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C-17 serves as an OR for Balad CCATT

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When TV anchormen are critically wounded, their treatment grabs headlines and coverage on the evening news, but the patients who matter most to the members of the 332nd Aeromedical Evacuation Flight are the wounded warriors who are just doing their mission for their country and brothers in arms. One component of that flight is the Critical Care Air Transportation Team (CCATT).

A CCATT is made up of a critical care physician, an intensive care nurse and a respiratory therapist, and its job is to care for the most critical patients onboard aeromedical evacuation flights. On March 12, 2006, the efforts of the team made up by Maj. (Dr.) Erik Boatman, Capt. Steven Lehr (RN), and Tech. Sgt. Richard Pakula took it to a new level.

The whole story really started the day before when a special CCATT arrived from Germany and needed to borrow Dr Boatman's equipment to go to Baghdad. That left his team non-operational, but the two teams were destined to meet again. His team worked most of the night to rebuild their kit so they would be ready to fly the next day. When they did receive that call, they were ready to go.

The team was notified that they would be caring for a patient who had been burned over 50% of his body. He had undergone a surgical procedure on his arms called a fasciotomy which is done to relieve pressure and prevent tissue death.

The C-17 aeromedical evacuation mission was scheduled to make a stop in Kuwait on its way to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. It was there, while the plane was awaiting passengers and cargo, that things started to go south.

The patient's vital signs started to drop, his blood volume was showing signs of dropping, and the absorbent bandage on his arm was blood soaked. The patient would need blood to make it to Germany, but there was none on board. They could turn back to Balad to return the patient to surgery, but it would have been a costly step backwards.

There was another option, however. The other CCATT that had taken Dr. Boatman's equipment to Baghdad happened to be on the plane. They had a surgeon Dr. Warren Dorlac as part of their team, and together with Dr. Boatman, an anesthesiologist, Capt Lehr and Tech. Sgt. Palukla, they had an ad hoc surgical team right there. They had most everything they needed with the exception of sutures, which they were able to obtain from the medical facility at Kuwait.

They set up an operating room right on the plane. While Dr, Boatman kept the patient anesthetized, Captain Lehr assisted Dr Dorlac and Sergeant Pakula served as an operating room nurse.

They exposed the patient's bleeding blood vessels and tied them off, saving the patient's life and allowing the flight to continue on to Germany.

Mission successful, the patient was stabilized and made it to Germany with no other complications. For their efforts, Dr Boatman, Captain Lehr and Sergeant Pakula were recognized by the 332d Air Expeditionary Wing Commander, Brig. Gen. Frank Gorenc with coin presentations during the Flight's Flyers Call on March 28th.