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Technology changes but mission stays the same

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Commentary by Tech. Sgt. Jeffrey Williams
934th Airlift Wing Public Affairs

10/30/2009 - **Minneapolis-St. Paul** -- Back in April, my editor gave me an assignment to write a story on the history of VE Day from World War II, and challenged me to find a local connection.

After scratching my head while wondering just how I could create this miracle, it came to me that I should trace our airlift squadron's heritage back to the war, thus the series, "The 96th Connection" was born.

Through a diligent search and with a bit of luck, I was able to interview George Johnson, William Wildes and William Hamrick, three of the last six remaining members of the original 96th Troop Carrier Squadron. It was a distinctive honor and privilege to talk to each of them.

Like most current military members who enjoy studying history, it became quite easy for me to put each of them on a pedestal of admiration, which they earned through their distinctive accomplishments nearly seven decades ago.

Soon after the interviews began however, I noticed just how similar their service was to mine. They served in Europe under some extreme conditions, while I served in Iraq under harsh conditions. While they talked of the troop carrier mission as "transporting troops, supplies and evacuating patients in the European theatre of operations," I could only think of how little that mission has changed among the modern airlift community.

The mission may have stayed the same but the technology has changed. As the 96th TCS flew paratroopers into Normandy June 6, 1944, they flew low, faced a barrage of flak and some were shot down, though most were able to deliver their cargo on-time and on-target.

The C-130s flying around the theatre of operations in Southwest Asia today may be equipped with chaff, armor plating, and a sophisticated navigation systems, but they are not immune from rocket-propelled grenades or missiles.

We may have dominion over the skies, but the ground-based threats are still real. Still, whether it be hauling five-gallon gasoline cans for General Patton's Third Army or bringing wounded troops out of Southwest Asia, both missions were and are vital to the success of their respective wartime operations.

Most of the original members of the 96th TCS have passed away, and before long, the last six will be gone as well. It was an honor to be associated with them while they are still here.

What will life be like for us 65 years from now? It will not be much different. Our ranks will be thinned too, and a generation that hasn't been born yet will put us on the pedestal. Yet the airlift mission will remain. The names, faces and airframes will change but the aircraft will fly on.

Meeting the 96th TCS members was an honor and privilege for me, but so has serving with the men and women of the 96th Airlift Squadron. As we head into Veteran's Day, remember those who served in the past, but don't forget your colleagues who are still serving today.

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