



U.S. Air Force First Lt. John Rinaldo annotates a patient's records after completing an aeromedical evacuation mission on a C-17 Globemaster III. Rinaldo is a flight nurse serving temporary duty with the 791st Expeditionary Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron at Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY MASTER SGT. JOHN E. LASKY

Purple Heart employees help honor role of C-17s in medical evacuation

BY FELIX SANCHEZ

It was more than 37 years ago that a deafening explosion tore into the carrier Don Walker was driving on an isolated road south of the Demilitarized Zone during the Vietnam conflict. The land mine they had rolled over threw everyone out of the vehicle, blew off Walker's helmet and thrust his head against the shield of a 50-caliber machine gun.

Walker suffered a bloody crease in his skull, and the other soldiers suffered critical injuries, but they all survived—thanks in large part to speedy medical evacuations from the scene by UH-1 Huey helicopters. For his injuries, Walker received the Purple Heart—the medal given to U.S. troops wounded in battle, the medal no one tries to earn.

Appropriately, Walker works today as a structural mechanic for the C-17 Globemaster III—one of the closest friends a wounded soldier can have in today's war environment. The C-17 has earned respect and universal praise from troops, military leaders and medical personnel for its role in helping quickly evacuate wounded soldiers from a war zone, saving lives and potentially lessening the severity of long-lasting battle wounds.

That's because the C-17—most known for carrying cargo, military supplies and humanitarian aid—can be converted in minutes into a high-tech, flying intensive care unit that quickly transports wounded troops to field hospitals or to critical care facilities in the United States.

Former Air Mobility Command leader Gen. Duncan McNabb has called the C-17 the "flagship of U.S. compassion" for the role it plays in the care and evacuation of soldiers. The C-17 routinely picks up wounded U.S. soldiers at the Air Force Theater Hospital at Balad Air Base in Iraq. International C-17 operators also use the

airlifters to transport wounded troops.

C-17s loaded with wounded patients depart daily, mostly at night. Sometimes the C-17 flying hospital has but one wounded soldier whose injuries are so critical that the plane departs quickly, flies at low altitudes to maintain pressures that don't exacerbate brain trauma, and jets nonstop all the way to the United States.

Aeromedical evacuation operations have created a survival rate today of 96 percent for wounded troops who can be airlifted to a hospital. That's the highest rate in U.S. military history, and C-17s play a big part.

In honor of the C-17's aeromedical evacuating performance, the Mississippi Air National Guard gave the name "Spirit of the Purple Heart" to a C-17 in a ceremony last month. U.S. Air Force officials, elected representatives, Boeing executives and Boeing employees who are Purple Heart recipients participated in the event.

Walker—who could not attend the event in Mississippi—has worked for 38 years at Douglas Aircraft, McDonnell Douglas and

Boeing, and is a team leader for welders on the C-17 Program. "I'm very proud of this aircraft and even prouder to be associated with a plane named 'Spirit of the Purple Heart,'" he said. "The C-17 is one fantastic airplane."

"It's saved a lot of lives," said Purple Heart attendee George Roy, Commander of the Long Beach Chapter of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. Roy worked at Douglas Aircraft driving rivets before he was drafted for the Korean conflict and flew B-26 Invader light bombers. He flew 47 missions before he was wounded and received the Purple Heart. He was back in the air not too long afterward, only to be shot down and wounded again on his 51st mission.

Richard Rivera, a 59-year-old structural mechanic on the C-17 program, also attended the event as a Purple Heart recipient. "Whichever role the C-17 is used for, you pride yourself in what you're building," Rivera said. "But when it's being used to ferry troops back and forth, or carrying wounded soldiers, I have a lot of pride."

Rivera was working with Douglas Aircraft when he discovered he was about to be drafted and decided to enlist in the Marines instead. He was wounded in

September 1968 in Vietnam when he was walking point on a detail and tripped a landmine that sent shrapnel knifing into his legs, arms and back.

"The next thing I knew I was on the ground, and then I heard the noise," Rivera said. He was evacuated to a field hospital by jeep because rainy weather prevented a Huey helicopter from flying in to pick him up. Later he was flown to Da Nang and eventually to Japan in a C-130 for surgery. Finally, Rivera was flown to Camp Pendleton, Calif., for therapy and rehabilitation. He received his Purple Heart while in the hospital in Japan.

George Muellner, president of Boeing's IDS Advanced Systems, said all veterans have a kinship, and those who work at Boeing understand the value of what they do and the products like the C-17 they assemble. Muellner could not attend but is himself a Purple Heart recipient for wounds he received when he was shot down flying an F-4 Phantom during a combat mission in Vietnam.

"We've got really great people working on the C-17 program, people who are highly focused on the needs of the warfighter," Muellner said. ■

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An injured soldier's best friend

Give them 30 minutes, and just a few people can transform a behemoth military cargo transport into a lifesaving flying hospital.

It's a transformation that loadmaster Allen Randall witnesses nearly every week. C-17 aeromedical evacuations include an average of two per week from Jackson, Miss., where he is stationed with the U.S. Air Force 183rd Airlift Squadron.

"I've transported patients on C-141s and C-130s, but nothing comes close to the C-17's capabilities," Randall said. "Boeing did a great job with this plane. It's set up to give injured soldiers the best care available while en route to medical facilities."

The C-17 can be rigged with litters for up to 36 patients. Each litter is fitted with a full set of medical equipment. The crew onboard includes six to eight medical personnel and two loadmasters.

Randall says medical crews can easily move around inside the C-17, the ride is smooth and comfortable, and the lighting makes it easier for caregivers to do their jobs. The design of the aircraft lets it operate on small, austere airfields. The C-17 can take off and land on runways as short as 3,000 feet and as narrow as 90 feet (910 and 27 meters, respectively).

"Time is essential for these missions," Randall said. "With other types of aircraft, you have to rig the flight overnight. With the C-17, you can fly down, and in 30 minutes you're ready to load and depart."

Randall recalled a mission in which a soldier with extremely critical head injuries was picked up in Iraq. The surgeon who was to perform the surgery was on the U.S. East Coast and not at Ramstein Air Base in Germany as anticipated. Accordingly, the C-17 traveled nonstop from Iraq to Andrews Air Force Base, Md.

It was all in a day's work for Randall, work that he finds exceptionally gratifying. "As a loadmaster I fly a lot of cargo missions," he said. "It's one thing to haul cargo, but it's really special when you can transport the injured as quickly as possible and potentially save lives. The C-17 allows that."

—Felix Sanchez



Aeromedical evacuation crewmembers prepare to take off in 2006 with 16 patients aboard a C-17 Globemaster III. The patients were stabilized at the Air Force Theater Hospital in Iraq, prepared for flight by personnel from the Contingency Aeromedical Staging Facility and then evacuated overnight to Germany. U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY MASTER SGT. JOHN E. LASKY