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Seven

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9280 - Left seat Captain Thomas Sonne; Right seat: Major Bill Tice.

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American forces are stationed at bases far and wide around Afghanistan. Some bases are like towns, such as Camp Bastion, Kandahar Airfield, and Bagram Airfield. But mostly they are small, often occupied by only a handful of troops.

Logistics into Afghanistan is a nightmare, and it only gets worse after you cross the border from the north or from Pakistan. By comparison, Iraq "logs" was like a run to a convenience store down the road. Afghan logs are more like driving from Miami to Seattle for grocery shopping, and then driving the groceries back to Miami while under threat of attack. Not a speck of exaggeration in that statement. Enemy logs interdiction was a large constituent of the Soviet

defeat, despite that the Soviet Union comprised the entire northern border of Afghanistan. When the Soviet hammer tried to crack the Afghan rock, the hammer shattered. The Soviets can easily put people in space and keep them there, but they couldn't handle backdoor logistics during their Afghan war. It's easier to keep people in space than to supply our war here.

Our Coalition is stunningly more effective at logistics than were the Soviets. For instance, when the British were resupplying small FOBs near Sangin last year—just a short drive from the origin at Camp Bastion—the monthly convoys were major operations that drained needed combat power, and still vehicles were destroyed with casualties. So powerful are some of the bombs that they can launch the ultra-armored American MRAPs into the air, flipping them like turtles, often breaking the backs of soldiers. Even today, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is making moves to facilitate allies to get more counter-IED gear, such as MRAPs, which seems like a good move because some allies are risk-averse to the point of being ineffective (not that MRAPs are going to save them). By air, when a civilian helicopter was trying to resupply at Sangin, it was shot down just outside the base, killing the crew and at least one child on the ground. Make no mistake: this is a worthy enemy.

Without the U.S. Air Force, we would need thousands more troops here just to run convoys, and bringing in those troops would require more convoys to supply their needs. It's okay to use contractors to bring supplies in from Pakistan or from the north, but driving up into those mountains and other remote locations would be suicidal.

9288- The United States Air Force invited me on a resupply mission, and when I showed up at 0400 to the trailer where the crew lives, one of their doors had been blown off the night before, leaving all else intact. Nobody knows what caused the door-ripping, though SSG Michael Jeffries was outside and said he got pounded in the face by gravel. Michael Jeffries said the winds were at least 60MPH and lasted only a few seconds. The pilots inside hit the deck. Anyway, Afghan mysteries aside, we drove to a chow hall, got breakfast to-go, and drove to the flightline.

The 772 Expetionary Airlift Squadron (EAS), from Little Rock, is comprised of elements from the 19th Airlift Wing, which they call the "Black Knights." During January 2010 the 772 EAS conducted 119 missions in Afghanistan that comprised 454 sorties. That's a lot of convoys saved.

Today's mission would consist of six sorties. A sortie consists of a takeoff and landing, and hopefully the landing was controlled. We would fly from KAF to Shindand to unload supplies, pick up passengers, then fly back to KAF. That would be two sorties. The crew would pick up more supplies and passengers and fly to a small base in Farah Province, then back to KAF to pick up another load, then fly to Camp Bastion, then back to KAF—mission complete—for a total of six sorties. Arguably this could be called three missions, but the Air Force is conservative and calls it one mission. The pilots would not shut down the engines which would be running all day.

Before starting engines, Captain Thomas Sonne, the pilot, adjusted an oxygen mask and showed me how to use it. He handed over a Bose noise-cancellation headset, then plugged it into the comms and demonstrated how to adjust volume on several radios and the internal.

I asked Captain Sonne if we have enough C-130 lift in Afghanistan (knowing we don't have enough helicopters). Captain Sonne said we enough C-130 lift—not extra capacity, but enough, which coincides with what others have said. "Is the Haiti relief hurting us here?" Captain Sonne confirmed what others have said: no, they can't feel the Haiti mission affecting our effort. Captain Sonne explained we are short on ramp space to park the aircraft, so they are busy building more ramp. This coincides with something General Petraeus told me in late 2008.

The pilot and copilot started through the strange checklist. The instrument panel showed we had 24,590 pounds of fuel. The weather was looking dicey for the landings on the rough airstrips, but takeoff would be easy, the pilots said. There were eight passengers and eight crew; three of the crew were FAST personnel (Flyaway Security Team) with body armor and weapons, and they would disembark on landing to guard the aircraft. Was good to have them along. Finally the crew got to the pre-taxi checklist. I understood a few words on this one:

"Brakes."
"Brakes clear."
"Copy."

Captain Sonne was wearing night vision goggles while Major Tice, copilot, was going without. Captain Sonne's voice came over: "We've got a 135,000-pound airplane," and then he looked back over his right shoulder at me, saying, "If you have any questions, go ahead and I'll alert you if we are busy." "Roger," I say in the microphone.

And now they are talking to each other again, "We'll try to get up to 265 tactical," says Captain Sonne.

My pen was too slow, especially in the dark cockpit, but I got some snippets:

“Pre-flight checks complete,” says Major Tice.
“Pressurized.”
“Roger.”

They talk quickly, succinctly, all business, and rumble down the dark runaway and lift away, “Gear’s up.” “Gear’s up.” The flight computer has a female voice that commands attention, and she kept saying, “Altitude, altitude, altitude, altitude,” and then much later, the computer woman says, “Thousand to go.” This has to be about one of the coolest jobs in the military. As we roar into the sky, it occurs to me that a young person with brains and a sense of adventure would be crazy not to consider joining the Air Force. This is fun!

9304- I ask through the headset if the HUDs are classified and if it’s permissible to make photos so people at home can see. Captain Sonne and Major Tice said there is nothing classified. Have at it.

9311 - We descend into Shindand by first coming over the base, and doing a hard corkscrew down, wings sometimes tipped at 45 degrees, to avoid ground fire. The cockpit is armored against SAFIRE, but there are people in the back and it's never a good idea to get your airplane shot.

9319 - We come down to the skinny runway, apparently made for Russian figthers, some of which were sitting near the runway. The Taliban had gotten their hands on old aircraft years ago, and somehow got them flying. Today, Taliban Air Force consists of kites and carrier pigeons. I've photographed a kite in downtown Kandahar that was flying in the dark with a dim strobe. Was it a signal? The pilots intended to land at about 120 knots.

9345 - We landed and the pallets were removed by forklift, followed by the “pax” (passengers).

9349 - The crew had a couple of flags hanging in the back. The pilots said they fly flags on missions for people at home, and send each flag back with a little certificate.

9354 - More passengers were loaded up and we rumbled away at about 0730, and someone said from the back that a flock of birds was off to our right. After we were safely airborne, and the pilots finished their checklists, I asked about bird strikes. "How high do bird strikes happen in Afghanistan?" Major Tice had heard of a strike that occurred at over 20,000 feet. Everyone seems to have high regard for the C-130J. The pilots explain that older variants required six crew members, but the "J" only needs four. The Navigator and Engineer no longer are needed, and so this cuts one officer and one NCO, both of whom require much expensive training. A four-man crew beats a hundred-man convoy.

9370 - And that was it; we landed back at KAF, the first two sorties complete.

9396 - KAF doubles as a civilian airport with traffic including 747s. This is the civilian side of the terminal. We can't do a lot of top secret stuff on the airfield because civilian planes land every day and everyone can take photos.

Captain Sonne and Major Tice parked the airplane, left the motors running without the props turning, and while loadmasters re-loaded the C-130J, I got coffee.

9410 - We loaded back up and taxied to the runway for the second part of the mission: take supplies and pax to Farah Province. On the taxiway, we waited for this 747 to take off. ATC (Air Traffic Control) said something about a 747 "heavy" taking off. I asked the pilots what "heavy" means, and they answered that any aircraft weighing more than 250,000 pounds is considered "heavy," and there are special rules at KAF for heavy. For instance, after he takes off, a truck must drive the runway to clear debris that the giant engines often blow onto the

runway. The debris will not damage the C-130 (after all, they land on gravel airstrips), but a rock sucked inside an F-16 engine is a bad thing, and we don't want to see pilots ejecting off the end of the runway while one of our jets crashes in the desert. Another rule is that we have to wait for three minutes after a "heavy" takes off because the giant airplanes leave dangerous vortices that can cause us to crash.

9416 - While we rumbled toward the FOB in Farah, the pilots were curious about the ground war and I offered a few vignettes. There are thousands of wars going on here. Everyone's war is a snowflake.

9439 - As we approached the airstrip, the pilots put the nose down and we dived into the soup of clouds. The biggest threat in Afghanistan for fixed-wing pilots is terrain. It's easy to eat a huge mountain over here.

"Flaps 50% please."
"Roger."

9440 - Now over Farah and approaching the strip, we kept going down, down, down and the clouds were looking brown. Occasionally the clouds winked and we could spot the earth momentarily, until the instruments said we were a thousand feet up. The pilots could not see the ground. The ATC said visibility was less than two miles, and Captain Sonne said he could not see a half-mile ahead. A loadmaster called up saying he could barely see the ground at 1,000 feet. I just kept saying to myself, "They know what they are doing. They know what they are doing. They know what they are doing." Captain Sonne reported we were getting some rain, and finally, at four miles out, he said "Abort," and I drew a breath of relief and we climbed away. As we climbed out, Captain Sonne said, "A little bit of rain, I'm going to switch back to weather."

We continued to climb away, when on another channel a pilot was talking to the ATC behind us. ATC crackled to the pilot, "Runway unsafe to land. Report your intentions." Captain Sonne explained that the ATC can advise the pilot about unsafe conditions, but the decision to land rests with the pilot. The other pilot aborted. ATC called saying it could be 2-3 days before the sloppy runway was dry enough for safe landing.

The computer issued an alert about a fuel imbalance. Captain Sonne explained that in older C-130 variants, the flight engineer would have been aboard to monitor this, and then he explained some details about fuel balancing and why it's important to stay within constraints to maintain stability. He reached around to his left and pulled out a book, explaining the different sections. Some alarms were critical and could mean life and death, but this was just an alert to take care of

some housekeeping. He read the procedure, which he probably already had memorized, and dialed four overhead knobs to redistribute the fuel, explaining each step.

We landed back at KAF and prepared for the sortie to Camp Bastion, but got a report that an aircraft had a problem on the runway, and so the Bastion runway was shut down and there was a delay. Meanwhile, a rocket attack occurred and so we ended up on the ground, and there was a nearby boom (maybe a few hundred meters or more). We wasted time in the bunker (somebody's rule up top) and the senior officer took inventory of his people, and finally the all-clear was sounded. We learned that the runway at Bastion was still closed. That was it. Mission was over. Not every mission goes perfectly, but then you can't control the weather, or acts of God. And in any case, this was seven doing the job of a hundred.