Inside the Air Operations Center at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois, Gen. Jacqueline Van Ovost ’88 intently watches the video feed from an MQ-1 Predator drone flying high above Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul, Afghanistan.

The final flights of the Afghanistan evacuation are about to depart, and a sense of pride wells up as Gen. Van Ovost recalls the nonstop, herculean effort of her team and Department of Defense partners over the previous couple of weeks.

“They provided hope for over 124,000 people coming out of Afghanistan,” says Gen. Van Ovost, commander of Air Mobility Command at the time. “Our total force airmen rushed to the sound of the guns. They were amazing.”

The airlift mission began in mid-August, and the estimates of the number of Americans and foreign nationals needing to leave the country fluctuated quite a bit. Original estimates were between 70,000 and 80,000 people. Senior leaders didn’t expect the number of evacuees to far exceed 100,000.

“Although we weren’t prepared to do a NEO [noncombatant evacuation operation] exactly like this, this is what we do,” Gen. Van Ovost says. “In Air Mobility Command, we deliver hope. Our contingency response mission is custom built for this.”

The AMC team stepped up in big ways during previous humanitarian crises such as Hurricane Katrina and the Haiti earthquake. But this particular mission was likely the most complex of them all, Gen. Van Ovost says, and yet her team and partners pulled it off. ➤
“THEY PROVIDED HOPE FOR OVER 124,000 PEOPLE COMING OUT OF AFGHANISTAN. OUR TOTAL FORCE AIRMEN RUSHED TO THE SOUND OF THE GUNS. THEY WERE AMAZING.”

— Gen. Jacqueline Van Ovost ’88
“All of our airmen are highly trained, they’re highly motivated, and they are empowered,” Gen. Van Ovost says. “They understood commander’s intent and they made it happen with the resources that they had.”

KABUL AND BEYOND

On the day the U.S. Senate confirmed her as the next commander of United States Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), Gen. Van Ovost sat down with Checkpoints to share her thoughts about the frantic end to the Afghanistan War. We connected with other USAFA graduates as well to learn about their varied roles in the operation.

This summer, Gen. Van Ovost’s team was supporting the significant retrograde of military personnel to meet Afghanistan pullout deadlines when the mission drastically shifted.

“We already had a deliberate plan that we were working through,” she says. “Then the situation changed. We went from a deliberate noncombatant evacuation operation, in coordination with the legitimate government of Afghanistan, to within 48 hours the government fell. Now we were doing a NEO in an uncertain environment.”

Because the airfield was breached, Gen. Van Ovost says the evacuation was temporarily halted to ensure the safety of evacuees and military personnel.

When the airlift ramped back up, it was all-hands-on-deck for the AMC team and its partners. During the 17 days of the operation, an average of 7,500 passengers per day departed Afghanistan.

“Airlift, air refueling, aeromedical evacuation and our ground air mobility support forces — our four core missions of Air Mobility Command — were all fully engaged,” she reports. “They were working 12 to 14 hours a day.”

Gen. Van Ovost readily shares credit with the total force partners and various federal agencies that helped secure HKIA, expeditiously process passengers and ensure the safe evacuation of American citizens and refugees.

She also is grateful for the 30 nations that stepped up to assist the airlift, as well as the commercial airline partners who transported thousands of passengers. In addition, nine nations agreed to host interim staging bases through which refugees could be housed and processed.

“Plus, we activated the Civil Reserve Air Fleet for the third time in our history,” she notes, which provided additional commercial capacity for the evacuation.

Despite the tragic loss of 13 U.S. service members and more than 170 Afghans in a suicide bombing in the final days of the evacuation, the AMC commander expressed pride at what the mobility team accomplished under challenging conditions.

“In the end, it was a safe and effective logistical operation,” Gen. Van Ovost says. “It was a relief when the last airplane got airborne.”

A WAR’S END

As Maj. Gen. Corey Martin ’91, director of operations at United States Transportation Command, watched the final flights leave Afghanistan, it was another personal milestone for him.

“It was a bit of a full circle moment for me, as I was deeply involved in bringing the last act of the war to its completion. I was there at the opening act as well. On the first night of Operation Enduring Freedom, I was flying in a formation of C-17s to do airdrops over Afghanistan.”

— MAJ. GEN. COREY MARTIN ’91

“I was not expecting to do the NEO in the middle of August.”

Conducting the evacuation in a highly contested environment was another surprise. In those first few days, the Air Force transported combat forces and support personnel from the United States to Kabul in order to secure the airfield and set the conditions for the operation.

“Early on, there was not the level of control and security that we would have wanted to start the operation,” Gen. Martin says. “But you saw how quickly that changed after we delivered soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen to HKIA … then we were able to do it much more methodically throughout the remainder of the operation.”

Once the evacuation became more orderly, Gen. Martin says, aircrews flew a steady stream of passengers to interim staging bases for processing. The operation required coordination with multiple combatant commands — chief among them Central Command, European Command and Northern Command.

Gen. Martin said aircrews were frequently forced to overload planes to expedite the evacuation.

“There was a need to get people out of HKIA as quickly as possible,” he explains. “They needed to be anywhere but HKIA. We were putting aircrews in some real nontraditional situations, where they had to make very split-second decisions.”

Eventually, on the final night of the war, combat forces were redeployed out of HKIA. Gen. Martin was pleased with the overall effort by his team.
“It was long days and hard work,” he says. “But we did our part of the task, and I think we did it well.”

Throughout the operation, Gen. Martin was especially appreciative of all the USAFA graduates who were involved from the top down.

“One of the things that I really valued in the midst of it was the folks who I was talking to were grads,” he says. “You saw that there was a Long Blue Line aspect to this. That was rewarding.”

**NEO WORKHORSES**

Brig. Gen. Daniel DeVoe ’95, commander of the 618th Air Operations Center at Scott Air Force Base, reports that his team did a phenomenal job of providing command and control for the movement of refugees and military personnel.

“When you’re talking about helping people, it’s crazy how motivated folks get,” he says. “This was not just about delivering hope, but taking people and delivering them to a new future. It was very gratifying to be able to participate in that.”

As he watched the operation from afar, Gen. DeVoe admits he had an itch to be in Afghanistan to help.

“I would have loved to be able to do it as an aircrew member … if I was younger in my career,” he chuckles. “I would have loved to be on the ground with the contingency response team there at HKIA.”

While a wide variety of aircraft were used in the evacuation effort, Gen. DeVoe reports the C-17 ended up being the workhorse of the operation. Of the 124,334 people who were transported from HKIA, about 79,000 — including 6,000 Americans — flew out.
on C-17s over the 17 days. An average of 28 Air Force “grey tails” were in the air at any given time to support the effort.

“It turned out to be the largest noncombatant evacuation operation that has ever been conducted,” he says. “It was a rapid push on the throttle because of the urgency of a very large number of people we had to get out of country. And not necessarily from the beginning did we have good clarity on how much time we would have to operate.”

It took the commitment, agility and ingenuity of airmen to make it happen, Gen. DeVoe suggests.

Typically, a C-17 is loaded with approximately 100 passengers. When it was decided to begin floor loading the C-17, capacities rose to about 300, Gen. DeVoe reports.

“The staff here was able to do some calculations and look at aircraft performance data and determine we could take that up to 400 or 450 if we needed to,” he says. “We looked at aircraft performance, given the atmospheric conditions, and determined it was safe.”

Perhaps the most incredible evacuation flight was Reach 885, a C-17 out of Dover Air Force Base, Delaware. It quickly filled beyond normal limits, with 823 Afghan refugees on board. Despite the crowded conditions, most of the evacuees had huge smiles on their faces when the cargo door shut.

“They were happy that they were on a plane leaving Afghanistan,” he says. “Those smiles certainly got larger once they landed and they got off of those aircraft and started to move on.”

C-130s and KC-10s also were key aircraft in the operation. When it was clear that some of the KC-10s weren’t needed for the refueling mission, they were shifted to the evacuation task instead, Gen. DeVoe reports. Aircrews floor-loaded each of those aircraft with about 200 departing passengers.

“This operation was moving at a velocity like I haven’t seen before,” Gen. DeVoe admits.

Success, he says, was only made possible by everyone accomplishing their varied roles throughout the operation. From the programmers and coders who ensured the free flow of information to decision-makers, to the maintainers who kept the airplanes operational despite the nonstop mission, to the port personnel who processed the passengers, Gen. DeVoe says everyone stepped up when called upon.

“I’m so incredibly proud of them,” he says. “Just the attitude and commitment to service, to helping others, and to going above and beyond. There was never a rest. Everything was kind of constantly moving around the clock.”

**FINAL FLIGHT**

It was a moment 20 years in the making.

Just a few months after Lt. Col. Alexander Pelbath ’01 graduated from USAFA, his future Air Force career would be significantly altered when terrorists attacked the homeland on 9/11.

“My entire career was spent in Iraq and Afghanistan,” reports Lt. Col. Pelbath, current director of C-17 Special Operations and former 16th Airlift Squadron commander.

It was only fitting that Lt. Col. Pelbath was the pilot on the final aircraft to depart Afghanistan on Aug. 31. He was the last in a formation of five C-17s to take off, and he was the airborne mission commander for the operation.

“I was able to see the entire air picture as we were leaving Kabul,” he recalls. “That image at night of four C-17s in front of me as we were rolling down the runway to leave there after 20 years was one of the pictures that hit me in that moment. Closing it out … I was very glad to be a part of it.”

A more chilling image imprinted on his mind was the Taliban soldiers waving goodbye as Lt. Col. Pelbath’s C-17 took off.

“They were waving to us not in a friendly way,” he says. “That’s an interesting sight that brings conflicting emotions.”

Lt. Col. Pelbath and his team were part of the Afghan evacuation from day one. His C-17 delivered ground forces to help secure HKIA as Kabul fell to the Taliban. As he was preparing to leave HKIA, Lt. Col. Pelbath was asked if his plane could transport a few outbound passengers.

“We were not expecting to be taking any folks out,” he says. “We filled up our aircraft with Afghan evacuees, which I believe was the first evacuation lift. It was unplanned and unexpected.”

In the ensuing hours, the airport was overrun with Afghans hoping to leave the country.
"We flew these heroes from Kuwait International through Ramstein Air Base, Germany, to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Once we landed in Dover, we participated in the ceremony and gave our respects. It was a sobering moment. It may be the most humbling and sober mission I will ever fly, and I am honored to have been able to assist."

— 1st Lt. Athena Robb '19

"Things got really challenging," he says. "That’s what most people back home started seeing in the news media."

When contingency response personnel arrived at HKIA and returned order to the airfield, Lt. Col. Pelbath says things settled down.

"This sounds incredibly ironic, but being on the ground in Kabul was the smoothest part of the entire operation," he admits.

Looking back over the two weeks of evacuating refugees and American citizens, Lt. Col. Pelbath says he’s grateful for the joint effort that made it possible. He gives props to the maintainers who kept the airplanes flying; the aerial port personnel who helped handle passengers and process flights; the 8th Expeditionary Air Mobility Squadron personnel who kept the flow of flights and passengers progressing; the KC-135 tankers that provided fuel for the sorties; the fighters who provided top cover; and the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance personnel who disseminated the necessary intelligence to inform all the players in the air and on the ground.

"We just got to fly airplanes," he smiles. "We had the easy part."

Throughout the effort, Lt. Col. Pelbath witnessed the relief that Afghan families felt when they finally boarded an airplane and left the country. It was rewarding to bring the refugees on the first leg of their new life, he says.

"If you’re a C-17 aircrew member, this was like our Super Bowl," he says. "All the C-17 folks who didn’t get to take part in the airlift wish they could have. We had more volunteers than we had opportunities for people to go forward, because everybody wanted to be a part of it. Everybody recognized what a big deal this was."

SOBERING MOMENTS
1st Lt. Athena Robb ’19 completed her pilot initial qualification in the C-17 in June 2021 and is currently assigned to the 21st Airlift Squadron under the 60th Air Mobility Wing at Travis Air Force Base in California.

As the Afghanistan evacuation began, Lt. Robb and her six-person crew were staged at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, to support the effort.

"My first operational mission, also known as a dollar ride, was to fly and assist in the Afghanistan evacuations," she reports. "In pilot training, they tell you that one day you may do a mission like this, but you
never think it’ll be your first operational mission. I am so grateful to have had an extremely supportive and capable crew to experience an immensely humbling flight. The crew members were supportive, patient and very helpful.”

Days later, Lt. Robb and her crew were tasked with yet another big mission. Her C-17 flew the remains of the 13 military personnel — 11 Marines, one Army soldier and one member of the Navy — who died in a suicide bomb attack in Kabul back to the United States.

“We flew these heroes from Kuwait International through Ramstein Air Base, Germany, to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware” she reports. “Once we landed in Dover, we participated in the ceremony and gave our respects. It was a sobering moment. It may be the most humbling and sober mission I will ever fly, and I am honored to have been able to assist.”

NEW BEGINNINGS

Maj. Jeff Schmidt ’08, director of operations with the 5th Expeditionary Air Mobility Squadron, volunteered for an unaccompanied, short-tour assignment to Cargo City at Kuwait International Airport and Ali Al Salem Air Base, Kuwait.

During Operation Allies Refuge (OAR), his team processed 227 inbound and outbound missions, moving 14,291 American, Italian and Canadian passengers from Cargo City. The 5th also provided aircraft maintenance oversight and support for 470 inbound and outbound missions, supporting 6,925 passengers and military movements through Ali Al Salem.

“One day, we supported an average of 750 personnel over a 24-hour period with only a handful of active-duty personnel,” he reports. “We were servicing a few planes every couple of hours.”

Prior to one outbound flight, an Afghan woman went into labor and was transported to the hospital. The next day, the newly constituted family of five left for a new future in the United States.

“I took them out to the airplane … then waved to them through the windows,” he says. “That plane rolled out that night as the last movement of Afghan passengers from Cargo City.”

In addition to the passenger mission, the squadron supported a staging team from AMC that provided support for up to 15 C-17 aircraft at Ali Al Salem and nine C-17s at Cargo City at the height of the operation.

All those extra duties were on top of the normal missions and cargo requirements that are standard at any port, Maj. Schmidt says.

“It was so busy that we found ourselves constantly on the flight line and only
able to recharge with a quick meal before the next problem needed to be solved,” he explains. “OAR showed me that we are capable of doing amazing things. Whether they wore green or blue — U.S. or allied, maintenance or logistics — all had the knowledge and ability to get the mission done.”

**FORWARD DEPLOYED**

Maj. Garrett Canter ’10 worked the night shift at Al Udeid, processing passengers arriving from Afghanistan.

“The Afghan personnel were coming off the aircraft essentially holding their whole life in a trash bag,” he recalls.

At one point, to help people relieve some of the stress, the host wing set up bouncy castles for families to use.

“Seeing kids and families playing in the middle of the night was kind of this surreal image,” he admits.

Maj. Canter and the 728th Air Mobility Squadron forward deployed to Al Udeid from Incirlik Air Base in Turkey as the evacuation ramped up. They helped augment the aerial port and aircraft maintenance operations being run by the 8th Expeditionary Air Mobility Squadron (EAMS).

“We were coming into the thick of things after the folks at Al Udeid had been surg-
“To be part of that was so remarkable … just a few years after USAFA graduation. It was a true no-fail mission. No matter how tired everyone was, we kept going because we were saving lives.” — 1st Lt. Sharon Dominguez ’19

A U.S. Air Force aircrew, assigned to the 816th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron, assists qualified evacuees aboard a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III aircraft in support of the Afghanistan evacuation. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Taylor Crul)
“To be part of that was so remarkable … just a few years after USAFA graduation,” she says. “It was a true no-fail mission. No matter how tired everyone was, we kept going because we were saving lives.”

**OPERATION OVERLOAD**

1st Lt. Natasha Payne ’18 volunteered to join the 8th EAMS to serve as an assistant maintenance director of operations. She is usually assigned to the 721st Aircraft Maintenance Squadron at Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

While in Qatar, she worked on the maintenance of C-17s on the night shift.

“The 8th EAMS typically has six C-17s assigned at a time and about 50 maintainers to fix them,” she says. “Within the first few days of the operation, we had up to 46 aircraft on the ground at one time. By the end of the NEO, we were tracking the status of 70 aircraft, which is over 10 times what the 8th EAMS is manned to support. We found creative ways to somehow execute the mission without any safety mishaps.”

Eventually, additional maintainers arrived from other bases to augment the team. Lt. Payne says the leaders had to push hard for that extra help.

“Even though the mission was being taken care of, we didn’t want to lose sight of the fact that it was taking its toll on our members — physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually,” she says.

Looking back over the evacuation, Lt. Payne says she was happy to be a part of it.

“I wasn’t a hero,” she admits. “I didn’t come up with any great ways to improve what we were doing or save lives. But I hope that I was able to make a positive impact and help lead during a very difficult time.”

**BABY REACH**

A baby was born Aug. 21 in the cargo bay of a C-17 after it landed at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. The girl was later named Reach after the aircraft’s call sign.

That moment caused Col. Adrienne Williams ’96, commander of the 521st Air Mobility Operations Wing, to pause and appreciate the huge impact her team was having.

“My daughter and I had a real good conversation about that,” she recalls.

“Standing there on the ramp and seeing the birth of baby Reach, we knew we were providing a new life for her. It’s a chance for her to go to school, to learn and to be what she wants to be when she grows up.”

For thousands of refugees, after a brief stop at Al Udeid, the second stop was at an intermediate staging station — Ramstein, Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy, Naval Station Rota in Spain and Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo among them.

Col. Williams and her team were tasked with making sure evacuees at each locale were processed and sent toward their final destinations. In addition, the wing provided maintenance on aircraft, serviced and cleaned aircraft on the ground, loaded and unloaded cargo, and supported the aero-medical evacuation effort.

“Our team was an integral part of the mission,” Col. Williams explains. “We are the ‘rapid’ in rapid global mobility for Air Mobility Command, because we’re providing all the support to keep the mission moving through the system.”

At Ramstein, the number of evacuees quickly outpaced available resources and space. As a result, Col. Williams and her team converted its C-5 hangar into an international airport.

“Another name for our hangar here was Happy Hangar 5,” she chuckles, “because everyone was happy. They knew they are going to get to the States and have new opportunities. We were giving them another chance at life.”

The hard work of her amazing airmen, Col. Williams adds, made it happen.

“They decided we were not going to fail,” she says. “I’m very humbled and I feel very blessed that I’m able to command such a wonderful group of airmen who really care about the mission.”

**SAVING LIVES**

Capt. Cassandra Hill ’13 was on loan to Ramstein Air Base to serve as director of operations on the night shift. She normally is director of operations for the 724th Air Mobility Squadron at Aviano Air Base, Italy.

By the time she arrived in Germany, Capt. Hill says her team had achieved smooth and continuous operations for inbound and outbound flights. Everything seemed to go well.

As director of operations, her top priority was keeping operations safe. Her second priority was keeping aircraft on schedule. If things took too long on the ground, crews risked being grounded due to rest requirements, and another evacuation flight could be lost.

Most importantly, Capt. Hill says her job was about people.

She recalls one particular night when, while she was escorting a family to the terminal, a car approached. Capt. Hill dropped to a knee to let the children know to stop.

“This child ran right up to me and threw his arms around me in a giant hug,” she says. “His parents were laughing and enjoying the interaction. At that moment, it really hit home the importance of the mission that we were doing and the lives we were impacting.”

Capt. Hill says she’s grateful to have been a small piece of the mission.

“While the days were long, and we were asked to do the impossible, knowing that we were saving people’s lives and getting them out of harm’s way filled me with such pride,” she admits.

**KEEP THEM FLYING**

As director of operations with the 721st Aircraft Maintenance Squadron at Ramstein, Capt. Christopher Stephens ’13 had the challenging task of keeping cargo and transport aircraft operating during the nonstop mission. He says his team did a stellar job throughout.

“We don’t get many opportunities to pull out all the stops, but that was certainly the case for Operation Allied Refuge,” he says.

“We had everyone present and on the job. The pace and coverage really didn’t allow for much time off.”

Capt. Stephens says his team of 250 maintenance personnel handled a 400% increase in airflow over the two weeks. On a typical day, the squadron accepts and maintains 10 aircraft; but during OAR, approximately 40 aircraft a day were quickly turned around.

Many new challenges presented themselves each day. Early on, the information systems failed, and the squadron had to accomplish the mission without that technology.

At another point, his team was given five hours to convert their C-5 hangar into an
international airport to handle incoming passengers.

“We knocked it out, with 30 minutes to spare,” he laughs.

In addition, aircraft parking was at a premium, and C-17s often circled in the skies above until a spot opened up.

“We were putting out fires as best we could,” Capt. Stephens recalls. “I am proud of the team. They did not know what they were signing up for, but they excelled.”

**CHANGING DUTIES**

1st Lt. Kathleen Kohler ’19 is the ramp services officer in charge with the 721st Aerial Port Squadron at Ramstein. Her team received passengers and unloaded cargo as aircraft arrived from Al Udeid.

“We were helping people down the staircases, getting them loaded up on buses to go to their next stop, dealing with bags and all of the issues in between,” she says. “The highest grossing day was 10,000 travelers inbound in one day. There wasn’t a blueprint for this. It really amazed me the ability for Ramstein Air Base as a whole to come together and to get this done.”

A few days into the operation, Lt. Kohler was shifted to a new role — Air Mobility Command representative processing NATO passengers headed to Poland and Kosovo.

“In total, there were 720 Afghan travelers who we moved from Ramstein to both Warsaw in Poland and Pristina in Kosovo,” she says. “They were moved there in order to settle there.”

Despite being exhausted during the operation, Lt. Kohler says it was great to be involved.

“This is why I wanted to go to the Air Force Academy and why I wanted to serve,” she says. “To make a difference. This was the first thing that I was exposed to that wasn’t day-to-day operations, and I was super excited.”

**COORDINATION**

Throughout much of the operation, 2nd Lt. Alexander Hubbert ’20 served as the 521st Air Mobility Operations Wing representative within the 86th Airlift Wing Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at Ramstein. His actual Air Force job is special handling and cargo processing with the 721st Aerial Port Squadron.

During OAR, he worked in the EOC answering phone calls, sending updates, streamlining processes and solving problems.

“We integrated with several government agencies, foreign militaries, sister services and non-government agencies to properly screen and out-process the travelers prior to heading to the United States,” he says.

One of the big challenges Lt. Hubbert faced was communication. Too often, it was unclear how many aircraft and how many passengers were inbound at any given time. His team figured out an effective workaround to improve the information flow.

“It is extremely rewarding to know that the hard work and effort we put into this operation saved lives and really showed that the United States military is a global force for good,” he says.

**TRUE IMPACT**

In the days since the end of the Afghanistan War, Gen. Van Ovost visited Ramstein Air Base in Germany and Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey to thank her airmen for their efforts and to personally meet some of the Afghan families.

“As I looked over the sea of humanity … I couldn’t help but reflect that they were seeing the very best of American values, shown through the actions of our courageous and compassionate airmen,” she says.

The commitment to the mission didn’t end when the duty day ended, she notes. Many airmen and family members volunteered their time after hours to aid the Afghan families.

“Our airmen were handing out clothes, blankets and food; giving them medical care; showing them their tents and their bunks; and answering all of their questions,” Gen. Van Ovost says. “It swells in me that our airmen could be so compassionate after working all those hours … to make sure that each family was well taken care of.”

U.S. Air Force airmen assigned to the 721st Aircraft Maintenance Squadron change nose landing gear tires of a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft to keep it mission-ready. (U.S. Air Force photo)