



Bimonthly WISE hopes to provide a series of articles about a female logistician and her reflections on growth of her career. The article for March/April 2007 is about Marie Blackburn of OXFAM.

How I Provided Relief in Pakistan



It still is something of a surprise to me to think that I have been involved in the Relief Operation that followed the Pakistan Earthquake disaster in 2005. Having achieved a BA Hons in Business and Marketing Management, I was undecided about what I was going to do. At the same time, I hoped that I could get a job that would not only be rewarding but something where I could make a significant and positive contribution to the world.

Imagine my surprise when immediately after my graduation I received a call from OXFAM to say that they had found my CV in their database. I was told OXFAM would be interviewing me for a position in their Logistics Department in Pakistan since they had already chartered a helicopter for the Pakistan Earthquake Relief Operation, and urgently needed someone with helicopter experience to look after the whole operation.

Well, if I have a life philosophy, it is probably 'go for it.' A date was arranged for the interview, and almost immediately after that, I made plans to travel to Pakistan and join the OXFAM's Logistics Team in Pakistan.

When I arrived in Islamabad on the 23rd of October 2005 I was totally committed and focused on tasking the Helicopter. The aim was to distribute relief aid by helicopter to the victims in those parts of the Kashmir Mountains that had been made inaccessible by road due to the earthquake. With this in mind I immediately started to familiarise myself with my role and found everybody most helpful; very quickly I became part of the whole relief operation. In addition to OXFAM UK's briefing, I had spoken to former Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RauxAF) colleagues to help me assess possible problem areas. By the time that I arrived in Pakistan it felt as if I had been part of this operation before.

A typical day for me would be to rise at crack of dawn (about 5:30 am) and hitch a lift to the Heliport in one of the OXFAM cars assigned to the Logistic Team. The helicopter was based at the 6th Aviation Squadron, Islamabad - some 30 to 40 minutes distant from OXFAM's office. Security was

stringent, as it would be on any military air base. We were not permitted to fly after 3:00 pm in the mountain air space due to frequent weather changes and safety reasons. Therefore, prioritising and handling competing deadlines was paramount. Decisions had to be made instantly on a day-to-day basis due to the unpredictability of the weather, road conditions, fuel and cargo availability etc., and consequently, scheduled tasks, flight plans, and routes would have to be changed very quickly to deal with the situations as they occurred.

At the Heliport I would meet with the Helicopter Crew – who were all Russian, so communication was a bit tricky at times. Nevertheless, we would have our morning briefing to confirm their plans for the day. I would then supervise the loading of the helicopter, ensuring that the correct weight of cargo was being loaded. More importantly, it was essential to ensure that the cargo being loaded was balanced and included items which make-up a complete ‘package’ for a number of units of family. If this was not done, the goods could not be distributed, causing storage and security problems at the point of delivery thereby making the whole operation a logistical nightmare. Paperwork was an important part of our routine too. What we delivered and uplifted included people—the sick, the wounded, and the dead. Our data on earthquake victims provided information to donors, management, PAF, government and other Non-Governmental Organisations and their partners.

At the start of operations, fuel was our biggest challenge. As there were no civilian fuel depots in the mountains, our helicopter stayed overnight at the 6th Aviation Squadron in Islamabad. Once the helicopter had its rotors running, I would schedule fuel top-ups while the helicopter was en-route from 6th Aviation to Chakala Airport Islamabad, before they departed for their first drop.

As a result, cargo had to be sacrificed for fuel capacity, and considerably less cargo would be airlifted for the first drop. However, there were other factors that also affected the fuel to cargo ratio such as weather and/or the condition of the landing zone at pick-up or drop-off points. For example, hovering to make a landing requires more fuel than ‘gliding’ on to the landing zone. Without fuel, we would be grounded and therefore this was always something that was planned diligently. Later, when we could fuel in the mountains, we increased the number of shuttles we did, thereby, carrying and delivering more cargo. The fact that we were already in the mountains meant that our first shuttle was either a cargo uplift or drop-off point. As part of HeliOps, we endeavoured to calculate the optimum permutation, thereby making the operation more economical, efficient and effective.

Once the helicopter was on its way, I would visit the Pakistani Aircrew of 6th Aviation Squadron to verify the location’s grid references for the following mission. The next port of call would be the Pakistan Airforce (PAF) Joint Operation Centre (JOC) briefing session at Chakala airport. This was a joint operation ‘working’ brief, for all members who ‘owned’ an aircraft operating in Pakistan Airspace.

During the JOC session, we were given flight information on the location of other air operators and their plans for the day. At the same time, we filed our flight plan for the next day’s mission to enable de-conflicting air traffic strategies to be put in place taking into consideration weather, fuel, cargo, security, location’s grid references, conditions of landing zones, and possible problems. As the operation grew bigger with some 60 helicopters trying to make drops and wanting to occupy roughly the same airspace, attendance to this briefing was crucial. If a group missed a briefing their next day’s mission would not be allowed off the ground.

I witnessed the logistical challenge of loading and unloading the helicopter in 5 to 10 minutes in order to keep up with the planned number of drops and to avoid other helicopters scheduled to land at the same landing zone. However, what I did notice was that there were no women helpers or distributors at the point of delivery in the mountains. This surprised me because we were supplying hygiene kits for the women in the mountains, who appeared to be ‘hidden’ from the public and segregated from their menfolk.

I wondered whether any of these items ever got to them, and if so, whether they knew how to use them. Assuming that they did, the next question, was whether they would use them or not, due to lack of means for disposing waste. Even packaging used to wrap the standard items to keep them intact, was at times, a hazard to incoming helicopters because of the flying debris as a result of the ‘downwash’ from helicopters trying to land. Furthermore, it was disturbing to find how rapidly some of the ‘gifted’ items were finding their way to the local markets and being sold to those who could afford to buy them. To me, also, it seemed a waste of very expensive resources to deliver items that were not used by most of the victims under ‘regular’ conditions. For example, razors and

shaving cream for the men who as the norm grow beards. Thus I saw the operation from both sides.

My prime responsibilities were for the effective and efficient use of OXFAM's helicopter, so the challenge for me was to try to fit all the other important daily routines around the core priorities. I guess OXFAM felt I had done a good job because I was then seconded to IFRC for a few months to assist with their helicopter operation, performing virtually the same tasks as with OXFAM, except that, this time, I was based in the mountains. Needless to say, this brought other demands such as curfews, the culture being more apparent, living conditions, limited shopping facilities and lacking the sophistication of Islamabad; but I gained the majestic mountains, and even experienced my first earthquake tremor. Nonetheless, the challenge of managing HeliOps appeared more intense and the urgency to deliver the goods even greater as we had to allow for the disruptions arising from religious holidays, worsening weather conditions, and stock shortages.

In many ways there were strong similarities with my time with the RauxAF, without which I would not have had the experience, capability and opportunity to carry out the Helicopter Relief Operation in Pakistan.

Whilst with the RauxAF 606 (Chiltern) Squadron I had trained as a 'soldier' and to work in the Helicopter Air Operations division, supporting the RAF Chinook & Puma Helicopters at RAF Benson and Odiham. I attended major NATO exercises in Germany and Cyprus as well as several others in and around the UK. When on exercise all our military skills were put to the test and every year we had to pass special aptitude, technical skills and fitness tests to make the grade. Some of my duties in AirOps were:

- Communication with Air Traffic Control and ground crew
- Logging flights and movements for pilot training and missions, downtime, aircraft/test flights etc.
- Handling 'low level flying' complaints on the phone
- Ensuring all maps and charts were kept up to date for the Pilots and operation room
- Sending and logging of special signals relating to specific missions

The biggest challenge for me was to be put in a position where I had to take orders that I did not always agree with. Nevertheless, it taught me personal discipline and gave me experience to handle challenges within this predominantly male environment. I learned to work and compete with them for the same grades and qualifications. This put me in good stead when I was working in Pakistan in HeliOps. The cultural differences and working environment were probably the most significant things I learned. These experiences have given me a number of skills and abilities that are both transferable and adaptable. I am able to apply these to a job or project that would not only be rewarding but where I could make a significant and positive contribution to society.

Studying for a degree as a mature student also bought its own challenges and determination to complete the course. Learning for me has always been a passion because it opens up lots of opportunities to try something new and different. I would like to think of myself as a 'sticker' once I have committed myself to a project. Having worked for Samaritans for several years has taught me dedication, perseverance and has often helped my perspective on life.

Leaving Kenya, my parents and my way of life brought personal challenges. Although I have lived in the UK for a considerable number of years, I still feel a great affinity for my birthplace. It was in Kenya that I first learnt to fly a light aircraft. Initially out of defiance, because flying was considered a very male skill, I was very proud of myself at the time. What's more, the ancillary skills that I learnt in addition to flying, such as navigation and meteorology, have been very useful over the years particularly during my time in the RAF and in the Pakistan Helicopter Operation.

Although the nature of the job in Pakistan Relief meant that I was ground-based most days, I sometimes had an opportunity to fly up with the crew and witness first-hand the earthquake devastation, as well as seeing how our help was being received. This meant most days having very early starts and very late finishes. Nevertheless, I would not have swapped this opportunity for anything. My work in Pakistan has been my most challenging and rewarding experience to date. The PAF were very impressed with my tenacity in the face of adversity and challenge and they awarded me their PAF 'Wings'... usually given only to their pilots.