



UTAH AIR NATIONAL GUARD PUBLIC AFFAIRS
765 N. 2200 W., Salt Lake City, UT 84116-2999
P: (801) 245-2446 - F: (801) 245-2535 - www.151arw.ang.af.mil

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Contact: Lt. Col. Lisa Olsen, (801) 245-2446

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Utah Air National Guard Mission in Chile Transforms into Humanitarian Effort

SALT LAKE CITY – Four members of the Utah Air National Guard’s 151st Air Refueling Wing had a rude awakening Feb. 27 when the 15th-floor hotel room in Santiago, Chile, started to shake. Originally deployed to Chile to provide flying and maintenance support to the Chilean Air Force on their new KC-135 ‘E’-model aircraft, the group had no idea that the 8.8-magnitude earthquake would quickly cause them to become the first U.S. Armed Forces personnel to support humanitarian efforts in the country.

The Utah crew, along with Airmen from Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas, arrived in Santiago Feb. 16 to help deliver the country’s first-ever KC-135E and provide training to Chilean airmen. That routine training plan quickly transformed into a real-world contingency operation when the group was asked to help transport mobile medical units and supplies back and forth from northern Chile to various locations throughout the country.

Over the past week, the aircrew has not only flown medical supplies to Santiago and Concepción, but it has transported field kitchens (feeding up 250 people each), cooks, firefighters, tents and blankets donated by the Chinese to airfields where needed.

While flying these missions, the Utah crew has been trying to fit in some real-world training for the Chilean airmen riding along with them.

“This has been fantastic training for everyone; you can’t plan this kind of situation,” said Lt. Col. Boyd Badali, a pilot with the 151st. “These students are getting Ph.D.-level training with contingency planning, cargo loading and all the maintenance issues we’ve had. It’s been a great experience.”

The Utah crew has been training two Chilean pilots, a boom operator and more than 30 maintainers. The KC-135E is the first of three tanker aircraft that Chile is purchasing from the United States.