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C-17 airdrops keep Operation Mountain Fury going strong

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C-17 crew airdrops 50,000 pounds of combat power in 40 minutes

by Maj. Ann Peru Knabe
Chief, 379th AEW Public Affairs

It reads like a scene from an action movie: Friendly forces are low on ammunition; poor weather and rugged terrain keep provisions from being delivered; the delivery of urgently needed supplies depends on the flying skill of one heroic crew.

For Capt. Lance Spear and his C-17 aircrew, this was the harrowing situation they found themselves in yesterday as they delivered more than 50,000 pounds of ammunition to NATO forces on the ground in Afghanistan in support of Operation Mountain Fury. For Captain Spear's team, it wasn't the movies — it was the type of pressure they handle everyday.

With poor weather conditions delaying most of the cargo flights in the region, more than 96 hours had passed since ground forces at four forward operating bases had received any supplies. The coalition forces' ammunitions were running dangerously low as they continued their fight against the Taliban near the Pakistani-Afghan border.

Captain Spear served as the mission commander on the sortie that took place more than 10,000 feet above sea-level. Assigned to the 816th Expeditionary Aircraft Squadron based in Southwest Asia, the pilot was joined by Aircraft Commander Capt. Michael Saylor, and Copilots 1st Lt. Shane O'Neill and Capt. Brian Phillips.

Normally, Mountain Fury supply runs are flown by C-130s. But with the extraordinary backlog of cargo, urgent need for ammunition, and requirement for multiple airdrops, the C-17 Globemaster was called in as the perfect aircraft for the mission. The C-17's size, speed, airdrop accuracy and capacity all factored in to its selection.

With a wingspan of more than 169 feet, the C-17's flexibility makes it an ideal aircraft for multiple airdrop missions. The aircraft is power by four, fully reversible engines. Normally, flown by a crew of three, for the vital airdrop mission over the mountains an extra copilot joined the team.

The crew landed their C-17 in Bagram, Afghanistan, and the loadmasters rigged 40 bundles of bullets, explosives and rockets destined for the U.S. and coalition forces fighting the enemy. The riggers used an innovative cushioning technique for the high value load, a shock absorbing system made from recycled milk crates.

"We probably save around $900 per bundle," said Tech. Sgt. Justin Strain, a C-17 joint airdrop instructor from Charleston Air Force Base, S.C., with more than 11 years experience flying. "The cargo is placed in nylon slings, and the ammo is separated by layers of honeycomb. Besides saving money, the low-cost system is a lot easier for troops to open on the ground. And timing was everything on this particular re-supply mission. The troops on the ground were running out of ammo."

The forward operating bases were less than a couple hundred miles from Bagram, and a 10 minute flight from each other. This meant the crew had to work quickly between airdrops.

Before each drop, Captain Phillips talked with Special Forces on the ground and waited for them to give the clearance to drop the valuable cargo. Once he heard the words "DZ's clear, you're clear to drop," the copilot hit the jump release switch. When the green light was touched, eight to 10 bundles of supplies were released from the back end of the aircraft.

Two of the drops into the mountains were classified as "low velocity airdrops" and two were "high velocity airdrops." Low velocity missions use larger parachutes, and factor in geographic space for weather and other mitigating circumstances that might alter the trajectory of the bundles. This type of airdrop falls to the earth at about 20 feet per second — still rather quick when you're dealing with hundreds of pounds of ammunition. High velocity airdrops, as the name suggests, have smaller parachutes allowing bundles to fall at much greater speeds — as fast as 100 feet per second — which means less interference from winds, gaining greater accuracy.

In between two of the drops, the aircrew left the C-17's aft door open and the loadmasters could see the containers hit the ground.

Adding drama to the situation was the fact that the aircrew had to fly less than 3,000 feet above the rocky Afghan terrain, but because the snow-capped mountains already reached more than 7,000 feet above sea level, they needed to wear oxygen throughout the mission. While the temperatures on the ground hovered around 15 degrees Fahrenheit, at altitude the temperature in the aircraft dropped to almost zero.

But the loadmasters weren't cold.

"We had on Gortex and harnesses or parachutes," explained Staff Sgt. Douglas Kuhn. "And we were moving quickly between drops to prepare for the next one. We didn't have time to get cold with everything that was going on."

Photo by Senior Airman Ricky Best

The potential for hostile fire also posed a threat to the aircrew.

"Flying in Afghanistan is dangerous," said Captain Saylor. "There's always the potential for small arms fire, RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) and shoulder-fired missiles. As a crew, we're constantly scanning the ground and sky the entire time, watching for any sign of attack."

In a drop like this, pilots use secure radio systems to talk to the troops on the ground in OEF airdrop missions, but the conversation can't be heard by the loadmasters in the back of the aircraft. Such was the case with the multiple airdrop sortie, adding yet another stress factor to the challenging situation.

"It's actually very challenging," said Sergeant Kuhn, who said the flight was his first airdrop in the AOR. "There's a certain level of anticipation associated with doing a real-world combat airdrop mission, and we all know it takes a whole crew working together to make sure the airdrops hit on time and on target."

Lt. Col. Ricky Rupp, 816th EAS squadron commander, contends the C-17's capabilities have evolved into a dynamic mission during the last decade.

"The Mountain Fury airdrop mission further validates the concept of 'vertical envelopment,'" he said. "Airdrop is an example of this nonlinear order of battle that allows us to compress time against the enemy – it's what defines airpower."

Time remained a key variable in the Operation Mountain Fury re-supply mission.

Normally, C-130s deliver supplies to the forward operating bases in Afghanistan, either by airdrop or airland missions. But this week the amount of supplies had become backlogged with mission cancellations related to weather, and the C-17 was the logical choice in airframe. With a payload capacity of 170,900 pounds and maximum gross takeoff weight of 585,000 pounds, the aircraft easily accommodated the cargo that would normally require three C-130s.

On the ground, Army forces anxiously waited for the airdrops. At one of the remote operating bases, an artillery platoon supporting the maneuver element was running critically low on artillery ammunitions.

"Much of our unit's basic load was depleted due to enemy activity," said Army Capt. David Jimenez of the 4th Battalion, 25th Field Artillery unit. "We were in desperate need for 105 mm ammunition, and the 816th responded to our call for re-supply. Without the responsiveness of the C-17s, our artillery platoon would have risked a depleted storage of ammunition that would have precluded the unit from continuing the war on terror."

Captain Jimenez said the drop was very successful with zero chute malfunctions.

"This is an indicator that the 816th EAS crews are nothing less than professionals," he said. "A zero chute malfunction drop means 100 percent recoverable ammunition and supplies for us, all which are critical to our daily mission."

The success of the drops was validating for Senior Airman Daniel Gagne, 816th AES loadmaster, who rigged the container delivery system bundles on the aircraft.

"We're prepared for all sorts of missions," said Airman Gagne. "But this is the first time I've experienced a real-world combat airdrop. I went to the C-17 loadmaster airdrop school in June, but that was just training. You almost feel naïve until you do the real thing – and once you do that first drop, you'll never forget the feeling of satisfaction, knowing you are the key to helping troops on the ground."

In turn, the troops on the ground were equally satisfied, if not more.

"CDS drops are our lifeline," said Captain Jimenez, whose platoon is supporting Operation Mountain Fury. "Without the constant hard work and dedication from Air Force aircrews, forward units like us risk mission failure."

Operation Mountain Fury is part of a coordinated effort to put continuous pressure on Taliban extremists across multiple regions of Afghanistan. Its goal is to provide security to the population, extend the government to the people, and facilitate reconstruction of the war-torn country.