New Boeing C-17 Honors "The Spirit of Middle Georgia"

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The Boeing/U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III is not permanently based in this central Georgia community, but when "The Spirit of Middle Georgia" touched down Saturday, the airlifter and its crew received a homecoming-style welcome. The C-17 flew to Macon to serve as the centerpiece for a dedication ceremony honoring the region for which it is named.

"Naming the C-17 is a tribute to the people of this community," said U.S. Rep. Saxby Chambliss (R-GA), moments after stepping from the aircraft following a brief flight. "Folks in Middle Georgia take a lot of pride in that we are the airlift center of the nation."

Robins Air Force Base in Macon is home to the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center. The base's flightline was crowded with older C-5 and C-141 transports in various stages of maintenance and repair as the new C-17 taxied by to the waiting crowd of admirers.

"They look like a bunch of mothers out there checking out the new kid on the block," beamed Chambliss, who is a member of the House Armed Services Committee. The Congressman described the C-17's short field takeoff and landing prowess in glowing terms -- an important capability he witnessed first-hand in the Balkans last week. The "Spirit of Middle Georgia" recently made the trip to the war-torn region to deliver the people and equipment the Air Force uses to manage an air traffic control.

Much of each new Globemaster III is built by Middle-Georgians in Boeing facilities here, a point Boeing Airlift and Tanker Programs Vice President David Spong echoed. Direct employment from the C-17 program totals more than 1,000 jobs statewide.

"One of the proudest moments of my life was in February in Washington, D.C., when President Clinton presented to me -- on behalf of our organization -- the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award," Spong recalled. "I have you to thank for that.

"But the award is also a challenge for each of us who have a part in producing the C-17 to continue to improve it, to reduce costs and to continue our journey for aerospace excellence."

The Air Force is buying 120 of the advanced airlifters that are capable of intercontinental flight carrying 85 tons and landing on short, austere airfields. The Air Force also has stated a requirement for an additional 14 C-17s for special operations use.

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