Eleven European air forces will pool their talents with the US to make the most of three C-17 transports.

By Marcus Weisgerber

From the looks of things, this could be a military joint venture like no other. Eleven European nations—some of them NATO members, others not—are teaming up with the US to create a new C-17-based strategic airlift fleet.

In just a few weeks, the first of three C-17 airlifters will touch down at a new home in Hungary—Papa Air Base, roughly midway between Budapest and Vienna. The former Warsaw Pact fighter base will be home for the versatile cargo haulers and hundreds of airmen from across Europe and the United States.

It will be the permanent station for those who will fly the C-17s on cargo missions around the world.

The multinational group will use the Boeing-made airlifters for missions ranging from troop transport, to equipment delivery and humanitarian relief operations.
USAF is the main driver behind the program and is footing the bill for one of the C-17s.

Other NATO members on the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) team include Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. NATO has other multinational capabilities, such as its 16-nation E-3 AWACS program, but what makes the Strategic Airlift Capability unique is the participation of Scandinavian nations Finland and Sweden—which are not NATO allies.

The consortium is set up similar to business jet time-share programs. Each participating nation signs up to use the C-17s for a certain number of flying hours. The more hours purchased, the more personnel are assigned to the wing.

The Swedes, in fact, have purchased 550 annual flying hours, the highest participation rate after the United States.

Unlike other aircraft-sharing partnerships, the strategic airlift capability allows participating nations to use the C-17s for essentially anything they want—so long as USAF Col. John Zazworsky, commander of the Strategic Airlift Capability’s Heavy Airlift Wing, deems the mission safe for the crew and aircraft.

Nations can use their flight hours to support domestic missions or NATO tasks. For example, a country participating in combat operations in Iraq could use the aircraft to transport its soldiers to and from the battlefield. This would likely not be possible if the aircraft were part of a traditional NATO structure, because any alliance member can veto any given mission.

**Flexibility Is Key**

“It’s a deliberate approach to try it a different way and to build flexibility into how we operate,” Zazworsky—a veteran C-141 and C-17 pilot—said of the arrangement. Not being attached to NATO is important so that participating nations have the flexibility to do what they want with their hours.

Partners have purchased 3,165 hours of flight time, said Air Force Brig. Gen. Richard C. Johnston, chairman of the Strategic Air Capability Steering Board, a multinational panel that oversees the aircraft acquisition and program management, support, and operations. Johnston also serves as director of plans, programs, and analyses for US Air Forces in Europe.

“This is a build it and they will come,” situation, US Air Forces in Europe Commander Gen. Roger A. Brady told reporters in March. “I think people are going to fall in love with this capability.”

Each of the SAC consortium nations determines a single contact to communicate directly with the wing’s command and control branch. The C2 branch then develops the flying schedules and plans the C-17 missions. It is Zazworsky’s job to make sure each country gets its fair share of hours.

During planning conferences over the past few years, many Heavy Airlift Wing participants said they plan to use the C-17s to rotate troops and equipment in and out of Afghanistan.
“To fly all the hours that we need to, we’re going to need to pretty much keep the planes busy every single day,” Zazworsky said. “There’ll be a lot of mutual pressure within peers to not have the plane just going off for something that’s not a productive airlift mission.”

A nation could also use its C-17 hours to support NATO Response Force commitments or the European Union battle group commitments. The participants “get a lot of capability for a relatively small investment,” Zazworsky said. “Our goal is to use these planes very efficiently.”

That being said, Johnston added that participants “have the ability to say, ‘I don’t want to participate in hours or [with] personnel for a particular mission.’” The ability to opt out is “extremely important, not only to the individual nations—it’s important to NATO and the EU,” he said.

If this were not the construct, “we’d be quagmired in bureaucracy,” Johnston said. Without the ability for missions to be executed without unanimous agreement, “this whole program would fail,” he said.

For the past few months, commanders have been bringing new personnel into the wing and settling them into their new positions. Airmen from all of the participating nations are slowly making their way to Hungary, along with their families, who will live in Papa.

“The really rewarding part is, all the nations take this program very seriously, and they’re sending high-quality people ready to go to work,” Zazworsky said.

Personnel are “spreading out into all parts of our headquarters building and in the final throes of establishing [an] infrastructure that you’d normally have in an office building that wasn’t there before,” Zazworsky said.

**Updating an Air Base**

This month, the wing should present Budapest’s Defense Ministry with policies and procedures “so we can demonstrate to the Hungarians that we’re ready to operate safely,” he said. This involves “pulling together all the basic regulations and operating policies any flying unit would have to include” and the maintenance and supply effort that “keeps the parts flowing.”

The goal is to have the unit certified about a month before the first C-17 is scheduled to arrive. The certification is necessary since each aircraft will be registered under Hungary’s authority.

The Globemaster IIIs will have Hungarian markings, a blue strip across the top of the vertical stabilizer, red, white, and green markings across the rudder, and triangular roundels on the wings.

The wing is expected to receive its full complement of three C-17 aircraft by the end of October.

Despite the current worldwide financial crisis, the nations are still committed to the program. “I think if we get this thing up and running, it’ll send the right message to the nations that are participating that their national treasure is being expended on something that’s going to really make a difference in their ability to move personnel and cargo where they need it,” Johnston said.

Zazworsky first traveled to Papa in June 2008. Over the following few months, the colonel split his time between Ramstein Air Base in Germany and Papa before settling down full-time at the Hungarian base—along with Heden—last October.

The Heavy Airlift Wing’s headquarters building is an old modified dormitory. When Zazworsky, Heden, and their small staff first arrived at the base, there was no computer network, and mobile phones were the main form of communication. The group sent work-related e-mails in
the morning and evening from their Internet-equipped hotels.

“It was really a fascinating, totally new challenge,” said Heden, a fighter pilot by trade, who most recently commanded a JAS-39 Gripen training wing in Sweden.

The airfield at Papa, its instrument approach systems, and a portion of the aircraft parking ramp were improved when Hungary joined NATO in 1999. Since then, the base has been a contingency field for alliance aircraft. The air traffic control and weather forecasting equipment are in good shape.

Two Hungarian Air Force search and rescue helicopters—tasked with emergency-response missions in the western portion of the country—are also stationed at the base.

The Hungarians are working on a number of infrastructure improvements to roads and security, and are constructing a new office building and gymnasium.

The SAC program is paying for ramp extensions, so all three C-17s can fit. Several hardened aircraft shelters—left over from the airstrip’s previous life as a fighter base—are being converted into storage areas for maintenance equipment and supplies. In all, about 350 Hungarian military officials will run the base.

A hangar and new headquarters building were part of the original program, but were deferred when nations dropped out of the consortium last year.

“For now,” Zazworsky said, “we’ll be operating without a hangar.”

Each participating nation will have its own pilots, loadmasters, flying crew chiefs, and security forces. USAF will train pilots at its C-17 schoolhouse at Altus AFB, Okla. Seven C-17 instructor pilots and five loadmasters will form a training cadre.

In February, two Swedish airmen began loadmaster training at Lackland AFB, Tex. In March, two Norwegian pilots and two loadmasters began their training.

The initial C-17 flight training program familiarizes pilots with the Globemaster’s computerized avionics system, said Norwegian Maj. Christian Langfeldt, who is among the first at the schoolhouse.

The C-17 is “very automated, so that’s a big difference,” said Langfeldt, who has flown the P-3 Orion and NATO E-3 AWACS.

After graduating, the new C-17 pilots will receive additional training at Papa to later become aircraft commanders and instructors.

The initial crews are expected to graduate in June, shortly before the first C-17 arrives at Papa.

Zazworsky said his goal is for the first airplane to be flown to Hungary with a multinational crew. “It looks like we’re on track to do that.”

The SAC countries have contracted the flight line maintenance at Papa to Boeing. In addition, a group of crew chiefs from the United States and three other nations will perform maintenance if an aircraft breaks down at a forward location.

More Nations To Join?

Training missions will also be flown at air bases in each participating nation, so that aerial port, crash, and fire personnel are familiar with the C-17.

Both US and European commanders believe the Heavy Airlift Wing could expand not only to include more C-17s, but other types of airlifters, such as the Lockheed Martin C-130J, Airbus A400M, or the Alenia C-27J.

“My main goal is to create a unit that’s operationally effective right away, but also flexible enough to expand,” Zazworsky said.

The agreement allows the wing to add different types of aircraft, and states: “The objective is to establish a SAC program to acquire, manage, support, and operate C-17 aircraft and other assets needed to meet national requirements of the participants.”

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“There are additional hours that are available to be purchased,” Johnston said. “If nations wanted to join, we would see them buying those remaining hours. If we go past 3,500 [hours], then we really need to start looking at buying another airplane.”

Securing purchasers for the 300-plus annual hours that are still available would allow the consortium to build that hangar and make other infrastructure improvements. More money would also allow for add-on systems, such as Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures on the C-17s.

“I think really our operational experience in the first year or two will drive the discussion of whether to procure another plane,” Zazworsky said. The airfield at Papa, “with some improvement, could handle a lot more aircraft,” he noted.

Even though the first C-17 has not even arrived, other countries have expressed interest in joining the SAC consortium, according to Johnston.

“Three are nations that have already started inquiring about the program as active members or asking for airlift support,” he said. “Getting this program up and running in July ... will clearly demonstrate we’ve got the capacity and the energy to make this a success.”

Sweden’s Heden offered an even larger opportunity if the multinational cargo-hauling pact proves a success: “If you asked me for a wish, I would say let’s ... do it with tankers.”