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Air Force news from around the world

Kadena Airmen aid Philippine typhoon victims

by Master Sgt. Val Gempis
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12/15/2004 - **CLARK AIRFIELD, Philippines** -- Airmen from Kadena Air Base, Japan, are helping the Philippines recover from the devastating effects of a series of typhoons that have left 1,400 dead or missing and displaced about 170,000 people.

Several "super" typhoons hit the island nation in the past few weeks, devastating areas of Luzon, the largest of the Philippine Islands, and the capital, Manila. The storms caused torrential rains, massive flooding and landslides.

Airmen from Kadena's 33rd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron are composed of those from the 31st and 33rd Rescue Squadrons, 320th Special Tactics Squadron and 718th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron. They are flying three HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters from the former U.S. air base here to help people affected in Quezon Province.

"It's a great feeling to provide help to the people here. What we're doing is very important," said Lt. Col. Billy Thompson, the squadron's commander.

Though not actively searching for survivors, the colonel said the rescue team is doing other essential work. Airmen are conducting site surveys to help assess damage and flying U.S. Marines and other officials providing direct help to the stricken areas.

The Airmen also evacuated four sick and injured people, including an infant suffering from dehydration, an elderly woman with broken bones and a cancer patient, Colonel Thompson said.

Jun Abrigal, a resident of Infanta City, said he is glad the Americans are helping. At the height of the flooding, he and his family ran to the nearest gas station as floodwaters around them quickly climbed to more than 10 feet in just a few minutes. The family stood on top of a gasoline tanker as the flood swept cars and houses past them. The family saw some of their friends and neighbors swept away by the floodwaters' strong currents, Mr. Abrigal said.

"I'm thankful (the Americans) are bringing us supplies," he said. "What they do really helps us a lot."

The Airmen on the team know they are providing valuable help, said Tech. Sgt. Don Currier, a pararescueman.

"It's awesome work," he said. "We're flying a lot and doing good things."

But the brunt of the rescue unit's mission is helping move relief supplies, provided by the Philippine government, to various distribution points in Quezon Province, officials said.

Helicopters pick up supplies daily at Clark and Villamor Air Base in Manila. Stuffed to the ceiling with goods, the choppers fly to different outlying areas.

There is hardly any elbow room left inside, one Airman said.

Flying over beautiful lush green valleys and farm lands, it takes 20 minutes to reach the affected areas. The rescue unit leap-frogs from site to site delivering sacks of canned goods, rice, water, medicine and flour to devastated towns.

The unit has delivered more than 16,000 pounds of supplies.



OVER QUEZON PROVINCE, Philippines -- Tech. Sgt. Don Currier delivers sacks of supplies aboard an HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter to Real City, Philippines, during typhoon relief operations. About 600 U.S. servicemembers are providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to residents of Quezon Province where widespread flooding displaced about 168,000 people and left more than 1,400 dead or missing. Air Force and Marine helicopters are flying daily missions to the stricken areas. Sergeant Currier is a pararescueman from the 33rd Rescue Squadron at Kadena Air Base, Japan. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Val Gempis)

"It's an awesome feeling to help," said Tech. Sgt. Nick McCaskill, a pararescueman. "Watching the town's reaction when we arrive reaffirms my belief that I'm in the right job."

The Airmen said Filipinos are happy to see them and welcome them with open arms everywhere they go. The people give them friendly waves and smiles at the landing zones. During one relief run, Airmen handed candy and snacks to some of the children.

"It gives us an overwhelming sense of pride knowing that we're making a difference," Sergeant McCaskill said.

Master Sgt. Chaz Stiefken, another pararescueman, saw a mother and child shed tears during one of their medical evacuation missions. It was a touching scene, he said.

"She couldn't thank us enough," he said. "Being here gives me an overwhelming sense of pride."