

# “The A400M has become the backbone of the EATC capacity!”

**Interview with Brigadier General Frank Best,  
Chief of Staff of the European Air Transport Command (EATC) in Eindhoven**

[Image]

***Brigadier General Frank Best has been EATC Chief of Staff since September 2023.***

## **General, what are the tasks of EATC?**

EATC plans and exercises command and control of the transport aircraft of its seven partner nations. The aim is to ensure an efficient employment via pooling and sharing the subordinate aircraft by means of single-source command and control. For this purpose, the partner nations have assigned “operational authority” of large parts of their air transport fleets to EATC, some nations even for all of their aircraft.

During daily operations, this means, for example, that a German air transport request is prepared by an international team, and then the transport is conducted by a Spanish aircraft, which is controlled and monitored by Mission Control or MICON, our 24/7 operations center. This can indeed be carried out without the direct involvement of German personnel. Each nation has, of course, its “red card holder” who can exercise the right of national veto at any time.

However, the process is not limited to air transport operations only. Tanker, Strategic Aeromedical Evacuation (StratAirMedevac), and some VIP aircraft have also been assigned to EATC. Their operations are also planned and controlled in the Operational Division.

In order to ensure smooth functioning of the whole process, a high degree of standardization of procedures is required, which in turn necessitates appropriate education and training. This task is assumed by the EATC Functional Division. Our partner nations are already working on the basis of operational, maintenance, and ground handling manuals that have been developed on a joint basis and introduced into service. In addition, procedures were established that enable us, for example, to carry out multinational work on air transport aircraft and to exchange spare parts in joint commands and on joint missions. This allows an interoperability that, not so long ago, did not yet exist in this manner.

## **Which nations do participate and which aircraft are involved?**

EATC was established in Eindhoven in 2010 by Belgium, Germany, France, and the Netherlands on the basis of a French-German initiative. In 2013, Luxembourg joined EATC while Italy and Spain joined in 2015.

Currently, EATC exercises command and control of more than 150 aircraft of its seven partner nations. The aircraft are mainly distributed to 14 airfields throughout the partner nations.

What is remarkable in this regard is that these aircraft are not purely national aircraft. EATC was also assigned command and control of the aircraft of the three multinational squadrons – the multinational MRTT unit with its A330 MRTTs in Eindhoven and Cologne-Bonn, the “BATS” French-German binational air transport squadron in Évreux, furnished with C-130J aircraft, and the Belgian-Luxembourg A400M squadron in Brussels.

The A400M, A330, and C-130 types operated by the three squadrons also represent the majority of the EATC-assigned aircraft throughout the national squadrons of the partner

nations. In addition, there are Boeing 767, Casa 235 and 295, C-27, and the VIP aircraft of Belgium and the Netherlands.

### **How many missions did you have in the past year, and where will you be at the end of 2024?**

Last year, we planned and controlled a total of 8,268 air transport missions, air-to-air refueling missions, and StratAirMedevac flights. During these missions, the aircraft accumulated 49,797 flight hours.

The missions were carried out in support of the deployments abroad conducted by our partner nations and NATO as part of Enhanced Forward Presence. The redeployment of the French and German contingents was a focus in the last half of the year. In 2023, EATC was also busy conducting the evacuation operation in Sudan as well as the deployment of forces and the transport of persons in the context of the Lebanon crisis. The total number of missions also comprises a significant number of training and advanced training flights. Without such flights, the aircrews cannot establish and maintain their operational readiness.

For 2024, we are expecting an increase in flight hours (approx. 2,000 hours), even though the number of missions will be reduced a little. At first glance, this seems unusual. However, one can understand this issue when considering the missions including air transport and air-to-air refueling flights that were conducted in support of our partner nations within the scope of the "Pacific Activities". Due to the distances alone, there were longer flight times per mission.

### **To what extent have you been involved in "Pacific Skies" this year?**

EATC had a key role for our partner nations in this regard. The training contingents of the various national fighter packages were supported by tanker and transport aircraft for the transportation of technicians and the necessary aircraft ground equipment during the westward deployment to Alaska, and then via Japan to Hawaii and Australia. The same was done on the eastward route to Australia, Japan, and back. In addition to the transport and refueling missions, the aircraft assigned to EATC ensured SAR support on the sometimes long overwater flights of the combat aircraft.

EATC aircrews actively participated as players in the different exercises as well. The "EART 2024" (European Air Refueling Training) tanker exercise conducted in Alaska, which had been planned and managed by EATC, must be highlighted in this regard.

### ***Cross maintenance: French, Spanish, and German technicians working together on a French A400M.***

#### ***Loading of a HIMARS launcher.***

### **What significance does the A400M have for EATC?**

The A400M has become the backbone of the EATC capacity. Currently, 89 A400M aircraft from Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg, and Spain have been assigned to EATC. This number will increase with the deliveries that are still pending.

In this regard, the A400M is not just a substitute for the C-160 and C-130H aircraft that it has replaced. Due to its significantly improved performance parameters with regard to load capacity, speed, flying range, and survivability, the A400M allows us to carry out missions that were simply not feasible before.

In addition to the obvious benefits in performance, the A400M is also the catalyst for further standardization among the partner nations, whether in the fields of training, mutual technical support, or the use of standardized loads. In this context, it should be mentioned that the Belgian-Luxembourg A400M squadron is already flying with mixed aircrews. The same is true

for the BATS C-130J and is normal for the A330 aircrews of the MMU (ed.: Multinational Multi Role Tanker Transport Unit).

However, much more is possible in this regard, especially with the A400M.

**What cooperation, for example in the field of training, does exist among the nations, and what role does EATC play in this?**

In addition to the already mentioned standardization of basic documents etc., EATC is the platform for its partner nations in order to advance the aircrews' tactical training. I have already mentioned EART. Furthermore, EATC actively supports the "ETAP" European Tactical Airlift Program within the scope of the Functional Division.

Besides the aircrew training, the "DART" (Disabled Aircraft Recovery Training) EATC exercises, the CATO (Combined Air Terminal Operation) program, and cross maintenance training are very important. This is where the foundations are laid for a joint employment of the partner nations. The "EGOM" European Ground Handling Operation Manual is also a milestone and is used not only by EATC nations today.

**What about logistic support, for example, when it comes to "cross maintenance"?**

As mentioned before, the A400M has already clearly fulfilled its catalytic function. EATC developed the Cross Maintenance Manual, tested it in practice, and implemented it. Now, A400M aircraft of different EATC nations can be supported by a multinational team of technicians or by the technicians of another nation during exercises or missions. For this purpose, one nation assumes the lead function and provides the CAMO Continuing Airworthiness Management Organization. Technicians from different nations are accredited there and can thus provide technical support to the aircraft and also release them for flight service after repair measures have been carried out. Cross maintenance is already a reality for the A400M. As regards the A330 and the C-130J, it would be the next logical step.

**And in your opinion, how could cooperation among the nations for the A400M be further extended in the future?**

With all the achievements, the potential of international cooperation at EATC has not yet been fully exhausted. I have already touched this topic on the technical side. Why should it not be possible in the future to staff the A330 or C-130J aircrews on a multinational basis or have one nation's aircrew operate another nation's aircraft, if required?

Furthermore, we are not even near an end in the mutual recognition of releases for payloads, cargo airdrop procedures, or parachute releases. So, there still is a lot to do and there is a lot of potential.

The partner nations' continued willingness to move forward together in all fields is crucial.

**General, thank you very much for the interesting details.**

***Brigadier General Frank Best was interviewed by Burghard Lindhorst.***