of activity with the maintainers launching and recovering aircraft.

"We started working just as soon as we got here," said Staff Sgt. Richard Lee of the Reserve's 943rd Maintenance Squadron, Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz. "We worked day and night keeping these aircraft flying." Chief Curl agreed.

"It was pretty grueling for awhile," the chief said. "We were going around-the-clock for the first couple of days."

Aircrews and maintainers from rescue units in Portland, Ore.; Cocoa Beach, Fla.; Las Vegas, Nev.; Tucson, Ariz.; Valdosta, Ga.; and Long Island, N.Y., soon melded into one unit.

"I got notified (Aug. 30) about 10 a.m.," said Capt. Craig Giles, 347th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, Moody AFB, Ga. "They said it looks like we're going off-station to do some helicopter operations in support of the hurricane (relief). By 10 p.m. we were on a C-130 coming out here (from Georgia)."

Eleven maintainers and three aircrews brought three helicopters with them. Two more helicopters arrived later. The Airmen had been told that it would likely be just a three-day trip. At the time, the magnitude of the storm's damage wasn't completely understood, and the scope of what was to come was only slowly being revealed.

"It was probably a full day (after arriving) when we realized how many more units they were sending in here -- how many more helicopters and how big it was going to get," the captain said. "We realized this wasn't just a three- or four-day trip."

Most of the public utilities were still unavailable in Jackson when the Airmen arrived. The city is more than 180 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, and the hurricane did a lot of damage to the area.

"We got here and there was no water, no electricity and no phones," Chief Curl said. "When we got a chance to rest, we slept in the dining hall."

Most of the Jackson host base unit, the Mississippi Air National Guard's 172nd Airlift Wing, had been activated. As a result, the incoming Airmen faced limited resources similar to those encountered at an austere location.

"It was pretty much we have a ramp and we have hangar space," Captain Giles said. "We had to make do with that."

"It was very much like a contingency," he said. "While that's what we've been trained to do, I never thought I'd (have to) do it in Mississippi."

The Guard Airmen pitched in to make life better for the incoming wave of rescuers and continued to provide "above and beyond" service throughout the deployment. No longer being used to house the visiting Airmen, the dining facility began serving hot meals, and a tent-housed laundry facility was put in service.

"The support here was just great; they gave us everything we needed, plus some," Captain Giles said. "I never heard word 'no' from any of them for whatever I needed."

The maintenance arm of the deployed rescue units came together under the direction of Lt. Col. Kurt Wilson, 347th Maintenance Group commander from Moody AFB. He was tasked by the Air Force Special Operations Command to take the lead in maintenance operations.

"We basically had five (separate maintenance) systems," Colonel Wilson said. "The first thing I recognized that needed to be done was to bring everyone together as a unit."

That vision solidified into working practices, and the success of his efforts was recognized by even the youngest maintainers.

"We've got Guard, Reserve and active duty all working together just as one ... swapping (aircraft) parts, helping each other out," said Airman 1st Class Ed Bellus of the 347th AMXS, Moody AFB. "It just flows like one team."

Tech. Sgt. Julian Alajos of the 920th MXS and his fellow maintainers from Patrick AFB supported the crew chiefs from the New York ANG's 106th RQS until that unit's maintenance team arrived.

"We're working as quickly as we can to fix everything as it comes in to us," Sergeant Alajos said. "Everybody's like that. We're getting everything done a lot faster than normal (to keep the aircraft flying)."

"I've kept the mindset that someone's life is depending on (our efforts)," Airman Bellus said. "If I can get this aircraft up quicker, they'll be able to save more people."

The effort has paid off. By flying around the clock, the total-force team saved more than 4,000 lives in the first eight days. On a single mission, typically lasting 10 to 12 hours, one crew was able to save 187 people.

"We're doing pretty well, I think," said Airman 1st Class Robert Eisen, an instruments and flight control system apprentice with the 347th AMXS. "As long as we are staying ahead of operations, I think we are doing pretty well."

Colonel Wilson believes their work is making a big difference to the rescue effort and is proud of each maintainer's contribution.

"I'd go to battle with any one of them," he said. "We haven't lost a mission (due to maintenance problems) yet, and that is awesome. It's a testimony to these (folks) who are waking up every morning, putting their uniform on and recognizing what's ahead of them." (Sergeant Huntington is from Whiteman AFB, Mo. AFRC News Service)