

Wing airlifts fire truck to Mexico

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9/22/2008 - **MCCHORD AIR FORCE BASE, Wash.** -- Reservists from the 446th Airlift Wing delivered hope, in the form of a bright yellow fire truck, and medical supplies to a village in the central Mexican state of Jalisco Sept. 19.

The donated cargo was flown by a crew of two pilots and three loadmasters from the 728th Airlift Squadron as part of the Denton Amendment program, which allows free transport of non-government relief supplies earmarked for humanitarian assistance.

The delivery of the surplus fire truck, a donation from the Sultan Fire Department, is part of an ongoing effort to improve emergency services in the village of Ayutla.

The inspiration for the relief effort came after three villagers there died from injuries sustained in a car accident because there were no emergency vehicles to transport them to a hospital.

"We're all here trying to make the world a slightly better place," said Lt. Col. Christopher Von Thaden, 728th AS director of operations. "When we get to fly missions like this, you get that instant gratification knowing you're doing something good to help your fellow man."

Crews from the 446th AW are trained for worldwide operations, but this mission presented some unique challenges, said Colonel Von Thaden. The crew from the 728th AS flew the supplies into Guadalajara, where no U.S. Air Force plane has been for more than two years. Because of that, said the colonel, instrument approaches had to be reviewed for accuracy. The city lies in the middle of a valley with mountains on both sides, requiring pilots to be particularly alert and prepared. Also, when flying outside the U.S., diplomatic clearance issues often come into play.

"The wickets aren't necessarily going to line up," said Colonel Von Thaden. "But finding volunteers for this mission was not a challenge."

Those volunteers included specialists from several domains within the wing.

"My squadron put out the call for volunteers to help support this mission, so I answered the call," said Staff Sgt. Benjamin Thomsen, a cargo loader with the 86th Aerial Port Squadron.

Sergeant Thomsen was at the wheel of an APS 60K loader (capable of transporting 60,000 pounds), and helped load the C-17 with 12 pallets of emergency medical equipment. Meanwhile, several of his squadron mates scurried underneath the 2,000-gallon fire tender to attach tie down chains to the floor of the aircraft.

"It always feels good to be a part of something that will help others in need," said Sergeant Thomsen, who works as a Pierce County corrections officer in his civilian job. Humanitarian missions give crews from the wing an opportunity to make a difference in non combat-related missions.

"It's so nice to bring needed supplies to those people who need them," said Master Sgt. Richard Lutz, 728th AS loadmaster scheduler. "This is by far the most satisfying type of mission we fly."

A mission made possible by citizen warriors of the 446th AW.



Reservist Tech Sgt. Lance Nelson (in the truck) backs a 2,000-gallon fire tender onto a C-17 at McChord Air Force Base, Wash., Sept. 19. The donated fire truck was delivered to Mexico by an Air Force Reserve aircrew from the 446th Airlift Wing as part of a Denton Amendment program to support humanitarian missions. Sergeant Nelson is a loadmaster with the 728th Airlift Squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo/Abner Guzman)



Tech Sgt. Dirk Gillespie, 86th Aerial Port Squadron, McChord Air Force Base, Wash., prepares a fire truck for a joint inspection before it can be loaded onto a C-17. The fire truck, along with pallets of rescue equipment, was flown by Air Force Reserve aircrews here to Guadalajara, Mexico on Sept. 19. Using the Denton Amendment, three local non-profit agencies worked with the 446th Airlift Wing for more than one year to secure the cargo's transportation to Mexico. (U.S. Air Force photo/Abner Guzman)



Master Sgt. Patrick McMullen, a Reservist with the 86th Aerial Port Squadron, unloads scales to weigh a fire truck for a joint inspection before it can be loaded onto a C-17. The fire truck, along with pallets of rescue equipment, were airlifted to Mexico for delivery to a remote village outside of Guadalajara Sept. 19. Using the Denton Amendment, three local non-profit agencies worked with the 446th Airlift Wing for more than one year to secure the cargo's transportation to Mexico. (U.S. Air Force photo/Abner Guzman)