



Photo submitted

Lt. Col. Kevin White commands a C-130 aircraft as the crew travels through Afghanistan during Operation Mountain Fury.

“The supplies we delivered helped these guys survive and fight the enemy.”

Fighting Taliban in Afghanistan

746th EAS delivers supplies when ground forces need it most

by Maj. Ann P. Knabe
Chief, 379th Public Affairs

Far above the rugged mountainous terrain of Eastern Afghanistan, the 746th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron C-130 aircrew flew into the night sky, watching firefights and mortar fire just hundreds of feet below. The reservists peered through their night vision goggles at the battles raging on the mountainside, knowing they were playing a key rôle in Operation Mountain Fury.

"The supplies we delivered helped these guys survive and fight the enemy," said Master Sgt. John Eichenberg, a loadmaster with more than 27 years in the military. "You could tell it when we dropped off the ammo. They were almost out, and they were fighting the Taliban hard."

The 746th EAS is just one of several 379th Air Expeditionary Wing units involved in a surge of operations supporting Operation Mountain Fury. The operation is part of a coordinated effort to put continuous pressure on Taliban extremists across multiple regions of Afghanistan. Its goal is to provide security to the population, extend the government to the people, and facilitate reconstruction of the war-torn country. Mountain Fury has been going on for several weeks in "shaping operations" designed to separate Taliban extremists from a population they would otherwise manipulate through coercion and intimidation. The 746th got directly involved when tasked to deliver ammunition, food and supplies to Army Special Forces units on the ground at forward operating bases Salerno and Farah.

The Colorado Springs-based 302nd Airlift Wing performed combat offloads in Farah – a first for any 302nd aircrew.

"When we landed at Farah LZ (landing zone) the forklift axle was broken, so we formed a human chain to off-load the cargo," said C-130

Flight Engineer Master Sgt. Ken Day. The entire crew formed a line and handed the precious cargo box-by-box to the next person, and at the end a soldier placed it into a waiting truck. Together, the two teams off-loaded dozens of boxes weighing 20 to 30 pounds each, emptying two pallets of boxes in minutes.

The third and fourth pallets, containing meals-ready-to-eat, potable water and other essential staples, flew off the back through inertia once the pilot applied take-off power and released the brakes.

"We cranked up the power to 5,000 inch-pounds of torque, then released the brakes and the two pallets slid off the back," said Aircraft Commander Lt. Col. Kevin White. "Simultaneously, the loadmasters released the pallet locks."

When the C-130 crew returned to Farah LZ a second day in a row, the crews recognized the impact their contributions were making in the war against terror.

"The special forces were still running really low on ammo, even with what we had just delivered the day before," said Sergeant Day. "They thanked us over and over again."

Operation Enduring Freedom offers a variety of challenges tailor-made for the C-130 mission.

"The C-130 is designed for this kind of flying," said Colonel White. "The mountainous terrain is challenging, especially at night. The threat level is high, and landings can be dangerous." Despite the challenges, the all-Reserve aircrew clearly felt connected to the Mountain Fury mission.

"We do channel missions all the time to Bagram and Kandahar," said 746th AS

Commander Col. Tom Henderson. "But the aircrew's work on the Pakistani border put us into the heart of the mission where they could witness the action up close, and make a direct impact."

Throughout their 4-day mission, the crew flew multiple sorties into combat areas, ranging from Jalalabad on the Pakistani border to smaller outlying bases like FOBs Salerno and Farah. The former features a 3,900 foot runway made of clay, dirt and gravel, while the latter is host to a 5,000 foot runway of broken-up concrete.

"We were definitely in 'bad guy country,'" said Colonel White, commenting on the terrorist threat and fighting on the ground in remote locations around Afghanistan. "When you combine this with the austere field operations and confined, unimproved landing strips, flying becomes a real challenge."

While the combat offloads added one more level of complexity to the flying mission, the crew didn't mind. In fact, they welcomed it.

"The Operation Mountain Fury mission was meaningful and timely; we made a difference to our guys fighting on the ground," said copilot Maj. Chris Kornmesser. "And that left us all with an awesome feeling."

In addition to the 746th AS, several other Southwest Asia units support Operation Mountain Fury Air Force missions, including specially-trained "ravens" from the 379th Security Forces Squadron who protect the plane, and maintenance crew chiefs from the 746th Aircraft Maintenance Unit who not only maintain the planes, but fly with the crew. The 340th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron and 379th Expeditionary Operations Support Squadron are also key contributors to Operation Mountain Fury.