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535th AS crews drop paratroopers

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JOINT BASE PEARL HARBOR HICKAM, Hawaii -- Paratroopers sat side-by-side both crushed and cozy from the weight of the massive parachute packs on their laps. Each jumper's eyes squinted from a combination of fatigue and flying dust kicked up by the ferocious winds whirling in from the C-17's side doors.

Loadmasters and jumpmasters alike systematically checked the doorways for something...anything out of the ordinary. Anticipating the approaching drop zone, loadmasters, jumpmasters and paratroopers began furiously hand-signaled each other, skillfully and efficiently exchanging information in a way that would make any baseball manager proud. The green light would be coming soon.

An aircrew from the 535th Airlift Squadron here flew a C-17 made the long journey to Ft. Benning to support the 507th Airborne School's paratrooper drop requirements Oct. 9-15.

After receiving a request from the school, the 535th AS decided to combine the mission with the transportation of officers to a logistics officers' association conference in Orlando, Fla.

The mission to Ft. Benning was unique for the 535th AS for several reasons. On a typical mission, an aircrew picks up cargo from one location and drops it off at another. On this mission, the crew trained in a single location and had "crew rest" at the same place every night. Additionally, an aircrew doesn't perform "multi-lift" sorties. At Ft. Benning, the crew was able to load more than 90 jumpers per lift, drop them off within five minutes of takeoff and land to load more.

To say the crew was productive would be an understatement. In total, the plane and its seven-member aircrew dropped more than 2,300 paratroopers in four days.

"We were out there with the C-130s dropping jumpers from the back every five to six minutes over the drop zone," said Capt. Mark Fischer, 535th AS pilot and aircraft commander for the mission. "On our own, we were able to drop almost 600 jumpers in multiple lifts in four hours without refueling."

"We airdropped over 200 percent of what was expected of us when we arrived at Fort Benning," said 1st Lt. Wayne Moxley, 535th AS pilot. "Our numbers speak for themselves."

Captain Fischer said the C-17's ability to support such a high number of paratrooper jumps says a lot about the airframe's performance in a joint environment.

"This exercise validates the C-17's role as a personnel airdrop vehicle for the Army," he said. "In total we dropped 2,349 jumpers in four days. We were out there with the C-130s dropping jumpers out the back every five to six minutes over the drop zone. On our own, we were able to drop almost 600 jumpers in multiple lifts in 4 hours without requiring fuel."

Lieutenant Moxley said the ability to train alongside the Army in a real-world scenario is a vital element of joint service operations. As such, the Air Force's role is vital in helping fulfill joint force training requirements.

"The Air Force plays a major role in the airborne parachutist mission," Captain Fischer said. "Since we are two separate services, there are many differences in culture, but in the end we are fighting the same war. Training together on a regular basis enables us to efficiently get the mission completed in the wartime environment."

According to Captain Fischer, the airborne school had to take measures to keep up with the crew's drop tempo.

"We dropped almost double the amount of jumpers they were expecting to drop," he said. "When we arrived at Benning, the school was severely behind. They were expecting us to drop one-and-a-half classes the first day of the (mission) but we ended up dropping two-and-a-half full classes. It went so well that they had to get a post commander waiver to drop some of the students more than twice in the same day."

According to Captain Fischer, the mission was a complete success due to the C-17 crew's outstanding support.

"The maintainers were out at the aircraft every day before the crew showed and took care of the jet after the crew left," Captain Fischer said. "They were there to meet us every time we shut down engines, ready and willing to service the aircraft as quickly and safely as possible to keep the jumpers going out the back. Without their expertise, we couldn't have dropped any of those students."

Captain Fischer said the aircrew's attitude and performance was equally impressive.

"The Aircrew was outstanding," he said. "They flew almost double the amount as the Airborne School was expecting. Every day they stepped up to the challenge and far outperformed the School's expectations with smiles on their face."

Captain Fischer said the crew's performance, despite Hickam's distance to Ft. Benning, may lead to further teamwork in the future.

"This is the first time the 15th Operations Group has supported the 507th for one of their courses," he said. "So far this is a once in a lifetime experience. Judging from the 507th's reaction to how well the week went, it might happen more often."
