



Homecoming: Supporting the Repatriation of US Citizens Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

An interview with Pete Sanderlin, Chief Operating Officer, Kalitta Air, LLC, and Heath Nicholl, Senior Vice President & Deputy Chief Operating Officer, Kalitta Air, LLC

By Sharon Lo, Managing Editor, *DTJ & The Source*

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, global travel came to a near-total standstill, effectively stranding tens of thousands of US citizens abroad. In close coordination with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Health and Human Services, the State Department was responsible for meeting the

monumental challenge of bringing these Americans home. With the dedicated support of their commercial industry partners, they were able to meet that challenge.

To hear more about what it was like to carry out this unprecedented mission to bring home and repatriate thousands of US citizens from every corner of the globe, *DTJ* sat down with Kalitta Air's Pete Sanderlin and Heath Nicholl.

DTJ: Thank you for taking the time to chat today. Kalitta Air was involved in supporting the government's response very early in the COVID-19 outbreak. Specifically, you played a critical role in repatriating US citizens from overseas for the State Department. Can you give us a little background on your work with them?

HEATH NICHOLL: We have a relationship with Phoenix Air Group and the State Department's op med group [Bureau of Medical Services Directorate of Operational Medicine]. We've worked with them in the past. In particular, we worked with them in carriage of their biocontainment units that go inside a 747 aircraft.

During the Ebola outbreak, the US government and other private sources developed a containerized biocontainment system [CBCS] that would fit into either military aircraft or a 747. We performed exercises into West Africa, to those the countries that had large Ebola outbreaks, transporting simulated patients to infectious

disease centers within the US. So, we've had quite a bit of experience with them.

PETE SANDERLIN: We've been doing that about seven years, well before COVID. Even though we never carried patients on the Ebola front, we did provide support as a carrier for over 40 missions carrying PPE [personal protective equipment], medical supplies, and everything else into West Africa.

DTJ: What was it like when you got that initial call from State requesting COVID response support? I imagine you had a lot to do to prepare your aircraft.

HEATH NICHOLL: I think the official notification came in over the weekend from our counterparts over at Department of State. They called us and asked how quickly we could get a 747 outfitted in order to repatriate passengers. With the large MRO [maintenance, repair and overhaul] facility up in Oscoda, Michigan, we have the ability to put in seat pallets and configure the aircraft in a short amount of time.

PETE SANDERLIN: We have a lot of donor airplanes. We buy a lot of ex-passenger airplanes that we can remove that equipment out of those airplanes and put them inside the 747. So almost immediately, we had everything on hand—we had slides, rafts, life jackets, oxygen, seats and seat pallets, and we were able to have lav equipment, as obviously we had to have physiological support for any potential patients.

We were able to do this all in a short amount of time. I think from the time we got the call, about 72-hours later, we had our first 747 in Oscoda getting configured in a passenger configuration. These airplanes are full cargo, but we're able to convert them and put seats inside the airplane.

HEATH NICHOLL: And this was ideal for the Department of State's needs because we could carry the CBCS's, and then being a freighter proves beneficial because it has

a lot of hard surfaces that are much easier to decontaminate after each mission. We also had a contract with a cleaning company that specializes in critical environments and performing decontaminations in places such as hospitals, biological labs,

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DTJ: How did you prepare your personnel? Did they express a lot of concern for their health and safety, given how little we knew about the virus at that time?

HEATH NICHOLL: Well, with our background working the Ebola relief flights and CBCS exercises, we developed protocols in relation to infectious disease and mitigation methods. We make sure that we give our team members—our pilots, our mechanics, and our loadmasters—the best health and safety environment we can put them in. We did that during the Ebola outbreak. We created our own internal protocols on how we would sterilize the airplane, how we protect the crews, and make sure that everything returned to us and put back on board the aircraft was treated to be Ebola-free and virus-free before heading back to the states. And that kind of segues into COVID, we applied

the same methodology when the COVID call came in, and especially when there were US citizens involved.

PETE SANDERLIN: We were one of the first carriers involved in these missions.

You asked about our crews having concerns, but our crews are very patriotic, and there was never an issue trying to find volunteers. They were lining up to do this mission. They were so proud to be able to be part of this, to repatriate citizens back to the US during the COVID ordeal, that we had no lack of volunteers. It was amazing.

DTJ: Did you have any difficulty getting PPE or any other supplies for your personnel?

HEATH NICHOLL: From our experience working with Ebola and doing the exercises with the Department of State, we had quite a surplus of PPE, everything from the Tyvek [protective suits] to the masks, the face shields, respirators, and gloves. We were very well equipped. And in addition, because the State Department was involved, they provided equipment as well.

DTJ: Once you had your people and equipment in place, what protocols or procedures did you implement to carry out these flights?

PETE SANDERLIN: Basically, how it all worked is that we would screen everyone.

They were all pre-screened before loading the airplane by State Department personnel. Along with the passengers, we were provided flight nurses and doctors that flew along with us. They would monitor the passengers' health onboard the aircraft. If a passenger had become ill, they would move them to designated seating on the airplane.

We also had a secure segregated area where, if a passenger happened to develop COVID symptoms while en route back to the US, we could put them in an isolation area of the airplane. We had that screened off so we could move passengers around as needed based on their health conditions. The healthy passengers stayed towards the front. If someone happened to develop any symptoms, we move them into the back into the screened-off area.

HEATH NICHOLL: And similar protocols were used to deplane the aircraft as well. The crew would remain isolated during deplaning while the passengers would exit the aircraft. We even identified exit locations that if a passenger became ill during the flight back to the States, they would be removed first through the identified exit point. So, you never had cross-contamination in either direction between areas of potentially sick and healthy passengers.

DTJ: It sounds like everything went remarkably well. Did you have any trouble traveling in and out of any countries or locations?

HEATH NICHOLL: At first, we had some snafus, but like anything else, the more you do it, the more refined it gets. The initial obstacles revolved around getting the passengers properly screened. And having our first entry points ready to receive a large volume of passengers in a secure, quarantined area such as Anchorage, Alaska, took a lot of coordination. But things got better over time.

Our biggest mission was when, at one point, we had four 747s with passengers.

They were staggered within seven hours of each flight coming out of China, repatriating back. We probably had more than 1,100 people in the air at once. But the different points in the US that we went into, such as the airbases, things for the most part went fine. It was amazing how well it went.

DTJ: If you had to pinpoint one thing, what do you think was the key to mission success?

HEATH NICHOLL: I think it's our people. It's our team. It's our folks. I can't emphasize enough the willingness of our pilots, loadmasters, and our mechanics to do these missions. For example, our Oscoda groups, I mean, we had people wanting to work extra shifts in Oscoda to configure these airplanes for these missions. We had crew volunteering to fly. They felt like they're all part of something. And especially when they saw the first airplane land on the news, they were so proud to be part of Kalitta Air. We had people tripping over each other to do this. They wanted to be part of something big, and through our eyes, it was big. It was huge.

DTJ: It was a big deal for those of us watching at home too. Is there anything you would have changed, or do you have any lessons learned or best practices you could share?

HEATH NICHOLL: You have your little hiccups here and there through a mission set, but nothing that would say we need to start over and regroup and redo this again. The ability to do the exercises in advance and with our work with Ebola really had us prepared. It was very easy to adapt the Ebola protocols to COVID, and they almost worked universally because both are so contagious.

And, if I could make a plug for the 747, as it is the ideal for air circulation because the flight crews have their own air source, which alleviated crew concerns. And the ability to load the CBCS's through the

nose door makes it a fantastic aircraft for these missions.

DTJ: Now that passengers can fly commercial, are you still involved in supporting the government's COVID response efforts?

PETE SANDERLIN: We are. We're still working with the Phoenix Air Group, Department of State, and other government agencies on other things. We've shifted from repatriation to now the vaccination. We have a smaller role because using a 747 for transporting the vaccinations is overwhelming, but we still support in that role.

DTJ: Well, Heath, Pete, I appreciate you sharing this story with us. It has been an incredibly challenging year, but we are so proud of NDTA's members' and partners' work throughout the pandemic, so thanks to you and everyone at Kalitta for your contributions. Before we go, I always like to end by asking if there is anything else you would like to share with *DTJ's* readers about this experience?

PETE SANDERLIN: This experience has been kind of surreal because when it first hit the news, there were pictures of Kalitta planes everywhere. It was a big story both here and internationally, and we were overwhelmed with the media coverage. We tend to be the back in the shadows with a small-knit group of companies and agencies that we work for, so our focus is on trying to stay ready and keep our crews ready to do whatever it was called for.

HEATH NICHOLL: We had a single goal in mind, band together and get our citizens home safely. And as a benefit, we've developed friendships along the way with our partners. We are very proud to be a part of it, and if we're called upon, we're going to be there again. We will keep running exercises, running drills to keep our crews and everybody else current on this. So, we can be there anytime we're called upon. **DTJ**