
END OF AN ERA WITH TCA RETIREMENT TCA 707

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The last Boeing 707TCA from NATO's training and support squadron made its last flight on December 21st to Maastricht Airport to rest its days in the Aviation Competence Center and becoming the domain of student aircraft mechanics.

No, it was not some secret unit, but beside insiders not so many people knew that NATO had employed three of these planes with modest image but important role and who served quietly but did a lot of good work.

THE SABENA PAST

The former Sabena Boeings became operational in 1988-1989 to support a fleet of 18 AWACS E3A NATO aircraft in supply and also in training facilities, with the designation TCA (Trainer Cargo Aircraft). During the years the accent shifted from these initial tasks more and more in the direction of larger military operations, especially supplying own forces far from home but also on behalf of human relief operations. The plane was absolutely suitable to do these jobs and became the carrier for help to disasters in world on behalf of the alliance. The first years were of particular importance to train the crews consisting of many nationalities and even investments lead to the install of the very same cockpit lay-outs as in the E-3A including 'seat 5, the cockpit trainer seat. Later on two of the three planes were provided with air-to-air refueling probes to provide training ability on this process. On the left side of the fuselage is a large cargo door and the plane is furthermore arranged as a combi-pax version for cargo and passengers. Both sections can be extended as required at that very time. The E-3A fleet is operated throughout Europe and besides main base Geilenkirchen Germany can be deployed from single 'forward bases' in Southern Europe and Norway. During the Balkan crisis over the nineties the E-3A planes were watching the skies continuously and the B707TCA did a lot of overtime with bringing all the necessary cargo and crews to secure the E-3A missions on several destinations could be conducted anytime.

RELIABLE

The last of these Mohicans, the LX-N 20199 made a penultimate operational mission with international aviation media and after that a final one-time mission to Afghanistan before the historic last flight would take place to Maastricht Airport in The Netherlands. Pilot & Plane was on the mission and did some interviews.

Someone who was associated with Sabena for years is mr. Maarten de Klerk. He explained during the flight: The Boeing, originally of the type 707-329C flew with Sabena and Sobelair and even for half a year it was owned by the rockband 'The Who' while later on the plane returned to Sabena before handed over to its new owner NATO. Sabena technicians maintained the planes and its technicians realized a technical reliability of 98%, which made the Boeing 707TCA a very reliable plane. The contractual requirement was to put TCA airborne within 90 minutes anytime which in general was accomplished always. In all these years a technician of Sabena joined every flight.

ALL OVER THE WORLD

In a typical supply mission at Afghanistan's Mazar-e-Sharif the crew flew with helmets and bulletproof vests to protect from the great danger of "small arms fire". The planes only made a 'drop off' of about 1,5 to 2 hours to load or unload cargo and passengers.

These were always tense moments with the screens of the windows down, but we always managed it well. More glorious were the missions to disaster areas such as Pakistan or Haiti and aid flights for people in war zones such as the recent Operation Unified Protector in Libya. Sometimes there were special moments such as in Pakistan where for the first time a NATO plane landed during the floods in 2010. There were about 60 media-people from Pakistan and India at the airport in Islamabad to cover this remarkable fact. Other special moments were food-flights to Moscow and a counting 36,277 km round-the-world flight in 2008 from Geilenkirchen to Iceland, the USA, Hawaii, Guam, Australia, Indonesia, Diego Garcia and Dubai and back to Geilenkirchen. This last mentioned flight was quite an achievement to get around all necessary consents and permissions to fly in specific airspaces. With the phasing out of the TCA and deactivation of the fourth squadron a bit of history gets lost, a plane which deserved statements as 'Wherever the E-3A is, we are', and the 4th squadron got - in case of disaster - the slogan 'first in and last out'.

Most people who were involved with this plane will however just remember him as 'the transportbus'. General Pototzky praised the plane in the farewell speech as "old but gold". The cargo missions are now contracted to Worldwide TNT. This organization has a Boeing 757 stationed at Geilenkirchen permanently while training facilities have been transferred to the E-3A itself. The total rate of noise goes down with the retirement of the TCA-707, which is not unimportant after all.

Kees Otten & Wim Das

PS: One TCA-707 went to Davis Monthan, one to WTD-61 in Manching Germany and this described example to Maastricht The Netherlands.