

## Operation TOMODACHI

On 11 March 2011, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake occurred off the northern coast of Japan resulting in a massive Tsunami that devastated parts of Japan, leaving as many as 28,000 people killed or missing as well as untold millions in property damage. It was one of the worst natural disasters in Japan's history. The United States Geologic Survey considered the earthquake to be the fourth largest in the world since 1900 and the largest in Japan for at least 130 years. While the Japanese government immediately responded, the United States government stood ready to support. Indeed, all four services would play significant roles in supporting the Japanese response efforts. One day after the Tsunami, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates authorized United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) to conduct disaster relief operations and approved \$35 million in funds for that purpose. Admiral Robert Willard, USPACOM Commander, directed United States Forces Japan (USFJ), to conduct Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief Operations. The effort was given the name Operation TOMODACHI, the Japanese word for "Friend."

The U.S. Air Force contributions to Operation TOMODACHI began with the deployment of HH-60 *Pave Hawk* helicopters of Kadena Air Base's 33d Rescue Squadron to conduct search and rescue operations. In the United States, Headquarters Air Mobility Command (AMC) at Scott AFB, Illinois, placed its forces on alert. Soon, USAF C-17 *Globemaster IIs* from Dover AFB, Delaware, Travis AFB, California, Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, and the Mississippi Air National Guard ferried supplies, personnel and equipment to Japan, while Travis AFB KC-10 *Extenders* provide aerial re-fueling support. In addition, Yokota based C-130 *Hercules* transports of the 36th Airlift Squadron delivered cargo and supplies and conducted reconnaissance missions of the devastated areas.

Of key concern during the recovery efforts was the status of the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Plant, which had been damaged by the tsunami and led to concerns of a massive radiation leak that would flood the already devastated region. To determine the extent of the damage, the USAF deployed U-2 *Dragon Lady* and RQ-4 *Global Hawk* aircraft to conduct reconnaissance of the damaged plant. In addition, the 459th Airlift Squadron at Yokota AB, Tokyo, deployed a UH-1 *Huey* and a C-12 *Huron* to check for contaminated areas and to conduct low-level radiation mapping missions. Finally, the Air Force Radiation Assessment Team (AFRAT) from Wright Patterson AFB, Ohio, deployed to help determine the level of contamination from the damaged nuclear plant. The 36-member team arrived on 21 March and remained in country until 27 May 2011. During that time, the team conducted 52 radiation reconnaissance and monitoring missions and monitored the condition of more than 700 military personnel supporting relief efforts. USAF personnel also participated in Operation PACIFIC PASSAGE, the voluntary transport of military dependents from Japan back to the United States in response to the deteriorating conditions at the Fukushima Nuclear Plant. Although mostly transported using civilian contract air transport, Travis AFB, California, was the only military base to serve as a port of entry for PACIFIC PASSAGE. More than 9,000 family members were evacuated as a result of the operation.

Other USAF contributions to the Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) efforts included McGuire AFB's 621st Contingency Response Wing (621 CRW), which deployed Aerial Port specialists, airspace planners, and an airfield assessment team, the latter of which joined personnel from the 320th Special Tactics Squadron at Kadena AB, Okinawa, to help open airbases in Japan's northern region, including Matsushima AB and Sendai airport. Indeed, the runway at Sendai airport, vitally close to the devastated region, was cleared of debris

in just 3 hours by Special Tactics Airmen. In addition, two USAF bases in Japan played major roles. Yokota AB near Tokyo functioned as the headquarters for Fifth Air Force and US Air Forces, Japan. It also served as an alternate airfield and staging base, while Misawa AB in northern Japan served as a forward operating base for HA/DR forces.

The USAF response to the Japanese Tsunami disaster was just one part of a much larger DOD and US Government effort. In the first two weeks of Operation TOMODACHI, the USAF had flown 225 missions and transported 4.2 million pounds of cargo and approximately 2,800 people. Overall, Operation TOMODACHI highlighted the utility of stationing military forces abroad, which had allowed for such a rapid response. Likewise, the use of Remotely Piloted Aircraft to support recovery efforts proved beneficial. In addition, the expanded use of social media during the crisis allowed DOD personnel to communicate more rapidly with loved ones. Although tragic in the loss of life and property, the USAF contributions to the overarching relief effort built firmly on the tradition of the US Air Force and Humanitarian Assistance missions that had begun with the Berlin Airlift of 1948. And as Air Force Fellow Major Rockie K. Wilson noted, Operation TOMODACHI was a “bright and glowing example of the ability of US agencies collectively, and specifically our armed forces, to do so much more than wage war.”

For more information, see Major Rockie K. Wilson, “Operation TOMODACHI: A Model for American Disaster Response Efforts and the Collective use of Military Forces Abroad.”(link to PDF)