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THE AIR BRIDGE

# Taking Supplies to the Troops, 'Coming In High and Fast'

By ERIC SCHMITT

**A** BOARD A C-17 GLOBEMASTER, over Iraq, Dec. 8 — From the darkened cockpit of this giant Air Force cargo plane, Capt. J. J. Grindrod peered early Monday through his night vision goggles at the Iraqi airstrip ahead and prepared to make a steep, high-speed landing, a tactic used to thwart surface-to-air missile attacks.

Captain Grindrod and his five-member crew were flying 71,200 pounds of cargo and equipment from Germany into Balad airfield, a sprawling base 45 miles north of Baghdad where the Army has built its major logistics center in Iraq.

"Coming in high and fast keeps the bad guys from reaching out and touching you," said Captain Grindrod, 31, of Orlando, Fla., the wisecracking commander of this C-17 mission.

The task of sustaining military operations in Iraq and the 155,000 American and allied troops here falls to an unsung supply lifeline of ground convoys from Kuwait and a complex air bridge of cargo flights from the United States and Europe.

The bulk of the supplies and equipment brought into Iraq goes by ship to Kuwait and is trucked over land, but the air bridge is crucial to delivering 500 tons a day of cargo into Kuwait and Iraq.

Flying matériel into Balad, which recently replaced Baghdad International as the main military airport in Iraq, reduces the number of convoys that have to drive risky routes to reach the big logistics base, commanders say.

More than 40,000 tons of supplies have been lifted into Iraq alone since the end of major combat operations in May, Air Force officials said, using fleets of three Air Force cargo planes — the C-17 and the C-5 Galaxy, for oversized loads across the ocean, and the C-130 Hercules for shorter flights within the region.

While less intense than the busiest wartime operation, the air cargo mission is still a complicated choreography of planes and crews.

Chartered commercial aircraft and C-5's depart from Dover, Del., switch crews in Spain and head to Kuwait.

Most of the C-17 missions begin in Charleston, S.C., and stop to refuel and swap crews at Rhein-Main Air Base in Frankfurt, Germany.

The C-17 hub at Rhein-Main is a 24-hour operation. Flights from the United States remain on the ground for about three hours, just long enough for a new crew to hop on and take the aircraft "downrange," as its pilots call hostile areas like Afghanistan and Iraq.

Captain Grindrod's four-and-a-half-hour mission from Rhein-Main overnight Sunday carried a typical load: nearly 36 tons of cargo ranging from tires and batteries to rations and office paper.

Packed in boxes and in crates, the matériel was then wrapped in plastic to prevent water damage and lashed to huge aluminum sleds called pallets that are rolled on and off the aircraft.

"It's all the mundane stuff you need to run a base," said Master Sgt. Paul Castillo, 43, of Corpus Cristi, Tex., one of three loadmasters overseeing the mission's cargo.

The gray four-engine C-17 is about as long as a Boeing 767 jetliner but much wider. It can carry as many as eight Kiowa helicopters. It can haul a 70-ton Abrams battle tank. It can airdrop 102 paratroopers. And it can refuel other aircraft in midair.

The huge C-5 can carry more than twice as much cargo, but the C-17 needs only one-third the runway, or about 3,000 feet, to land and take off, a big advantage when picking up or dropping off cargo at austere airfields.

The C-17 is also built to fly into harm's way. Its cockpit floor is sheathed with Kevlar to protect the pilots against ground fire. The plane is equipped with flares designed to fool heat-seeking missiles. Newer models have an infrared sensor that can fire a laser at a streaking missile to blind its guidance system.

The \$200 million plane is agile enough to execute combat landings with tight turns to avoid hostile fire, and crews use the cover of darkness to avoid attacks. "The night is our friend," said Maj. Phillip Durocher, 39, of Thibodaux, La., a Persian Gulf veteran who was one of three pilots on board for the mission.

When the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade needed to airdrop nearly 1,000 paratroopers into northern Iraq in March to open a northern front in the opening week of the war, 15 C-17's were dispatched from Italy to carry out one of the largest airdrops since World War II.

Hundreds of C-17 missions have also been involved in combat operations and civilian aid missions in landlocked Afghanistan.

"We are the lifters of choice," said Captain Grindrod, an Air Force Academy graduate.

Those kinds of demands can be grueling for active duty units like Captain Grindrod's 16th Airlift Squadron, based in Charleston, S.C., as well as reserve squadrons that have been called up. Twenty-four-hour days are not uncommon. Some C-17 pilots are on the road from 200 to 250 days a year, a strain that has broken up many marriages, crew members said.

With no end in sight to the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the pace is not likely to ease and could

ultimately push some pilots to look for civilian flying jobs. "This is an endurance contest," said Lt. Col. Shane Hershman, commander of the Seventh Airlift Squadron at McChord Air Force Base, Wash., who was deployed two months ago to run the C-17 hub at Rhein-Main. "This is for the long term."

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