SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Special Delivery

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Kandahar, Afghanistan

08 February 2010

American troops are spread widely across Afghanistan. Some are remote and accessibility is difficult. In 2008, I was with six soldiers in Zabul Province who didn't even get mail for three months. They had no email. They were on the moon. Six courageous men, in the middle of nowhere, and their nearest backup was a small Special Forces team about five hours away. Resupply to these small outposts is crucial, difficult, and would require major effort by ground. Enter the United States Air Force.

Tonight's mission was to fly from Kandahar Airfield (KAF) to Bagram Airfield (BAF), pick up specially rigged bundles of fuel and ammunition and parachute those to American forces up near the border of Turkmenistan.

8865 - The aircraft would be a C-130J. The C-130 variants have been around so long that Captain Fred Flinstone may have been the first pilot. They've seen more than fifty years of service. The aircraft is so good that nobody wants to shed them, so the Air Force simply continues to upgrade a great old horse. Dozens of countries fly dozens of variants today.

8872 - The latest and greatest for general use is the C-130J. You can spot a "J" from the older variants by looking at the propellers. Each propeller has six high-tech blades, allowing the

aircraft to carry more weight with greater economy. In Afghanistan, with the "high hot" conditions, pilots say the J can carry 2-3 times more cargo than older variants.

The C-130 crews in Afghanistan have many crucial missions, though the U.S. crews are proud to say that some of their friends are working Haiti. Here in Afghanistan, they perform such missions as resupply by parachute, or often landing on rough, remote airstrips. They recover bodies of our lost troops and fly the remains back to base. The Js can actually carry a firetruck or two fully armored Humvees, which is pretty impressive considering a single Humvee door weighs more than 400 pounds.

8897 - Before takeoff, the two pilots go through long checklists using a lot of terms that are unfamiliar to me. Sounds like a space launch. (They seated me in the cockpit -- which they call

the “flight deck” -- wearing a headset, and so I can hear and see it all.) The flight deck is so big that even giant Dutch people could stand up and take a step or two with no problems. There is even a bunk bed behind us.

Some things are easy to understand, “Engine number two,” “flaps,” “breaks,” but they go over the checklist so quickly that my pen has no more chance of following than a sparrow could follow a hawk.

8911 - Finally, after several long checklists, we start taxiing to the runway. We got held up by ATC (Air Traffic Control) when the tower spotted two scrawny dogs crossing the runway. The pilots scanned but didn’t see them, and finally 1LT April Brown, in the right seat, said, “There they are,” pointed, and Captain John Holland, left seat, got eyes on. The dogs held up this part of the war for about a minute before trotting away, and then the fighter jets and others kept roaring away.

The small pieces of glass in front of each pilot are called “HUDs”, or Heads Up Displays. Pilots say the HUDs are great because they can keep their eyes out the windows while still seeing critical information without looking down at the instrument panel. Notice through the left HUD, a fighter jet is roaring down the runway. (Just after the dogs left.) My quarters on KAF are straight ahead past the far side of the runway, so it’s pretty loud here day and night. Helicopters, C-130s, jets of all sorts. The enemy has been firing more rockets onto the base, causing some casualties, but to my knowledge have destroyed no aircraft. Years ago, the Mujahidin more or less ran the Soviet Air Force out of Kandahar with their rocket attacks. The “Muj” once shot down a Soviet general, captured him, but killed him before they realized they had a general. Today, the enemy shoots at lot with SAFIRE (Surface to Air Fire) at aircraft and sometimes sparkle the pilots with lasers. If there is a surface to air missile threat, it’s not presented itself.

8918 - The pilots throttle up and we rumble away. There are actually three pilots aboard and the other is sitting behind me, or down in the cargo bay. It takes about eighteen months to learn how to fly this aircraft. One year of pilot training, then six months of training on the C-130J. Captain Holland said the pilot training is pretty tough, but by the time you get to the C-130 school, you are in the study groove and it gets a bit easier.

8937 - That's Lieutenant April Brown in the right seat. She's from San Diego and it's obvious she loves flying. After we got up into the darkness, she asked Captain John Holland, left seat, to

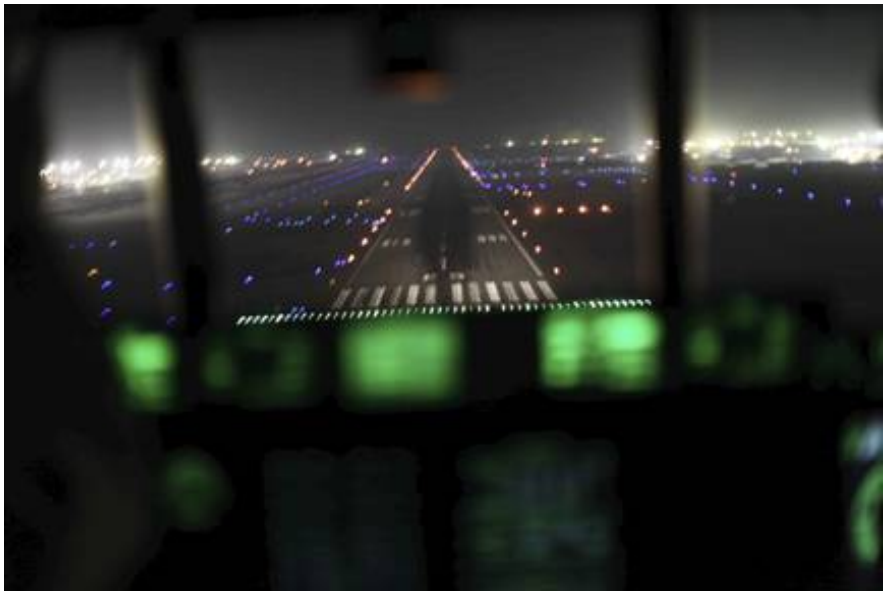
take the controls so she could snap on her night vision goggles. They see a lot of shooting stars up here, artillery illumination missions, and other aircraft.

They were kind enough to issue me a set of goggles for the mission, but the helmet and that type of goggles were alien to me so later a helpful loadmaster helped fit the goggles on the helmet and adjusted them.

There is a heck of a lot of air traffic up here, especially near the main airfields. Over the radio, pilots could be heard with accents that seemed to come from all over the world, talking to air traffic control about headings, altitude, and other matters such as the length of available runway. Predators and other "drones," which are always looking down, keep their lights on so that pilots don't plough into one.

9115a - The crew has parachutes in case the aircraft becomes uncontrollable. I asked a pilot how in the heck he was going to get into a parachute if the airplane was out of control. Bottom line: at least one pilot is going to have to ride the plane in while the crew gets out.

8989a - The first leg of the mission took us to Bagram Airfield (BAF), which must be one of the busiest airports in the world. BAF is madhouse of traffic and they also take a little rocket fire at times. The rocket fire is not a big deal, though we do take some KIA and wounded. On the scale of the war, it's like mosquito bites. A nuisance you could do without, but trivial when taken to scale.



9006 - To avoid SAFIRE, pilots turn on the landing lights during the last few seconds.

9016 - So they taxi behind the "FOLLOW ME," and we roll by all sorts of jets and helicopters.

9036 - And then we park, and go to grab take-away dinners at a nearby DFAC (dining facility) while the airplane is loaded with the supplies that are to be parachuted later tonight.

9063 - Twenty pallets weighing a total of about 32,000 pounds are rolled into the cargo bay. The loadmasters have special training and much responsibility. If they make a mistake, passengers can be hurt, the aircraft can be damaged, and it could even crash. Each pallet has information posted on the side, including gross weight. Before the pallets are loaded, they already have been arranged in the proper order, and a loadmaster then programs in the weights of the pallets and their anchor locations into the C-130J's computer. This calculates the CG, or Center of Gravity, which must be within specified constraints. The computer calculates the gross weight of the aircraft, which is the net aircraft weight, plus fuel, plus cargo. Gross weight for this mission would be about 150,000lbs.

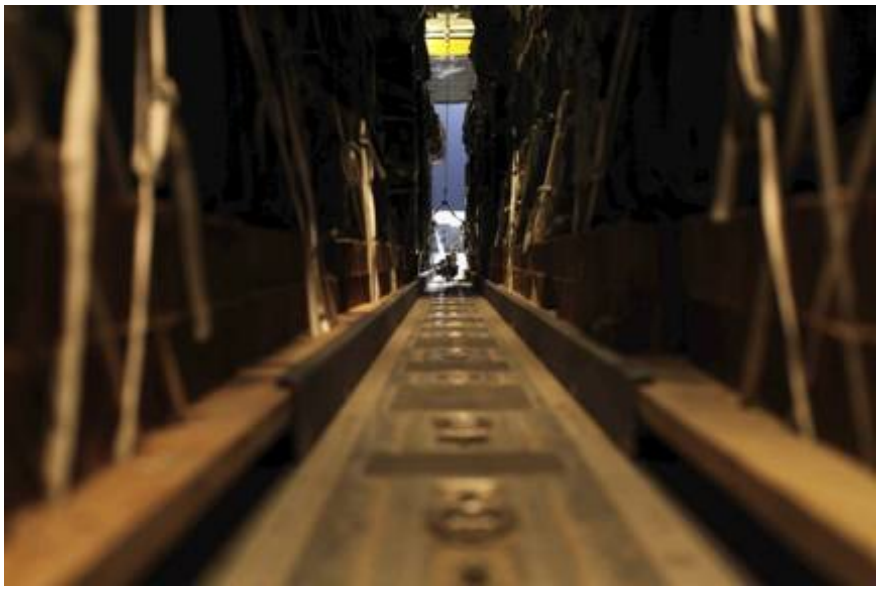
9081- In addition to the loadmasters heavy responsibilities, the riggers who "build" these pallets and attach the parachutes must be on their job. They call this a CDS, or container delivery system, and they said it's using LCADS "low cost air delivery system" parachutes that are

relatively cheap and do not need to be turned in. Whereas parachutes for our soldiers nearly always open, the pallets are more likely to burn in (though they seldom do). This happened once when I was with the British in Iraq, sending us all diving to the dark, desert floor while we heard the pallet screaming in, and then practically explode when it hit the ground. The honey comb on the bottom is a shock absorber. Some of the containers carry ammo. I asked the pilots about the dangers of parachuting relief aid into places like Haiti (remembering when some Kurds were killed by bundles), and they confirmed the dangers. Problem is, the people you are trying to help are desperate – hence the willingness to use dangerous means to feed them -- and so when they see the parachutes floating down, the hungry people rush to catch them, not realizing these things are very heavy and coming down very fast, and then people get crushed and we get blamed for killing people with love. The pilots try to drop far enough away that people don't get crushed.

9083a - Atop are the LCADS parachutes, and these are fuel drums. Usually, our people try to avoid parachuting ammunition in Afghanistan. Though normally right on target, cargo has a real chance of floating into enemy hands. Also, ammo is more easily damaged than MREs and fuel.

Illumination for the drop was to be at .001 lux (pitch black), and moonrise would be 10 minutes before TOT (time on target). Though military standard for drops is plus/minus two minutes (four minute window), the pilots said they normally are plus/minus one minute.

9188a - This is the BSA, or Buffer Stop Assembly. The BSA is designed to keep the cargo from lurching forward during flight.



9132a - The floor of the aircraft is lined with rollers and rings for moving cargo and tying it down. You must be careful when walking because people do trip. When we approach the DZ, the pilots will pull the nose of the aircraft up to about 7 degrees, causing the pallets to strain against the anchor webbing as gravity insists they roll out the back. Looking down the aisle between the pallets, you'll see that inverted Y cable. The pallets are tied down with strong webbing, but that cable is attached to two knives that are up against the webbing. So after the pilot pulls pitch to 7 degrees, and we reach the Computed Air Release Point, a loadmaster uses his controls to cause the knives to cut the webbing and the pallets should slide out. Each parachute is attached via "static line" to an overhead cable, and so when they roll into the hurricane winds and darkness, the parachutes should be pulled out by static line. That is, if the

parachute riggers have done their jobs. If the loadmasters have loaded right. If the pilot is doing the job. One weak link and something will go wrong.

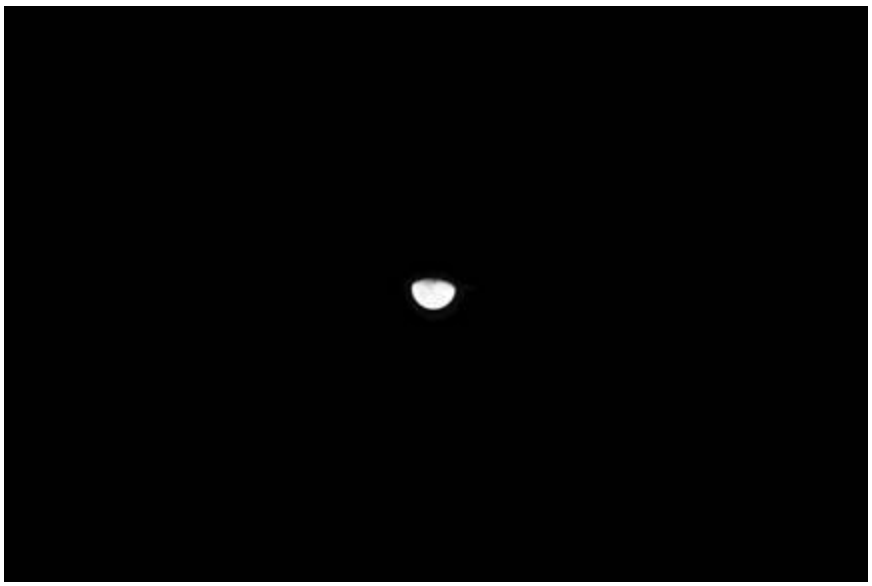
8892 - The algorithm in the onboard CARP computer (Calculated Air Release Point) cannot factor the winds without data. And so as we roared through the night toward the, drop zone a loadmaster would toss a "dropsonde" out the back. The dropsonde has a small parachute, GPS, and radio transmitter. The black antennae screws into the nose and transmits drift data that feeds into a laptop onboard, improving accuracy. In addition to the desire to get this fuel and ammo to our people, nobody wanted that ammo to fall into enemy hands.

9163 - Taxiing for takeoff from BAF, an awesome C-17 aircraft lands in front of us.

This was a great mission so far: our chances of crashing or getting shot down were low, so that made me happy, and all five crew members were enthusiastic about their work, and answered about a thousand questions. They also wanted to know about the ground war and were asking me a lot of questions. Everybody's war is different.

About an hour after flying out of BAF, we were on final approach to the DZ. The pilots continued to gather information about the situation and decided the dropsonde was not needed and the drop would be strictly CARP. I crawled down the three stairs from the cockpit to watch the release while a loadmaster kept his eye on his own console, which was counting down to drop time. To avoid being seen by the enemy, the back was too dark to take good photos. The ramp was down when we roared over the drop zone and the pilot pulled the nose up 7 degrees, and so now the 32,000lbs in the twenty pallets were straining to be free. At just the right moment, the knives cut the straps and in maybe 3-4 seconds all twenty rolled into the night and the plane, suddenly lighter, accelerated. After the ramp was closed, I unbuckled and stood as the pilot pulled hard and we gained altitude, causing me to stagger under the g-force. Up in the cockpit, he said all the bundles landed on the drop zone, and the last ones landed right on target. Well done.

The pilots pulled the nose south in the direction of Kandahar.



9199 - The moon continued to rise.

9205a - The heavenly views at night show no hint of the guerrilla war raging below. The crew wants to know more about how our people are doing, and I say we can succeed, and their airlift contribution is crucial. Without the Air Force, we would have to dedicate far more troops to dangerous convoy duty, bleeding our resources away from other important tasks, and we would endure more KIA from the convoys. The airlift crews are saving lives and freeing combat troops to perform other tasks, such as going after the enemy.

9227a - We kept rumbling through the night, amid the clouds, the stars and the glow of the moon.

9255a - And finally back to Kandahar Airfield (KAF), which is becoming a bustling, crowded base due to the Afghanistan Surge.

9265 - The marshaller brings us into a parking place.

9273 - 1LT April Brown (Pilot), Captain Tanner Bergsrud (Pilot), Captain John Holland (Pilot), TSG Jonathan Boyce, SSG Gabriel Campbell, Senior Airman Joe Hawkins.

If you are a troop on the ground and need a pizza delivery by parachute, well, tough luck. It's not coming. But if you need fuel, ammo, medevac from remote locations, or any number of specialty services that require a C-130J, you might look up into the sky and see the 772 EAS (Expeditionary Airlift Squadron), from Little Rock, Arkansas.

9279 - After we land, in the background, three helicopters launch on a mission at about midnight.

The airdrop mission was a success. I had been back in Afghanistan for eighteen hours and it was great to be back with winners.