



C-130J Carrying A Load In Afghanistan Theater Plane Can Get In, Out Where Others Can't



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette Military Affairs Reporter Amy Schlesing is embedded with the Arkansas National Guard's 39th Infantry Brigade on its second deployment to Iraq. The article below about C-130J operations is reproduced with kind permission of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette and Amy.

JALALABAD, Afghanistan — The hazy light at dusk blended the runway's crumbling edge into the surrounding dirt as Capt. Cory Waldroup nosed the C-130J down to earth. More than 12 tons of ammunition - thousands of .50-caliber bullets and boxes of mortar rounds - rested in the plane's belly. Ammunition is the biggest supply need for troops in this Taliban and al-Qaida mountain stronghold nestled near the invisible and politically muddy border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The plane's warning system repeated in a firm female voice, "Altitude ... altitude ... altitude ..." as the plane plunged into a steep-descent combat landing. Waldroup, the co-pilot, eased the plane onto the runway and threw its props into reverse. The plane roared as it came to a stop just short of where the runway narrows and falls away. It was a landing no other cargo plane in the U.S. military's air fleet could handle.

This is what drew Waldroup, of Cabot, and pilot Capt. Christian Garber away from flying Air Force jets and into the world of Hercs.

"I flew jets. But you have the rest of your life to fly commercial jets from here to there," Waldroup said. "I wanted to really fly, and this is really flying. This, the Herc, is different. It's fun."

Now the two fly the newest Herc in the fleet as members of Little Rock Air Force Base's 41st Airlift Squadron. The 41st became the first active-duty C-130J squadron in the Air Force last year and is now deployed to an unnamed location as part of the 746th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron where it's testing the limits of the newest Herc in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Horn of Africa.

"Our guys have the freedom to say, 'This works, let's do it this way,' rather than, 'That's the way we've always done it,'" said Lt. Col. Dan Tulley, 746th commander. He is also commander of the 41st at Little Rock.

The 746th is a blended unit that includes all three versions of the prop-driven C-130 - planes built from 1963 through last year - and airmen from seven Air Reserve and active-duty squadrons.

"We're redoing our entire training plan based on what we've learned here," Lt. Col. Don Buckley, the 746th's operations director, said about his home unit, the 815th Airlift Squadron of the Air Reserve's 403rd Airlift Wing at Keesler Air Force Base, Miss.

High Demand

In the past four months, the 746th flew 261 more sorties than the previous squadron over the same time period despite having one less plane. Part of that increase is demand, but part is also attributed to the added capabilities of the two J-model Hercs that the 41st took there with them. In four months, the 746th has flown about 2,060 sorties, hauled 3,481 tons of cargo and 40,678 passengers.

More than 70 percent of all flying missions in the three battle fronts are airlift operations - either moving people and cargo or refueling planes in flight. In Iraq, the demand is for moving people. In Afghanistan it's all about cargo.

"The increase is primarily related to logistics. It's very difficult to get to these outlying forward operating bases," said Lt. Col. Brian "Smokey" Robinson of the Air Mobility Division of the

Combined Air Operations Center. "It's the quickest way to get fuel, food and ammo to those locations."

"You're really doing a mission you think about as a Herc mission when you fly here," Garber said of Afghanistan as he piloted the C-130J toward Kandahar in the beginning hours of a two-day mission there. The Jalalabad landing would be the last of that mission.

Older Herc models fly Afghanistan missions as well but are considerably more limited by distance, space and cargo weight. Mostly E and H models fly in Iraq, where there are well maintained runways, shorter hops and lighter loads. The J, which can fly farther, faster and carry more, is reserved for the longer trips.

In one instance, a 1960s E model Herc had to leave part of its cargo load at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan because of the day's heat, the high altitude of the air base made the 134,000-pound load too heavy for the plane. The crew asked to spend the night at the outpost and take off when it was cool so the plane could handle the weight. Instead, they were told to leave part of the load behind and head back.

"The crew is still bitter about it," Waldroup said. "They couldn't help it. It wasn't their fault."

The J-model could easily take off at that weight in those conditions.

Small Airfields

The sun took on an orange hue as the crew ate sack lunches and headed toward Kandahar to pick up a plane full of Afghan commandos. Waldroup spun the Herc into a tight turn as he moved in to land. He straightened up over the edge of the runway just before touching down.

His eyes glowed green from behind the night-vision goggles on his helmet.

"It's a great night for flying," Garber said.

The plane rolled to a halt next to a yellow building with cracked walls and a sign that read, "Welcome to Kandahar Airfield."

More than 90 Afghan commandos, some with grease camouflage on their faces, walked in straight lines into the back of the airplane. They all wore body armor and helmets decorated with Arabic writing and carried U.S. weapons - everything from M-4 rifles to 240B machine guns and 60-mm mortar tubes.

"It still wigs me out, sometimes," said Senior Airman Cecil Johnson of Sherwood, a loadmaster. "I say, 'We're taking how many people and pallets?' And every now and then, they'll [fill] us like an E-model, with 56 people. We'll have all this extra room."

Airman 1st Class Kyle Jefferson of Jacksonville worked at a computer, preparing the bay for the pallet to load.

Staff Sgt. Jessie Rhom of Colorado Springs, one of two Air Force security airmen on the mission, looked back at the cargo bay packed with Afghan soldiers.

"You don't see this every day," he said.

The soldiers were headed to Tarin Kowt, a dirt landing strip in the western mountains, where they'd set off on foot.

Garber nudged the Herc into the night sky as he and Waldroup began a constant dialogue about geographic hazards and navigational points in the dark below.

"There's that peak we were talking about," Waldroup said. The field is surrounded by 8,000-foot mountain peaks that they have to navigate around.

"We have this valley to go through," Garber said, weaving through the star-speckled sky.

They called to the controller at the dirt strip. There was no tower, no air traffic control. There was just a guy on a radio telling them the strip was clear.

"That's the best kind of flying right there," Garber said. "You keep yourself safe."

"We did it the other day at 150,000 pounds," Garber said of his J-model. "She didn't perform the way she normally does, but we did it."

In May, the J-model Garber and Waldroup piloted flew 356 hours - 100 more hours than any other plane on the flight line at the unnamed operating base they call home. Most of those hours can be attributed to the long hauls through Afghanistan.

The C-130J can carry up to six pallets of supplies or 98 people and two pallets. The older models top out at 56 people and one pallet. A traditional Herc crew includes a pilot, co-pilot, engineer, navigator and loadmaster. Automated navigation and flight equipment reduces the crew in the J-model to two pilots and two loadmasters.

"You should see when we land," Staff Sgt. Steve Pearson of Little Rock Air Force Base, one of two crew chiefs onboard, said somewhere over Pakistan. "I'll pull the data card out of the slot over there, plug it into a computer, and it will tell me if anything is wrong with the plane."

Bugs in the plane's heavily computerized systems delayed its acceptance into the U.S. Air Force fleet a decade ago. Those bugs have been long hashed out.

"It's so reliable that when it breaks, it's noticeable," Tulley said.



Garber and Waldroup strained to see four small infrared lights that marked the end of the field.

"How's that for an LZ [landing zone]?" Garber said as they circled. "Frickin' crazy."

"Can you see anything?" Waldroup asked.

"The moon disappeared on us. This is as dark as it gets," Garber answered.

The men spotted the marker, and Garber took the plane down as clouds of dirt enveloped the aircraft.

"Well that snuck up on us," Garber said, smiling.

"What? The ground?" Waldroup laughed back.

They pulled up next to another C-130 that was unloading its commandos and gear. The two crews, both from the 746th, chatted over the radio. Waldroup told the other crew that he was headed back to Kandahar for the night. The other crew had just left there and would head back to the unnamed base by morning.

“We cleaned the tent for you,” the other crew said.

Then, in another cloud of dirt that turned the air in the plane an eerie brown, Garber churned the props up to speed. The plane bounced down the dirt and lifted back into the sky, back to Kandahar.

“We’re light, she’ll climb like a banshee,” Garber said.

Within a half-hour they slid onto the pavement of the Kandahar runway.

Jefferson snapped on latex gloves and a face mask to clean up the mess left by the Afghan soldiers. He carried bleach cloths and a biohazard bag.

Three had thrown up during the flight. “You know, I didn’t think I could do it,” he said of the cleanup, “Until I had to.”

Another Hope

It was after 3 a.m. when the crew members would nestle into a dusty tent for much-needed sleep. They’d wake just six hours later to sweltering heat and the continuous beeping of a forklift outside. The men walked the gravel roads of this international outpost to the dining facility. At this military post in Kandahar, Americans are in the minority.

As brunch wound down, Garber grabbed one of his napkins and a pen. He scribbled numbers out trying to calculate how much fuel to load for the day’s mission.

At base operations, the crew members learned that the flight line would be closed during the hour they planned to stop back in to refuel before heading back to base camp that night. The flagdraped coffins of soldiers killed in a helicopter crash the day before were being loaded onto a plane for the long flight home.

If the crew members delayed their mission an hour, their flying day would stretch longer than allowed. They’d have to leave early.

As the rest of the crew discussed what to do, Garber appeared around a corner.

“OK, we’re set to push early,” he said and continued walking out to the flight line.

Outside, Jefferson and Johnson rigged the plane for a four-ton pallet of ammunition and passengers. The temperature raged to 119 degrees outside, boiling in the plane’s metal cargo hold. Sweat trickled off the crewmen in the hour it took to load the plane.

Later, the plane flew over poppy fields coloring valleys between rugged brown mountain peaks.

The plane turned out of the mountains and over a vast, desertplateau where Camp Bastion appears. It is little more than a landing strip, concertina wire and a small community of tents. There is no taxiway, nowhere to park. Planes stop at the end of the runway and simply turn around.

As the plane waited on a patch of concrete for someone to find a forklift to unload the pallet, a dust storm kicked in. Within a minute, visibility went from a mile to less than 600 yards. White dust clogged the air, blocking out the sun.

“The winds are picking up,” Garber said as the loadmasters ran to the nearest tent to ask where to put the ammo. “We really need to get this pallet off and get out of here.”

Within five minutes the air had cleared again. And as soon as it did, a British C-130J landed on the strip next to them.

“I feel that the Js own Afghanistan,” Waldroup said.

“They have to,” Garber said. “That’s the thing about Afghanistan. It’s a little bit of the Wild West, hands-on flying.”

An hour later they dropped into Bagram Air Base on the edge of the Hindu Kush’s 20,000-foot peaks. Veins of snow still rested in the crevices of the mountains hugging the runway.

The plane picked up its 12 tons of ammunition bound for Jalalabad and prepared for the last leg of the journey.

Waldroup ran down the list of warnings about the runway: no edge markers, narrow and a tower run by a local Afghani.

“It’s a shady piece of pavement,” Garber warned the crew. “It’s the worst piece of pavement in the [entire Iraq/Afghanistan theater].”

Waldroup set the plane down onto the runway, fighting the harsh dusk light to see if he was on pavement or dirt.

“There’s no difference between the two in this light,” he said. “You lose the line.”

After the steep landing, Garber took over navigating the plane to a parking space. He pointed out a group of airmen standing on the runway’s edge as the plane’s wing spun around. Airmen and soldiers stationed at Jalalabad must cross the runway to get from one living area to another. A red light tells them to stop when a plane is landing.

Even so, the C-130’s wings hang several feet over the narrow taxiway.

Garber spun the plane around on a small patch of pavement and prepared to back into a corner. Another C-130J was landing and would need to share the parking space that seemed too small for even one of them.

“I’m telling you, flying a C-130 is much harder than flying [the much larger jet-engined] C-17 or C-5,” Garber said as he watched the second Herc tiptoe down the too-small taxiway. “You couldn’t get one of those in here.”



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