

**Speech by the Minister of Defence, Ank Bijleveld-Schouten,  
on the occasion of the 10-year anniversary of the European  
Air Transport Command at Eindhoven Air Base on  
24 September 2020**

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Distinguished guests,

There are moments that a service member will never forget.

Such as the happy moment of an infantryman during a tough few days in the middle of enemy territory.

On the agreed date and time,  
reeking of dust, sand and sweat in his hiding place,  
he hears the familiar sound of the engines above him...

Looking up, he sees the vital package of food,  
ammunition and water descending to the landing zone.

He pulls himself together and finds the motivation,  
strength and energy to carry on.

Exactly what he needs to complete the dangerous  
mission with his unit.

Or the moment that a fighter pilot sets course for a  
tanker area because he desperately needs fuel...

And finally catches sight of his big grey brother.

The few minutes that he spends under the boom feel  
like an hour.

He wants to return as soon as possible to the troops on the ground who are under heavy fire a few kilometres from the refuelling area.

He knows that he can make all the difference for them from the air.

But not without enough fuel...

Not without the help of the tanker aircraft.

It is moments like these that a service member will never forget.

Moments when air transport and tanker capability provide essential support.

Without air transport, there is no mission.

This is what makes the work of the aircrew and the operational planners of the air transport fleet so valuable.

Without them, there would be no mission support, humanitarian assistance, medical evacuation, movement of people or supply of fuel or equipment.

They are essential in the military chain.

But they have also been a scarce asset for many years.

Ten years ago, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands therefore decided to join forces.

European Air Group pioneers who, with a healthy dose of creativity, common sense, and logistics and operational insight, said to each other:

Together, we can do this much more efficiently.

We are going to share our air transport fleet.

We are going to use each other's resources and capabilities.

We send German materiel to a mission area on a Belgian aircraft... and bring French troops back.

That saves cost and effort.

We learn from each other and we help each other.

It is a collaboration that works, that I am impressed by... and that I very much encourage.

The European Air Transport Command was formed in 2010 to ensure that no capacity would be lost.

Because together, now with Luxembourg, Spain and Italy as well, we achieve more.

The EATC's enviable record proves that.

In ten years:

Almost two point nine (2.9) million passengers...

Almost three thousand one hundred (3,100) air-to-air refuelling missions...

Over twelve thousand (12,000) patients...

Over eight hundred and ninety thousand (890,000) paratroopers...

Over one hundred and sixty-eight thousand (168,000) tons of cargo...

And a total of almost eighty thousand (80,000) missions flown and four hundred and sixty thousand (460,000) flight hours.

These impressive figures do not just happen by themselves.

They were achieved because of the efforts of willing countries that saw the best in this cooperation.

And because of the efforts of their people, who always think in terms of possibilities and opportunities and therefore bridge cultural and operational differences.

And, perhaps more importantly...

There are compelling stories behind the reality of these figures.

Stories that take place in war situations, crisis areas and countries struck by natural disasters, and during exercises and international commemorations.

They are stories about colleagues on a mission and their families,  
World War Two veterans who jump from an aircraft one last time,  
fallen comrades, those who have lost loved ones,  
civilians in distress and search-and-rescue teams.

If you ask the crew of a military transport aircraft what they will always remember, I can guarantee that the answers will be deeply moving.

Like the personal story of the C-130 pilot who allowed a young boy to visit his cockpit after he had brought the bodies of MH17 passengers back to Eindhoven Air Base in 2014.

It later became clear that the child's parents had been in his aircraft.

He will never forget that encounter.

Or the stories of the French and Dutch aircrew who left on the same day to provide assistance when Hurricane Irma was passing over several Caribbean islands in 2017.

There was massive destruction... and they saw a lot of unbearable suffering.

An air bridge was set up to evacuate people and bring aid workers and relief supplies to the affected area.

In the following three weeks, EATC countries flew seven hundred (700) hours and transported a total of seven hundred (700) tons of goods and five thousand (5,000) people.

That disaster is still very fresh in my memory.

It happened shortly before I became minister, and relief efforts were still in full swing when I took office.

I later spoke with many colleagues in person, saw the scale of the damage on the islands with my own eyes, and had the honour of awarding medals to personnel as a show of appreciation.

That made a profound impression on me.

The EATC was there in 2013 when European nationals had to be evacuated because of rising violence in South Sudan.

When French, German, Belgian and Dutch transport aircraft carried out humanitarian flights in Iraq in 2014 during the rise of terrorist organisation ISIS...

When flights had to be coordinated in different African countries in 2014 at the time of the Ebola epidemic...

When, two years ago, a special intensive care medevac was carried out for a member of the German military...

And when intensive cooperation was needed within the EATC at the beginning of the global coronavirus outbreak.

In January, you were very busy evacuating fellow nationals from China, delivering essential medical supplies, transporting patients and military personnel.

To return to hard figures:

The COVID-19 effort has [so far] resulted in over one hundred and eighty-five (185) missions and almost three thousand (3,000) flight hours.

These figures show solidarity.

Everyone saw the need and deployed the most experienced team members within the EATC, which resulted in the proactive, solution-based and safe performance of a shared task.

(...)

Ladies and gentlemen,

Air transport covers the whole world. Your area of work.

All of these examples of deployment, the figures and their underlying stories show how rewarding and how essential the work of these airmen and women is.

You never have enough air transport.  
We must use it smartly.

Together, you share expertise, streamline procedures... and make the transport deployment of seven countries as efficient as possible.

I am certain that your track record will continue to grow with the years...  
and that, thanks to the EATC specialists and our national logistics and operational crews, even more successes will be achieved.

So, happy anniversary, 10 years of EATC!  
To many more efficient and, above all, meaningful years.

Thank you.

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