



Te Matataua

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Humanitarian Evacuation and Airlift

Early air power theorists considered aircraft as machines of war and wrote about aerial combat strategy accordingly. Less is written about using military aircraft for transport roles such as humanitarian evacuation and non-military airlift. They differ from military operations as passengers are civilians instead of military personnel and may require inter-country relocation. Depending on the environmental, political or military conditions imposed on the population and on the airlift operation itself, there can be numerous issues to resolve or endure, including the following:

- The physical condition of civilians is often unknown and they may require special care.
- Airlift personnel may have little authority over their passengers and the evacuation itself.
- There may be no unity of command as various agencies may be involved.
- Airlift capacity may exceed the ability of receiving areas to handle the volume and health state of passengers.
- Evacuation during conflict is disorderly and aircraft may be overwhelmed by desperate people.
- Governments are sensitive to, and can place restrictions upon, foreign 'soldiers' assisting their country.
- Humanitarian airlift operations receive considerable publicity, including criticism.

One of the earliest recorded instances of military aircraft being used for humanitarian flights date from 1928 with the large scale evacuation of civilians from Kabul during December 1928 until February 1929. Afghanistan was then in a state of rebellion against King Amanullah that threatened hundreds of foreign embassy staff, including their families. Fortunately, the RAF had a range of aircraft in India and Iraq, including seven Vickers Victorias and a Hindali troop carrier. The Victorias could only carry 10 passengers at the 6000ft altitude of Kabul, and because they had to fly over 15,000ft mountains to India, aircraft were stripped of any extra equipment and weight allowing up to 20 passengers to be carried¹. The aircraft collectively flew over 45,000km in support of the evacuation² during one of the harshest winters with temperatures plummeting to -19°C. The aircraft were not insulated and some had

open cockpits. Passengers were nearly frozen to death and had to endure severe turbulence when flying over the mountains. On one occasion, tribesmen, camels and elephants were used to trammel a runway clear of snow so aircraft could land³. Despite the arduous conditions, occasionally while under fire in the middle of an armed rebellion; no lives were lost and the mission is recorded as one of the greatest humanitarian operations undertaken by an air force.

In 1947 the partition of India into two nation states, a Hindu majority India and a Muslim majority Pakistan, brought about the largest human migration in history, as 15 million displaced people moved to their new countries. Every aircraft that could be found was used to assist the exodus. Dakotas were stripped of all non-essential equipment except vital instruments, so that they could increase passenger loading from 28 to 100 per flight².

The Berlin airlift during 1948/49 was a tremendous achievement as it bypassed a land blockade to move over 1.8 million tons of freight and 240,000 people in 277,804 sorties (each sortie included the flight into Berlin and out again). Three RNZAF crews flew 473 sorties over 13 months moving 1577 tons of mainly coal and newsprint during the airlift. Return flights were often filled with children suffering malnutrition⁴.

Operation Babylift carried out in 1975 to rescue Vietnamese orphans and refugees during the Vietnam War offers a good case study of the issues faced in a complex evacuation operation. Inefficient bureaucracy, evacuee health check requirements; attending babies before, during and after flights, securing cardboard bassinets, an aircraft crash, massed panic to board aircraft, political impositions, and lack of central command dogged an otherwise successful operation⁵.

The RNZAF flew freight and passengers across the Cook Strait under Operation Pluto between 1969 and 1983 in conjunction with Safe Air, who operated an inter-island freight service at the time. The first Operation Pluto was enacted to help move a pre-Christmas backlog of north to south freight, mainly light and bulky goods such as

toys and foodstuffs, as there was insufficient capacity on the ferries. Freight went to Wellington airport to be loaded into Hercules and Bristol Freighters bound for Blenheim. Approximately 350 flights carried almost 5000 tons of freight.

The second airlift was undertaken late 1971 in response to industrial action, with the objective of moving people and vehicles. Approximately 320 flights were undertaken, again using Hercules and Bristol Freighters.

The third airlift was prompted by maritime unions stopping work in protest of the visit of the USS Truxtun in September 1976. Approximately 600 cars and 1,400 passengers were carried by the RNZAF and Safe Air. Three more inter-island airlifts were carried out in 1979, 1980 and 1983⁶ using Hercules and Andover aircraft.

In 1993 the RNZAF deployed three Andovers to the Unified Task Force in Somalia. This was a peace-making multinational force put in place to prevent further human suffering in the face of increasing anarchy within the country. The detachment of 62 personnel spent 5 months based in Mogadishu providing humanitarian relief.

28 December 2004 saw an RNZAF Hercules deployed to Sumatra, Indonesia for two months in the wake of the devastating Boxing Day earthquake and tsunami. The international response to the emergency was overwhelming and required considerable de-confliction to ensure there was sufficient ramp space available for aircraft to load and unload freight and passengers. An RNZAF Hercules carrying water filtration equipment had to divert to Medan for that very reason. The RNZAF carried out 29 sorties, carrying 1477 relief workers and refugees, and around 215 tonnes of aid.

The Christchurch earthquake of 2011 again saw the RNZAF involved in a major airlift operation moving injured persons and aid supplies. C-130s and 757s were used to move more than 4,800 passengers and 316 tonnes of freight.

Following RNZAF support to Tropical Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu in 2015, Tropical Cyclone Winston hit Fiji in February 2016. RNZAF 757, C-130, NH-90 and

RNZN SH-2G(I) aircraft were deployed to move personnel and over 300 tonnes of aid.

Recently, the severe earthquake that cut-off Kaikoura in November 2016 led to the deployment of RNZAF and RNZN aircraft to evacuate people from the area, and bring in and distribute relief supplies. Civilian aircraft and helicopters from international navies assisted the airlift.

The NZDF uses its resources and capabilities in conjunction with government departments to ensure a rapid and meaningful response to natural disasters. New Zealand has strong cultural and political ties with Pacific Island countries and naturally desires to provide help when disaster strikes the region.

Being prepared to respond to disasters is a key requirement of the NZDF, and the RNZAF remains ready to assist the next humanitarian disaster, occurring in New Zealand or internationally. The Future Air Mobility Capability Project will ensure the flexibility of aircraft and capacity to conduct humanitarian evacuation and airlift operations in the future.

Key Points

- The air power a nation brings to bear in support of humanitarian evacuation and airlift includes its military and civilian aircraft.
- Humanitarian airlift occurs with little notice or preparation and can take months to complete.
- The RNZAF is prepared to assist in a humanitarian disaster.

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