Enduring Airlift

Afghanistan is a logistician’s nightmare, and air mobility is the solution.

By Marc V. Schanz, Associate Editor

With a new 20,000-strong contingent of US troops streaming into Afghanistan, the task of generating required logistics support has jumped near the top of the Pentagon “to do” list. The new increment of ground forces will need tons of materiel and lots of transport, and all signs are that USAF’s airlift will be the key.

The Air Force’s mobility fleet has been vital throughout eight years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, swiftly and reliably moving thousands of service members, contractors, bullets, guns, supplies, water—you name it.

While airlift proved important in the Iraq war, it may well become decisive for the renewed US war effort in Afghanistan.

USAF Col. Gregory Schwartz, chief of contingency operations at US Transportation Command, reported, “I could make the argument that airlift is more important to sustain what we have going on in Afghanistan,” if for no other reason that Afghanistan, unlike Iraq, has no established national distribution system.

In fact, Afghanistan amounts to a logistician’s nightmare.

Top: A C-17 drops combat delivery system bundles to ground forces in Afghanistan. Above: Army Spc. Joshua Vazquez (left) and SMSgt. Timothy Gaines move a pallet into a C-130 cargo bay before an air-drop mission.

To begin with, the country lacks modern infrastructure, possesses no access to sea or river ports, and is ringed by some of the highest and most rugged mountains on Earth.

Generally, cargo and supplies move into Afghanistan over land arteries from the north and south. However, the land routes leading into Afghanistan are fraught with difficulty and danger. They are under constant threat of insurgent attack. What’s more, surrounding na-
tions impose political constraints on the type of cargo that can be moved to the Afghan border.

Certain sensitive items (such as ammunition and armaments) can’t be shipped between certain areas, Schwartz said, and have to go in by air. These supplies are often air-dropped or delivered at austere landing fields.

In July, US and coalition forces of Operation Enduring Freedom generated a record: Some 3.3 million pounds of supplies were air-dropped around the country. Deliveries ranged from combat support supplies to humanitarian goods.

The impact of the mobility surge is evident not only in Afghanistan but also on flight lines at US bases, where units now are feeling a strain. “We have a finite number of resources, and those are in continuous use,” said Col. David B. Horton, the commander of the 436th Operations Group, Dover AFB, Del., which operates both C-5 and C-17 airlifters for the Afghanistan operation.

“The mission in Southwest Asia has shifted,” said Horton. Iraq no longer has top priority.

Dover is one of the Defense Department’s busiest US logistical hubs, providing some 25 percent of USAF’s global airlift capability and home to the 436th Aerial Port Squadron. The 436th is currently DOD’s largest air freight operation, and serves as the aerial port for much of the materiel headed east to Southwest Asia.

For three consecutive months this spring—from April through June—Dover’s cargo throughput exceeded the monthly record set in early 1991 in missions require Dover aircraft to fly into Kabul and Bagram several times per week.

“We may fly two or three or four of those a week,” Horton said, “whereas contingencies are more irregular. ... There is a time sensitivity to it, which is why we are flying it.”

A Very Different Mission

Capt. Jeremy Reich, a C-17 weapons officer and chief of tactics with the 3rd Airlift Squadron at Dover, experienced the increased operations tempo this past summer when he carried out a 60-day deployment downrange.

“I was deployed [in] 2006, and back then it was mostly OIF. ... I’d say about a 60/40 split,” recalled Reich, a six-year veteran of C-17 operations. “This time it was significantly different, and it was a lot more of the OEF missions.”

In addition to flying normal inter-theater routes, C-17 aircrews moved a good deal of equipment from Iraq into Afghanistan and assisted with moving sea-lifted supplies from Kuwaiti seaports into the Afghan theater.

Reich recalled flying sorties into Forward Operating Base Bastion, a remote coalition outpost in rugged Helmand province. Bastion possessed a tiny, 90-foot-wide airstrip. And that was the high end of the landing experience. In his squadron’s deployment, he noted, C-17 aircrews performed 11 dirt strip landings.

Given Afghanistan’s difficult geographic circumstances and delicate regional politics, sustainment of American operations in Afghanistan has long been a concern of US officials.
and dangerous, however. To the west lies Iran, which permits no US transport.

Routes through Central Asia remain critical to the effort. This is particularly true of the air route through Kyrgyzstan’s Manas Air Base, located just outside of the capital, Bishkek. The Pentagon reports that about 15,000 US personnel and some 500 tons of cargo move through the base each month.

In March, the Air Force assigned three C-17s from Pacific Air Forces units to fly round-the-clock missions from Manas into Afghanistan and deliver critical cargo on an urgent basis. The C-17s flew in critical supplies without slowing down or otherwise interfering with other operations at the base. Supplies included materials for aircraft parking ramps for new Marine Corps airfields used to support the summer offensive against the Taliban in Helmand province.

Earlier this year, Kyrgyzstan’s government indicated it would end the US lease on the facility by August—sending US and coalition allies scrambling to find new basing rights in neighboring countries. In June, however, the Kyrgyz parliament ratified a new agreement which would allow the US to continue use of Manas as a transit and logistics hub under a one-year lease of the facility. The deal was wrapped up in July.

For all the threats, development of Manas never ended. A nine-member airfield resources team from Holloman AFB, N.M., erected two dome shelters for the 376th Air Expeditionary Wing. The new 4,000-square-foot shelters added needed bunk space and latrines, critical to the large number of US and coalition personnel transiting the base to Afghanistan.

The commercial aviation sector provides a significant fraction of US airlift capability, offering the power to expand US airlift at low cost. Commercial transit is also why overflight issues are so important at the top levels of US Central Command and TRANSCOM, as commercial traffic delivers loads to key hubs where they are transferred to military lift.

Bursting at the Seams

With bare-bones infrastructure in place, building up facilities and airstrips is just as much a strategic effort as a tactical one, officials claim. “Improving the infrastructure is not only for our logistical issues ... but also for the Afghans,” Schwartz said, noting air infrastructure’s contribution to building an economy.

The US has brought steady improvements to some of Afghanistan’s more important airfields, which now can accept more and larger aircraft, such as the C-5.

This is not a luxury, but a necessity. The Air Force’s main in-country hub, Bagram Air Base north of Kabul, has experienced a rising wave of traffic since the beginning of the year. The base’s 455th Expeditionary Aerial Port Squadron was processing around 14,000 tons of cargo a month in May—about double the volume being processed only a few months earlier, according to squadron officials. The passenger terminal at Bagram has also seen sharp growth in traffic; the daily rate has expanded from some 1,200 passengers to 1,600 passengers.

In February, the Air Force began surging as much support capacity as possible to help build up facilities to handle the traffic. Even months later, new buildings, aerial port facilities, airstrips, and other permanent structures continue to sprout in Afghanistan.

“You go to Bagram and Kandahar [Airfield], they’re absolutely full up with missions,” said Air Force Civil Engineer Maj. Gen. Delwyn R. Eulberg in March.

The ramps at both facilities are “bursting at the seams,” he added, noting that at Bagram alone, four concrete batch plants were operating 24 hours a day for the past 18 months to keep pace with demand for concrete, used everywhere on an air base.

On some ramps, aircraft are parked three deep, a sight Eulberg said he had not witnessed in 31 years of service. (Eulberg retired from active duty in August.) To alleviate the crowding, USAF has shifted as much of its civil engineering capacity as possible to meet demand, Eulberg said. RED HORSE units moved into the country to erect airstrips in many locations.

In the country’s restive south, US and coalition officials enhanced existing infrastructure, stood up new squadrons, and established a second expeditionary wing at Kandahar Airfield.

To support the number of air-drop resupply and airlift taskings in country, the 772nd Expeditionary Airlift Squadron (a C-130J unit) was activated at the airfield on March 15. It came with eight Js and about 120 operations and maintenance personnel. On the day prior to the stand-up, the first four of the squadron’s aircraft were already flying missions.

Coalition allies are throwing whatever they can into the airlift pot. In July, the Strategic Airlift Capability consortium stood up, comprising 10 NATO and two non-NATO countries that will jointly operate a wing of three C-17s from Papa AB, Hungary. The unit’s first airlifter, which arrived at the base July 18, was immediately prepped to start flying support for alliance operations in Afghanistan.

From the start, aircrews and logisticians pushing materiel forward have had a clear perspective on their mission.

“If those Army guys were going to drink, it’s because we brought them the water via airdrop,” Reich said. Without airlift, “you would have to ... get it through the mountains.”