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LAUGHLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Texas -- A C-130 from the 302nd Airlift Wing at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., awaits the arrival of maintenance personnel to prepare for flying missions over Mexico and Texas in support of ongoing efforts to contain wildfires. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Scott Saldukas)



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Help comes when things heat up

by Senior Airman Scott Saldukas
47th Flying Training Wing public affairs

4/22/2011 - **LAUGHLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** -- Aircrew members from the 302nd Airlift Wing at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., have deployed here to support fire-fighting efforts in Mexico and Texas.

The Mexican government requested the C-130 support to assist firefighting efforts against wildfires in northern Mexico's state of Coahuila, 60 miles south of the Texas border, that have burned more than 245,000 acres. After arriving at Laughlin April 16, the 302nd Airlift Wing also learned they would be flying missions to support the fight against ongoing wildfires in Texas.



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Due to the urgency of the situation in both locations, the Colorado Airmen didn't have much time before getting to work.

The unit has used two C-130s, equipped with the USDA Forest Service's Modular Airborne Fire Fighting Systems, to conduct 18 sorties as of April 18 in the areas most affected by the fires in the two locations.

Even though the Airmen are trained for these missions, the real thing can still seem extreme. This was especially the case when the aircrews conducted their first missions over the unfamiliar terrain in Mexico.

"Basically, when we got to the site, we followed a lead plane and he directed us where to lay down our retardant," said Maj. James Jui, 731st Airlift Squadron C-130 pilot. "(The missions) have been exciting; it is pretty challenging terrain out there since we were expecting it to be pretty flat. When we got into Mexico we were working with some pretty deep canyons and hills up to about 7,000 feet. So getting in there and dropping retardant was one of the most challenging missions I have ever had in my limited experience".

"All the hills were on fire and you can see the flames coming up off of the brush; it was pretty intense," Major Jui continued.

Navigating their way through burning ranch land was difficult, the Major explained, but was imperative to have a successful mission.

"Our main goal is to help the guys on the ground," he said. "There is no way in our capacity to put out a fire of that size strictly from the air. The guys on the ground were able to let us know where they were working so we could lay down retardant, and they can get in there and stop the fire."

The drops have been at the direction of the Comisión Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR), the National Forestry Commission of Mexico.

The major said he feels the aircrews are succeeding in providing this assistance.

"I can say we were successful," Major Jui said. "We flew over an area where we had previously dropped, and we were able to see that the fire had only burned up to where we dropped. Areas where we have worked look considerably better than they did when we first arrived."

Major Jui noted that the mission is difficult but the end result will be worth it.

"It feels good to know that we have done some good," he said. "We were able to stop the fire from getting a man's ranch; we were able to save people's livelihood."

Although saving the ranch and putting out the fire is only a small part of the ongoing wildfire problem, Lt. Col. Dave Condit, 302nd Air Expeditionary Group deputy commander, said the unit has already received positive feedback from Mexican fire officials.

"They were very thankful for our efforts and said our support was really helping them," Colonel Condit said.