

RAF exchange officers contribute to US rescue and aid effort

Royal Air Force personnel serving on exchange with the US Air Force have played an important role in the relief efforts following the devastation wreaked by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria.

Aerospace Battle Manager Flight Lieutenant Rob Parr is currently serving on an exchange tour in Oklahoma. On 31st August he was aboard an E-3 AWACS aircraft flying over Houston, Texas where Hurricane Harvey had caused significant damage. He said:

“I flew two missions on board the USAF E-3G Sentry, one 6.4 hours long, the other 13.4 hours long from Tinker AFB, Oklahoma. Our job was to provide enhanced radio communication between the helicopter assets and ground based elements to help better co-ordinate the rescue efforts.”



The team aboard the aircraft tracked the status of hospitals, landing zones and provided coordinates and taskings to helicopters undertaking rescues.

“With so much confusion on the ground surrounding who needed to be rescued and what facilities were open, the whole crew felt like we were making a real difference, especially when we would get a call from our ground agency giving us only a street address and cell phone number and vague details of what the survivors’ status were.

“Then we were able to figure out where the location was and task an asset to go and assist. It was also great working with such a wide range of civilian, Coastguard, Navy, Air Force and Army assets all trying to help out the best they could.”

As a direct result of the assistance rendered on the two flights Flt Lt Parr participated, a total of 51 rescues were conducted recovering 218 survivors including three pregnant women and six patients in critical condition.



Summing up the sorties Flt Lt Parr said: “The mission was great, it was probably one of the most rewarding and interesting missions I’ve done in my seven years of flying on AWACS.”

When Hurricane Irma struck the Caribbean Flt Lt Matt Jenkinson piloted a C-17 transport aircraft from its base in North Carolina to Illinois, one of 36 C-17s evacuated from Charleston AFB ahead of the storm. Once there he was put on three hours standby.

“I flew two Hurricane relief Operations” he said. “One was immediately before Irma struck where we landed four hours before the storm arrived to deliver a

search & rescue team and medical & blood supplies. The second was after the storm had passed through – again delivering urgent supplies.”

He added, “We took an Air Traffic Control tower into St Thomas in the US Virgin Islands along with water & food provisions then headed, via Tampa for fuel, to Texas. There we loaded 130 US tons of water and food and took it to St Croix the following day. We received a waiver to operate on night vision goggles into the airfield at night.”



The military personnel exchange programme in its current guise commenced in 1971 when the RAF and USAF agreed to allow each other’s personnel to fill reciprocal positions. Designed to maximise the special relationship the UK shared with the US, the benefits to many areas of air force activity were immediately apparent. In consequence the exchange programme grew steadily to encompass agreements with the US Navy, Marine Corps, Army and Coast Guard.

The range of specialisations also broadened and now embraces everything from Air Transport, Fast Jet, Rotary and ISR platforms, to Project Engineers, Research and Development, Intelligence, Cyber, Space and Force Protection specialists to name but a few. The programme with the United States today stands at an exchange of 55 RAF personnel who have swapped places with 40 Americans now stationed in the UK. Similar exchanges take place with a number of other nations and RAF personnel serve around the world.

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