

COVID-19: From Challenges to Opportunities



German medical personnel prepare for relocation of COVID-19 infected patients. (Photo: German Air Force)

When COVID-19 broke out, armed forces have provided fast and crucial support from the provision of field hospitals or medical expertise to the transport of patients, logistics and more. As such, EATC was engaged from the very first moment, facing the unpredictability and urgency of the situation that is characteristic to many crisis conflicts. Responding to a crisis situation is the essence of a military command. It also leads to a dynamic opening to find solutions and to unexpected opportunities to generate innovative ideas.

From Unpredictability...

EATC's operational team was the first to be confronted with unforeseen problems. Worldwide, the countries ordered national restrictions. Borders, airports and airspace were closed, opened and closed again from one day to another. Restrictions for landing, overflying, remaining overnight or movement of personnel were implemented without previous warning.

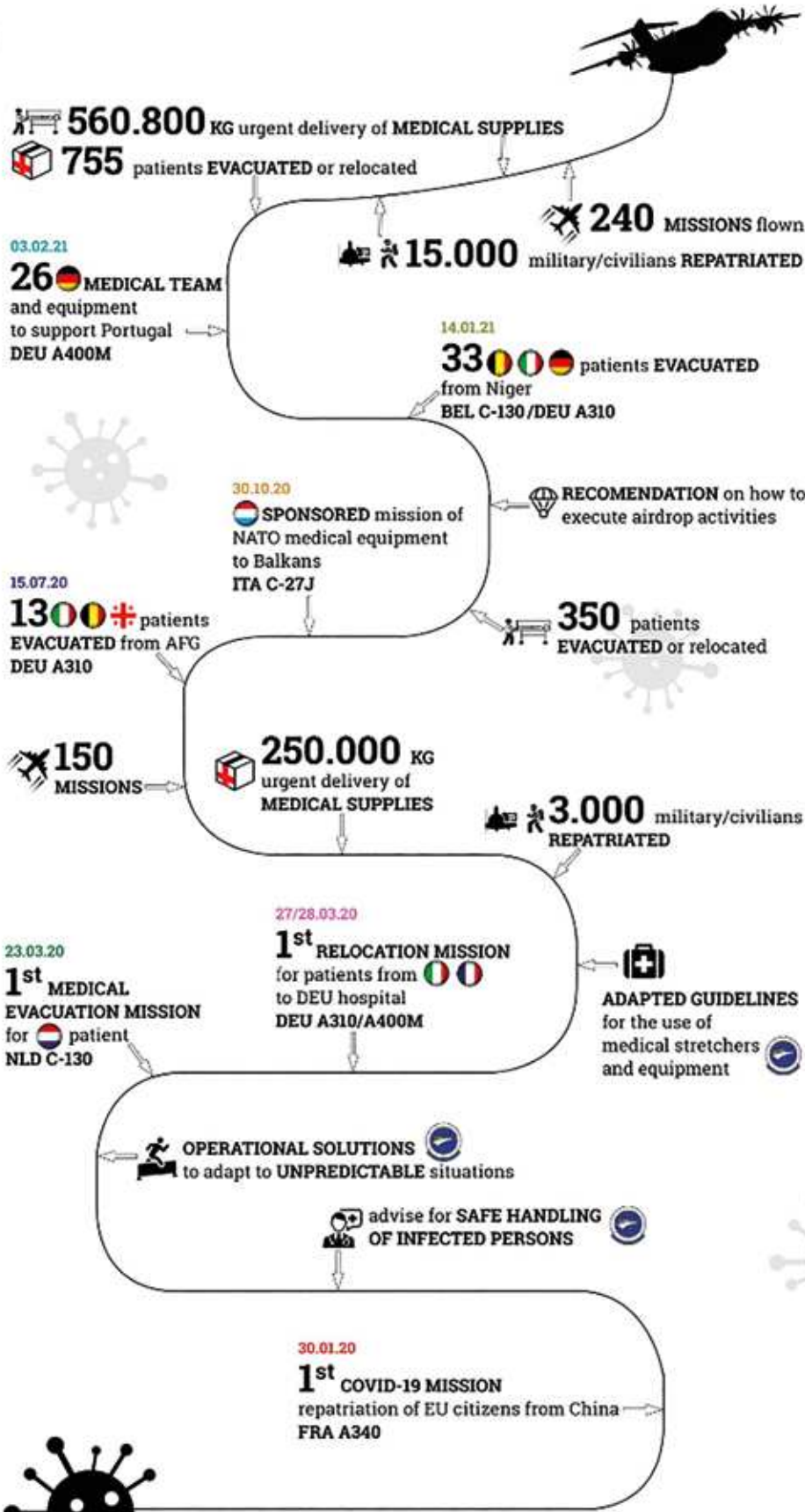
This entailed that EATC planning experts continuously had to revise routes, and destinations. They also faced increasing differing national directives to adapt requirements for crews and passengers. When social distancing and face masks started ruling our daily lives, it was no different in the restricted space of an aircraft. Nations imposed customised use of

the cabin with buffer zones between crews and passengers or individual protection equipment for the crews. Once they decided on mandatory disinfection procedures of the aircraft after each mission, the aircraft availability dropped dramatically and EATC had to adapt to this shortage, while the priority of the missions remained high.

On top of these challenges, the Aeromedical Evacuation Control Centre (AECC) experts faced an unprecedented situation with a need to transport infectious patients on any type of aircraft and national bans on stopovers when infected patients were on board. Of course, the pandemic hit EATC as a whole. Most of the 2020 training and exercise programme had to be cancelled, which imposed a delay on the set training objectives. Then the headquarters was confronted with a situation that is, in principle, not in the DNA of a defence entity, and for certain not of operational business: the sudden upsurge in remote work.

... to Windows of Opportunities

EATC faced a situation where the missions could no longer be planned and executed according to standardised procedures and long-lasting experience. They entered uncharted waters, while, on the other hand, the urgency of the missions required prompt, but viable solutions. So, the operational experts started looking for information wherever available in order to create "a picture of the situation". They were permanently



One-year milestones:
 EATC in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.
 (Graphic: EATC)

in contact with the national crews to hear about recent experiences. Or they just consulted news programmes or internet. This might look daring for a professional command, but the pandemic requested extraordinary solutions.

Communication played a central role during this crisis. Means of communication had to be adjusted while delays to execute missions became shorter, the reduced staff presence and social distancing putting pressure on established coordination principles. A quick exchange of information among all internal and external actors became unprecedented vital. Step-by-step, EATC established recommendations to advise the nations on specific problems and to harmonise the procedures for multinational missions, including how to organise airdrop activities.

EATC's medical experts played a pivotal role and were heavily engaged to find common solutions and develop harmonised procedures. Aeromedical evacuation and the consequently medical treatment are highly sensitive national issue and need particular attention. The team finessed operational guidelines for management of air passengers and air/cabin crews. Moreover, they issued advice on how to evacuate patients with a suspected infection, on intra-theatre evacuation missions and on the use of medical equipment during the pandemic. Besides this functional support, they managed 1,500 aeromedical evacuations of infected and non-infected patients during the year 2020. This is an increase of about 50% in comparison to the previous years.

Looking Into the Future

COVID-19 offered unexpected opportunities to EATC. Some were implemented at the drop of a hat, while others will offer innovative undertakings for the future.

As such, the EATC Commander prioritised the further standardisation of medical processes and regulations and the development of a lessons learned catalogue. Amongst others, recommendations include to permanently warehouse a strategic stock of Personal Protective Equipment kits for flight wings and to train them in using these kits, as well as standard procedures for infectious passengers. EATC will also put care into its exercise programme in general to catch up on training objectives and to seize opportunities to reinforce the e-learning environment. This goes hand in hand with the set-up for home office capabilities to face any future crisis.

In past year of the pandemic, EATC has proven that only acting in concert leads to success. On the one hand, through sharing aircraft and having privileged access to the whole diverse EATC fleet of 170 assets. On the other hand, through pooling experts into one single command. The EATC staff was able to face this unpredictable pandemic through varied professional and cultural backgrounds, and made sure to overcome any problem with innovation and expertise.

