

CSAR Hercs leave Afghanistan; C-130Js for rescue; Speed saves

GOOD-BYE, HC-130S

As the US military has reduced the number of American troops in Afghanistan, it has also worked to close forward operating bases, return equipment to permanent bases, and reduce the overall footprint there. Part of the drawdown effort included pulling HC-130s—the combat search and rescue (CSAR) version of the C-130—from the country.

Still, more than 8,000 US troops remain in Afghanistan, and the loss of the HC-130 from the large and mountainous country left a void, making it significantly harder for pararescuemen to reach a downed pilot or other isolated service members quickly if necessary.

Normally, the rescue triad is made up of Guardian Angels (the specialized personnel recovery airmen), HH-60 Pave Hawks, and HC-130s. Losing the HC-130s led to a reduction in “range and speed,” explained Lt. Col. Scott Nichols, commander of the 83rd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron.

HELLO, RESCUE VULTURES

To make up for that loss, the 83rd, the 774th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron, and the 455th Expeditionary Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron (EAES)—all from the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing—created something they call “Vulture Rescue.”

Lt. Col. Sarah Santoro, commander of the 774th, told *Air Force Magazine* that the C-130 unit at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, is not trained in personnel recovery, but does provide airlift and airdrop of personnel and equipment as part of its core capabilities.

“We’re very familiar with the airdrop mission,” Santoro said, and although the squadron “is not trained in CSAR, we can help provide capability for that need”—namely, getting Guardian Angels to far-flung locations quickly.

Before Vulture Rescue, teams would need more time to get to an isolated person because they would have to fly the entire way in HH-60s, possibly needing to stop for fuel on the way, Nichols said.

Now, “they can load onto a C-130J along with an aeromedical evacuation team and fly faster and straight to the isolated person,” he said.

Then, Guardian Angel pararescuemen and combat rescue officers can jump out of the C-130J, take care of the person, and put him or her on an HH-60 Pave Hawk that can meet up with the C-130J “at a nearby airstrip and transfer the person to the medical team’s care if needed,” he said.

Col. Ricky Sexton, commander of the 455th EAES, pointed out that if someone is stranded far from any US base, the pararescue team may be working on the ground for several hours to keep the person safe. By the time they get to the aircraft, they may be “smoked,” but if they’re using the C-130J, they can turn the patient over to the EAES team—which includes critical care personnel—for additional care.

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The C-130J can also get patients back to Bagram more quickly, where they can receive more treatment at the hospital there or be flown to Germany. Using Vulture Rescue instead of just the helicopters could get service members the care they need hours earlier than they would otherwise, he said.

“The bottom line is that we found a unique way to improve our capabilities and have a higher chance of saving lives in search and rescue situations,” Nichols said.

“It’s all about getting American hands on American personnel and getting them to safety and to the medical care they need,” he continued.

The idea began with the previous deployment rotation of airmen, and those units did a full mission rehearsal in the late summer.

Nichols’s, Santoro’s, and Sexton’s units arrived around October and immediately started hammering out details and planned another mission rehearsal for December, so if the capability would be needed, they’re ready. ★



Airmen with the 455th Expeditionary Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron prepare to load medical equipment onto a C-130J at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, in May 2016.

USAF photo by SrA. Justyn M. Freeman

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