

Last Combat Mission for 517th C-130's

Capt. Jeff Clark
386 PAO

"Clear number three engine," says Tech. Sgt. Daniel Elliot, 737th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron flight engineer. One of the loadmasters, Airman 1st Class Bret Oyler, stands in front of the aircraft, ensuring nobody walks into the propeller arc and monitoring the engine start to ensure all goes well before responding, "Number three is clear."

"Turning", calls the pilot, Maj. Andy McGee, as he engages the starter.

"Timing", responds 1st Lt. Jake Duff, the co-pilot.

The prop slowly begins to rotate and quickly gathers speed. Another mission begins in much the same way each flight has since 1954 when the first C-130 took to the sky. The crew readies itself to deliver troops and cargo throughout

Iraq, much like any other combat mission. This isn't any other combat mission though; it's the last combat flight of the 517th Airlift Squadron in the C-130. After the last Alaskan C-130 crew leaves the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing, they will return home to Elmendorf Air Force Base, where the 517 AS is transitioning to the C-17.

The C-17 Globemaster will be the newest in a long line of aircraft assigned to the squadron. The squadron has performed its mission flying C-47 Skytrains, C-82 Packets, and C-119 Boxcars. In 1960, the squadron received its first C-130. Since that time, it has flown virtually every troop/cargo variant of the C-130, from the C-130A to the present-day C-130H. The squadron earned the name "Firebirds" with fiery jet assisted takeoffs (JATO) from remote arctic sites with the ski-equipped C-130D.

During their time in Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom, the Firebirds have racked up more than 6,000 mishap-free combat flying hours despite multiple hazards. One young crew had a tire blow on takeoff from a small dirt strip nestled in the mountains. Despite significant damage to the aircraft, they safely landed the aircraft at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. Another crew was faced with a sudden pressurization loss. The Firebirds have also performed numerous combat airdrops, including a short-notice resupply of a firebase under threat of imminent attack.

"Flying in combat is what we train for," said Maj. Chad

Christopherson, navigator. "Despite the high ops tempo, it's a really fun job."

The expertise of the Firebirds, however, is not limited to combat. They have projected their tactical airlift capabilities in a broad range of theatres. Among them are tsunami relief in the Philippines, prisoner of war recovery operations in Vietnam, presidential support missions, and scientific studies of the Greenland ice cap. In 1967, they saved a tiny native village from extinction after the caribou they depended on were driven further into the Arctic by wildfire. This turned into a yearly "Santa" flight into the remote village.

It isn't known for sure if the new C-17 squadron will retain the name or heritage of the 517th Firebirds but it seems it will live on with the men who flew the last C-130 combat mission.

"It's nice to be a part of a finale," Maj. Travis Buford who was a second navigator for the flight said, "This was a historical flight for a historic squadron and we're proud to be a part of it."

So proud in fact, many on this crew are already scheduled to fly on the 517th's last mission in a C-130 March 23. The rest of the crew is trying to be onboard as well.

The history of the 517th is indeed storied, but it's also tied to the 386 AEW. Not only was the last combat mission flown while the crew was assigned here, Col. Paul Curlett, 386 AEW commander, was also commander of the 517 AS in Elmendorf from 1998 until 2000.

"I really enjoyed my time in Alaska as the commander of the 517th but I could never imagine being deployed here years later and seeing their last combat mission," Colonel Curlett said. "I'm very proud to witness another moment in the history of such a great squadron."

Pride was the overwhelming feeling shared by the crew but they all said the redeployment home and then move from Elmendorf would be bittersweet.

"I was thinking about all the missions I've been on and all of them have been with the 517th so this is bittersweet," Senior Airman William Oxenford said. "This is my fifth deployment since I've been in the Air Force but even when I physically go home and even leave the 517th Airlift Squadron; I'll still remain united here with my fellow Airmen and warriors."



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