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# NewsRelease

## “Hurricane Hunters” a big hit among school children at PJIA

**SIMPSON BAY, St. Maarten (March 16, 2012)**—Scores of school children thronged the Princess Juliana International Airport (PJIA) on Friday morning and got a first-hand look at a United States Air Force C-130 Hurricane Hunter aircraft.

The 25-man crew arrived in St. Maarten aboard the C-130 on Thursday as part of a US Caribbean Hurricane Awareness Tour (CHAT).

According to one of the five pilots among the crew, the CHAT mission will, hopefully, build a bond between the Meteorological Department of St. Maarten (MDS) and the US National Hurricane Center.

“The purpose of our visit is also to let everyone here learn about what we do and the different services we provide as we are flying through a storm,” said the pilot.

The climatic-related purpose and data helps “in the emergency preparedness and lets everyone know on the island and throughout the Caribbean what they are up against when it comes to the storm season, such as the strength of the storm, where it is going, the direction,” said the pilot.

The hurricane hunters explained to students that although 25 persons are touring aboard the C-130 aircraft, only five people – two pilots, a navigator, weather officer, and a weather loadmaster – are needed for a standard operation when investigating storms. If the mission is longer than eight hours, an extra pilot would be deployed.

Nikita Mukhi, a St. Maarten Academy fifth form student, said Friday’s tour of the large plane was very exciting. The US Air Force reportedly has 10 hurricane hunter airplanes or “weather birds,” including the touring C-130 aircraft, which are usually deployed from the base in Biloxi, Mississippi.

“It was a good learning experience. Our geography teacher, Ms. Williams, took us because it will benefit us in our exams and I found the information to be very interesting,” said Mukhi.

When asked about the dangers of the job, one pilot explained that despite the fact that it is not uncommon for the airborne plane to be struck by lightning, they have never lost a plane. “Because we are at 10,000 feet, ice can accumulate on the wings and that can be somewhat dangerous. But overall we have a tremendous safety record.”

The C-130 operates throughout the U.S. Air Force, serving with the Air Mobility Command. The aircraft also takes part in natural relief missions, fire-fighting, aero-medical missions, and weather reconnaissance.

“We also move equipment all around the world for the Air Force and for the military and we have done humanitarian missions, moved injured soldiers all around the country. These aircrafts are allocated for hurricane missions, but we also do other missions every day of the week,” said the pilot.

The current mission took off from Mississippi last Sunday, flew to Miami where

the crew picked up personnel from the National Hurricane Center, then flew to Mexico for two nights. Thereafter, the aircraft stopped in Costa Rica for a night before heading to St. Maarten.

“We do it every year and we try to go to different places every time to build that awareness all across the Caribbean,” said one of the pilots.

The MDS hosted the visit of the aircraft and its team for two days, and together with PJIA organized several tours for students from various schools.

The St. Dominic High School, Methodist Agogic Centre, Sundial, and Sr. Marie Laurence Primary School were among the schools whose students toured the Hurricane Hunters aircraft at PJIA on Friday.

The C-130 airplane departed here on Friday for San Juan, Puerto Rico – the last leg of this specific CHAT mission of the hurricane hunters tour. The North Atlantic Hurricane Season, which directly affects the Caribbean region, starts each year on June 1 and ends on November 30.

**Photo caption:**

US Air Force Hurricane Hunter aircraft at PJIA, St. Maarten, on Friday (3/16/12). (Courtesy Robert J. Cijntje)