

Burn Flight Team Saves Lives, Breaks Records

By Meghan Portillo, NCO Journal

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The U.S. Army Burn Flight Team has transported patients twice from Singapore back to the U.S. Army Institute of Surgical Research at Joint Base San Antonio – Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and both flights resulted in record-breaking missions.

The Burn Flight Team is a five-person team that flies burned military personnel from anywhere in the world back to the USAISR Burn Center, which is the only burn center servicing the Department of Defense. A team consists of a burn surgeon, a critical care registered nurse, a licensed vocational nurse, a respiratory therapist and a forward operations noncommissioned officer. Four teams rotate call, so that two teams are always ready to deploy.





A burned service member is flown from a foreign medical center back to the U.S. Army Institute of Surgical Research Burn Center at Joint Base San Antonio – Fort Sam Houston, Texas. The U.S. Army Burn Flight Team travels with specialized equipment on a commercial flight to meet patients, then flies them back on a C-17 Globemaster III operated by an Air Force critical care air transport team. (U.S. Army photo courtesy of USAISR)

The team's first mission to Singapore, on Feb. 22, 2013, was the longest nonstop flight in the team's history. Because of the patient's critical status, the Air Force critical care transport team operating the C-17 Globemaster III refueled inflight, allowing the Burn Flight Team to get the patient to the burn center as soon as possible.

"They have a hook up in the front, and then a little fueling plane flies ahead and lets out a little cable, and they have to connect them," said Sgt. Matthew Anselmo, NCO in charge of the burn team. He is a respiratory therapist who worked as the rear operations NCO for that particular mission.

The team flew for 19 hours straight over 9,850 miles to bring the patient home. As the Burn Flight Team is not part of the plane's crew, they are not afforded crew rest. But the team members said they didn't mind the exhaustion. Getting their fellow service member back home safely was the only thought in their minds.

The second and only other time the flight team transported a patient from Singapore was Nov. 9, 2015. This flight also resulted in a record-breaking mission, but for a different reason. It was the first time the team used a kidney dialysis machine to provide continuous renal replacement therapy inflight.

The patient, a Marine who had suffered severe electrical and thermal burns, was experiencing kidney failure, and would not have survived the flight without the procedure, said Staff Sgt. Daniel Zimmerman, the NCOIC of the team at that time and the respiratory therapist on the flight.

Continuous renal replacement therapy, or CRRT, is similar to regular dialysis in that it removes blood, filters it and then replaces it back in the body. It is different, however, in that it is a slow, continuous process. Because CRRT pulls blood at a slower rate, it does not disrupt the patient's hemodynamics.

"Without CRRT, that patient would have had to stay at that remote hospital, being treated in another country," said Staff Sgt. David Shelley, a licensed vocational nurse and assistant NCOIC of the flight team. "So the medical director decided we needed to do what it takes, get this service member to the best place in the military to treat burns, and we made it happen."

"We are always ready," Zimmerman said. "I was the NCOIC at the time and the only respiratory therapist on the team, so I was basically on call for two years straight. When you get that call, it's exciting."

And this time, the team members knew the flight would require them to use equipment they had never before taken on a flight. The team now considers CRRT part of its capabilities and has dedicated transport equipment, but on that flight, the team used equipment from the intensive care unit.

"Everything went as planned in so much as we had never done the CRRT before," Zimmerman said. "We weren't sure what complications we were going to run into, but it was overall a pretty uneventful flight, and that is definitely a success."

"Every successful mission comes with a very rewarding feeling," he said. "To go pick up a critically injured service member who really needs attention that they can only get in the ISR in our unit, to be able to get them back here safely and see them get better — it is a very rewarding feeling."



U.S. Army Institute of Surgical Research Burn Flight Team members Staff Sgt. Daniel Zimmerman, Capt. Sarah Hensley and Capt. Kirt Cline monitor a patient during a record-breaking mission from