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Workhorse in the sky

JEN GRAVES; The News Tribune

ABOARD A C-17 GLOBEMASTER III - This cockpit has a spectacular close-up view of the Big Dipper, but more impressive is its own interior constellation.

Hundreds of tiny green, yellow, orange and purple control lights dot the consoles of the C-17 Globemaster III, the latest, greatest airlifter of the U.S. Air Force.

"This is a computer with wings," Capt. Paul Sonstein, 29, a pilot based at McChord Air Force Base, said during a recent trip to Frankfurt, Germany. His five-person crew would spend the next two weeks flying supplies and troops in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan from Rhein-Main Air Base.

The C-17 is actually 23 separate computers powered by four engines and a minimal crew, said Lt. Col. Shane Hershman, commander of the 7th Airlift Squadron at McChord but now running the C-17 operation at Rhein-Main.

On the eve of the 100th anniversary of the historic flight at Kitty Hawk, N.C., the C-17 has no trouble marking its own place in history with its combination of brains, strength and speed. (One of the McChord-based planes is even nicknamed "Spirit of the Wright Brothers.")

"In the history of flight, I'd say the C-17 is very significant," Hershman said. "We do it all, from staying up indefinitely with the air refuelings to landing on short dirt strips."

For these reasons, the C-17 has become the workhorse of the Air Force, flying overtime to support a two-front war. Tuesday's explosion in a C-17 engine above Baghdad shows the inevitable risks of logging so many miles, though nobody was hurt seriously.

Air Force leaders hope to build the fleet from 89 to 222 in the next few years.

The C-17 is a \$200 million plane that can take 170,900 pounds of cargo, including an Army M-1 tank or three Strykers. It can fly 575 miles per hour and land smoothly on half as much runway as a commercial plane - handy for Third-World tarmacs in the post-Sept. 11 world. It is a cross between the C-5, a huge long-distance mover, and the agile C-130, used within an area of operations.

Where the C-17's predecessor, the C-141, might need a crew of nine, the C-17 needs a maximum of five; computers take the place of navigators and flight engineers.

"We landed in a dry lakebed with an M-1 (tank) once, just to show that you can take it anywhere," Hershman said. "Everybody's asking for the C-17 to take them."

Half the fleet at McChord

The Boeing-made C-17 has been flying since 1991. About half the U.S. Air Force's 89-strong C-17 fleet is at McChord; most of the rest are based at Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina.

These days the busiest C-17 hub, supporting about 25 missions a day in the war on terrorism, is in Germany. From Rhein-Main, supplies of all kinds go into the war zone.

No C-17s have been shot down, partly because of the Air Force's strict precautions. With no weapons and only flares, the bird is not allowed to stay overnight in either Iraq or Afghanistan. That means 14-hour days for crews flying to Iraq and back, and 24- to 26-hour days for missions into Afghanistan.

It's a grueling schedule, with only 12 uninterrupted hours of rest required between missions. The crews average six or seven missions in one two-week deployment, so they need in-flight rest, too. Behind the cockpit are two snug bunks for the pilots to switch off catnapping.

As the Air Force's star airlifter, the C-17 gets the exciting trips. In 2002, while McChord pilots steered the plane to Guantanamo Bay, McChord loadmasters down in the giant belly guarded the first crew of Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners taken from Afghanistan.

The plane has its own upstairs-downstairs scene, with the pilots up top and the loadmasters below. Both take advantage of the plane's bells and whistles, but while the pilots know where they're going, the loadmasters never know what's coming onboard.

A member of Sonstein's crew, Tech. Sgt. Jim Alexander of Tacoma, escorted home the soldiers who saved Army Pvt. Jessica Lynch from her Iraqi captors. He remembers their mixed feelings of triumph, relief and mourning for the dead buddies they left in Iraq.

With a loving hand, Alexander has secured briefcases carrying bone fragments and swatches of fallen soldiers' uniforms, usually from Vietnam.

"Those are emotional ones," he said. "It's an honor."

'Full-time hobby'

It's 10 minutes before landing in Dover, Del., for refueling on the way to Germany when Alexander and Senior Airman Eric Olson of Puyallup learn what's waiting to board the plane.

There's a 48,000-pound crane headed for a base in Uzbekistan. And for Afghanistan, there's a mystery pile marked "PURE," blue barrels of detergent and new dollies for hauling heavy objects.

They smile. It's improvisational labor guiding the crane on board, making sure it's chained to the metal floor at three times its weight with room for the four roll-on pallets.

But this is how they like it.

"This is my full-time hobby," said Alexander, 34, a Tacoma reservist who used to be a math and science teacher at Chief Leschi School and a Boeing engineer.

Every C-17 crew has one or two loadmasters. They're part flight attendant, part high-octane security guard.

"We're more the 'you-gotta-have-fun' guys," said Tech. Sgt. Randy Culver from McChord.

The plane can ferry anything from tanks to fighter helicopters to humanitarian supplies.

Pilots usually fly more than half the year, Sonstein said. He logged 220 days in 2003.

Alexander flies 15 to 20 days a month. His first 12 years, he racked up 2,800 total hours. Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, he's flown 1,200, he estimated.

"I'm hoping I'll be home for Christmas," said Alexander, who lucked out and got to spend Thanksgiving with his wife and children.

The C-17 was designed with the pilots and loadmasters in mind. The loadmasters praise the plane's powerful, automated gear and its roughly 1,600 square feet of cabin room. Floor panels flip over to become rollers that turn in all directions, allowing for smooth movement of heavy cargo. About 100 paratroopers and their equipment can jump out the two side doors in a rapid chain connected to a pulley system.

It was a McChord team, including Hershman, that in March did the C-17's maiden combat airdrop of 1,000 soldiers, the largest since the invasion of Panama in 1989. They helped open Iraq's crucial northern front.

Most missions are not that glamorous, especially for loadmasters. They set airsickness bags in the plane's single lavatory, tie down the crew's many bags - each takes gear plus two different chemical suits - and give a safety briefing to passengers before takeoff.

On domestic missions, loadmasters might chaperone presidential limousines and satellite dishes going to Cape Canaveral. If there are empty seats on a plane not headed to a combat zone, military families can hitch a ride to vacation spots.

Flying's the goal

During the loading in Dover, the pilots are at the Burger King on base. They don't really need to know what the cargo is except to calculate how much fuel they'll need, they say.

"It could be a couple thousand frozen turkeys or a bunch of bullets," said 1st Lt. Andrew Oiland, 24, of Shoreline. "Either way, you're gonna fly."

And that's why they got into it.

"I tell people I get paid to put on pajamas and act like a 3-year-old," said Oiland, referring to the airmen coveralls. "Obviously, there's professionalism involved, but we get to go fly airplanes and have fun."

The C-17 has a global positioning system and works on a preset autopilot program but requires adjustments and a constant watch. Neon green displays projected onto glass shields give the pilots altitude, speed, course and distance without ever having to look away from the sky.

"It will take us all the way from Germany to McChord pretty much without touching it," Oiland said.

Like any computer, it does have its quirks. In Dover, "it decided to control-alt-delete itself for a second," he said.

Sonstein and Capt. Anne Lueck of Puyallup were stuck re-entering the course that Oiland already had plugged in, their Burger King meals in hand.

New crew into war zone

Traveling from Frankfurt into the war zone at Kandahar, Afghanistan, the plane assumes a different air. It also gets a new crew.

The experienced McChord deputy operations group commander, Lt. Col. David Callis, takes over from Sonstein. This time the flight includes a turbulent air refueling. The plane shakes violently as Callis and co-pilot Capt. Damen Sebler pull the massive C-17 up under the back of the air tanker.

A hose descends and retracts, trying to make the connection. It's a swing ... and a miss. When the hose finally settles in, the pilots chat on their headphones with the tanker crew for the five minutes it takes until they're done.

The tanker drops to the left as the C-17 rises to the right, speeding up again after refueling at about 305 miles per hour.

For drop-offs in war zones, the plane is lit with infrareds. Loadmasters wear night-vision goggles and body armor. The pilots sometimes do spiral landings to decrease the chance of being hit by enemy fire. If it's a dangerous area, pilots and loadmasters coordinate for a rapid drop. They unlatch the cargo, lower the back door to a ramp and jerk the plane forward to ditch the goods and take off again.

Kandahar Air Base, the U.S.-led coalition's base at Kandahar Airfield, is considered relatively secure. Floodlights greet the plane's landing on the field's legendarily short runway, and the C-17 brakes hard to a smooth stop.

The back of the plane opens its big mouth, and a ground crew in T-shirts climbs on. It feels like a delivery in the States, except for the prison tower in the distance marking where Taliban and al-Qaida terrorists are held.

The News Tribune sent reporter Jen Graves and photographer Janet Jensen to Kandahar Air Base last week on a McChord Air Force Base C-17 aircraft. This is their final report.

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- A C-17 that had an engine explode shortly after takeoff in Iraq is from McChord. **Back page**

(Published 12:01AM, December 11th, 2003)

General Info:

The Interactive Media Division of The News Tribune © 2002 Tacoma News, Inc.
 1950 South State Street, Tacoma, Washington 98405 253-597-8742
 Fax Machines: Newsroom, 253-597-8274 Advertising, 253-597-8764
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