



Pooling & sharing that works: The Heavy Airlift Wing at five

by Jan Joel Andersson

Without much fanfare, the Heavy Airlift Wing of the independent multinational Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) Programme turned five years old in the autumn of 2014. There was a low-key ‘birthday celebration’ on 29 August last which did not attract much media attention. But the truth is that the Heavy Airlift Wing is a rare and remarkable achievement of pooling and sharing that has delivered tangible and new operational military capability in Europe. As such, the Heavy Airlift Wing demonstrates that not only can multinational pooling and sharing work – but that it is also a smart way of jointly procuring and owning new capabilities for countries too small to do it alone.

Lifting together

Faced with a perennial lack of strategic transport and without the resources to acquire heavy transport aircraft on their own, 11 European countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Sweden) joined the United States in September 2008 to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to jointly procure and operate a fleet of strategic, long-range transport aircraft for a period of at least 30 years.

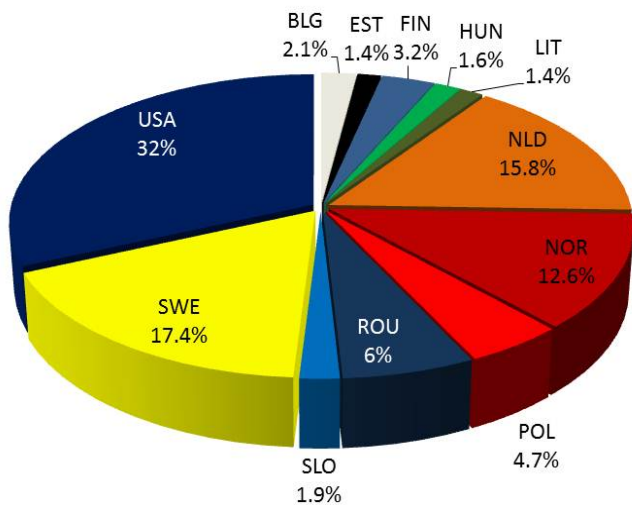
Less than a year after signing the MoU, the first C-17 Globemaster III aircraft was delivered in July

2009 to the Heavy Airlift Wing’s home, centrally located in Europe at the Papa Airbase in Hungary. Having reached full operational capability in 2012, the Heavy Air Wing now provides more than 3,100 flight hours per year. Since its first operational airlift missions in August 2009, the Heavy Airlift Wing has in the past five years flown over 14,000 flight hours on more than 1,000 missions, transporting some 44,000 tons of cargo and 56,000 people.

The Heavy Airlift Wing currently consists of three Boeing C-17 Globemaster III strategic transport aircraft. The C-17 is one of the largest and most flexible military transport aircraft in service today. Also operated by the air forces of Australia, Canada, India, Kuwait, Qatar, the UK, UAE and the US, it is designed to fulfil a variety of airlift requirements for both military and humanitarian missions. The C-17 can deliver large amounts of cargo and personnel, as well as trucks and armoured vehicles, across long distances directly to small primitive airfields around the world. Even when carrying a load of more than 72 tons, a C-17 requires only a little more than a 2,000 metre runway for take-off. It can then fly over 4,000 kilometres and land on runways as short as 900 metres or less on a small (paved or unpaved) airfield. The C-17 aircraft can be refuelled in flight, extending its range significantly. The C-17s of the Heavy Airlift Wing are all equipped with countermeasure systems that allow them to enter areas where a ground threat exists.



SAC nations' flight hour shares



Source: <http://www.heavyairliftwing.org>

Trained and certified to the same standards as US, Canadian and UK C-17 crews, the multinational crews and aircraft of the Heavy Airlift Wing have supported member countries' national military and humanitarian transport and training needs by, for example, moving cargo or dropping paratroopers. The Heavy Airlift Wing has also supported military and civilian missions of the EU, NATO and the UN, including in Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, Central Africa, Haiti, and Pakistan. According to reports, the Heavy Airlift Wing has achieved a very high capability rate of 94% during its first five years of operations.

How (and why) it works

It is not only the aircrews that are multinational. The Heavy Airlift Wing is multinational also on the ground. Currently, some 135 military and civilian personnel drawn from the 12 member countries are working in the three squadrons of the Heavy Airlift Wing in Hungary. Each member country contributes personnel to the Wing according to its share of agreed flight hours in the SAC programme. Leadership positions, however, are filled by the member countries with the largest share of flight hours.

The MoU signed in September 2008 established an independent multinational Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) Programme. Not directly part of either the EU or NATO, the SAC programme is governed by a Steering Board consisting of representatives from the participating countries. The Steering Board provides the guidance, execution

and oversight of the SAC Programme in accordance with the MoU. Still, the SAC Programme relies on NATO for some key support structures, and in particular on the NATO Airlift Management Programme Board (NAM PB) and the Boeing Company for technical support and logistics.

Each participating member country controls a pre-agreed share of available C-17 flight hours that can be used for national missions. While these flight hours are 'owned' by the member countries, it is the Commander of the Heavy Airlift Wing that has the final authority over decisions on mission planning and execution.

The largest owners of the flight hours are currently the US (32%), Sweden (17.4%), the Netherlands (15.8%) and Norway (12.6%). The innovative governing structure of the Strategic Airlift Capability Programme and the Heavy Airlift Wing has few comparisons in the world – and legal counsel was instrumental in its creation.

Growing together

Demand for European strategic airlift capability is most likely to remain high if not increase in the foreseeable future. The current structure of the Strategic Airlift Capability Programme is tailored for the operations of three C-17 aircraft in one Wing but could very well be expanded to include more member countries as well as additional C-17s or other types of transport aircraft – such as A-400Ms or C-130s – and capabilities such as Multirole Tanker Transport (MRTT) aircraft.

In fact, ever since its inception, the Strategic Airlift Capability Programme has been open to other European members of NATO or the Partnership for Peace (PfP) to join. This would make it possible to reap even further benefits of this successful pooling and sharing arrangement that has provided even very small European countries with a strategic transport capability that they would not have been able to achieve on their own.

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