



Coast Guard Mission to North Pole a Success

By PA1 Kurt Fredrickson

KODIAK, Alaska - A Coast Guard HC-130 Hercules airplane successfully reached the North Pole October 25, 2007, ushering in a new era of Coast Guard operations in the Arctic.

The 2,300-mile flight, which originated from Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak, was the first to reach the North Pole exclusively for the purpose of Arctic domain awareness. This new mission or the Coast Guard is based on recently observed climate changes that will provide greater maritime access to the Arctic. But for the Coast Guard reaching the northernmost point on Earth was more than a typical maritime patrol.

BARROW, Alaska--The 22 passengers and crew of Coast Guard HC-130 Hercules airplane 1703 stand for a group photo after successfully reaching the North Pole Thursday. The airplane and crew are from Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak. (Official U.S. Coast Guard photo)

"The significance of crossing the North Pole is a statement," said Rear Adm. Gene Brooks, commander of the 17th Coast Guard District in Juneau. "It's a statement that the U.S. Coast Guard is prepared to operate in the Arctic and the high Arctic. We are here to work."

This first Arctic domain awareness flight is not just the beginning of a changing Coast Guard role in the region, but also a step toward learning how to conduct missions in one of the harshest environments on the planet, Brooks said.

"The primary change in the Arctic is that for 150 years we have done exploration and research," Brooks explained. "The change is we now must prepare to do all Coast Guard missions in the arctic, including maritime surveillance."

The North Pole flight was the first step in that direction. Although it was uncertain if the mission would be a success, it was a vital step in setting a baseline for Arctic operations.

"The main expectations were to see how our instruments and radio communications work, what altitude we can (reach) before hitting our cold weather limitations, and what the forward support limitations are going to be in Barrow itself," explained Lt. Tommy Wallin, aircraft commander for the North Pole flight.

Although the operating environment of the Arctic has similarities to the day-to-day missions of the Coast Guard, it also presents great challenges.

"The main difference is that we are flying extreme distances under extreme temperatures without any support," Wallin said. "Once we get up to the Arctic we're kind of on our own. There's a lot of logistics that you have to do ahead of time and a lot of preplanning because once you get there everything has to already be planned out. It's similar to what we do day to day but just a little bit more extreme."

This extreme nature of Arctic flight was experienced as the aircraft neared the pole where temperatures outside dropped to -40 degrees. Despite the extreme temperatures Coast Guard airplane 1703 crossed the North Pole at 12:23 p.m., under the glow of a noontime full moon. The rising morning sun was left behind as the mission entered latitudes trapped in perpetual winter darkness. With a magnetic variation of more than 70 degrees in some locations, the compass guides aboard the aircraft were jumping, as if unsure of where the aircraft was. But as planned, navigation was maintained by GPS and the skills of the navigator. Although everyone aboard was excited to cross the North Pole, perhaps no one was as excited as the navigator who tracked the aircraft's every move.



"I'm a navigator so for me one of the most fun aspects of the flight, besides being in a unique mission, was when we headed over the pole and we headed south," said Chief Petty Officer Dave Boschee, Air Station Kodiak HC-130 navigator. "We were heading true south, but we were heading magnetic north because we were above the magnetic North Pole. I was bouncing out of my seat with excitement. We were on the other side of the world at that point. I would have never thought I was going there."

BARROW, Alaska - Chief Petty Officer Dave Boschee, Coast Guard C-130 Hercules airplane navigator, monitors the position of Hercules Coast Guard 1703 on its way to the North Pole Thursday. (USCG photo by PA1 Kurt Fredrickson)

Before returning home the aircraft circled the world, crossing every longitude and passing through every time zone, briefly making it the fastest moving object on the planet. For the second time that day, the sun rose for the passengers and crew of aircraft 1703. On this day with two sunrises the Coast Guard began a new chapter in Arctic history.

As the world examines the changing Arctic it is likely this flight will not be the last to navigate its way toward 90 degrees north. For the Coast Guard, future Arctic operations may mean more than the occasional over flight. The Coast Guard is examining the possibility of establishing a seasonal base in the Arctic. As the principal federal maritime enforcement agency in the Arctic, the Coast Guard will be called on to carry out its safety, security and environmental stewardship missions as maritime traffic increases in the region.

"When we start moving aircraft and small boats into the Arctic it's going to be a great opportunity, but it will also be a great challenge, because this is hard, and this is dangerous," Brooks said. "Like many other things in Alaska, it's beautiful and it's magnificent, but it can be deadly."

While the mission succeeded in reaching the pole safely, the trip was not without problems. But it is those issues that arise that provide insight into how to best conduct operations in the Arctic. Friday morning a hydraulic leak was discovered which grounded the aircraft at the airport in Barrow. One propeller had to be removed entirely in sub freezing temperatures by the crew and replaced with a replacement flown in from Kodiak. In regard to logistical support, operating in the Arctic is difficult to say the least.

"When you work outside in the Arctic, in the wind and the cold, without any protection it's really hard and it can be dangerous with the ice and the wind with the guys working on the plane," Wallin said. "If we're going to be up there for extended periods of time, providing shelter for the crew and the planes for scheduled maintenance is the most difficult thing."

Despite the challenges faced by the crew, the trip provided valuable insight for future Arctic operations. Wallin explained that the times of year the Coast Guard can operate from the Arctic will be limited by weather. As winter approaches high winds, icing on the runway and other factors may limit the ability to land and fly alto-



gether. The fact remains that under these extreme winter conditions there may not be any waterways open and subsequently no vessels to look at, he added.

As with any new undertaking there will be challenges to overcome. One of the key benefits of the mission, according to Brooks, occurred before the flight as many individuals planned for the mission.

BARROW, Alaska--The sun rises off the right side of a Coast Guard C-130 Hercules airplane on its way to the North Pole (Official photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Kurt Fredrickson)

"It's a dawn of a new era," Brooks said. "I do believe we are looking at Coast Guard operations into the highest hardest part of the world, and we're going to have to learn how to operate in the Arctic."

Although the Coast Guard must examine closely how to operate in this new environment, one thing they are doing to better their chances of success is not stepping into it alone. Aboard the flight to the North Pole was Charlie Hopson, a senior whaling captain from Barrow. Brooks noted that the knowledge held by those who inhabit the Arctic is an invaluable tool to the Coast Guard's success in the region, and he explained that the Arctic is in no way an exclusive Coast Guard domain. He said the people of the Arctic nations must decide the course of action to be taken in this new frontier.

"We are just a small part of the entire Arctic equation," Brooks said. "Understanding that the basic questions of the Arctic: Where are the boundaries? What is American? What do we own? What will we defend? Those questions are unanswered, and they're not Coast Guard questions."

As the Arctic nations examine how the resources of the Arctic will be used and developed the Coast Guard is preparing its own people to expand its missions should they be needed.

"Everything is dangerous -- everything has risks -- and the challenge here is doing things that minimize risk," Brooks said. "We have to be able to operate in every part of the world now, from McMurdo Sound in Antarctica to the North Pole in the Arctic. We're going to have to make sure that the Coasties who come, that we give them the training, give them the equipment and we give them the passion for operations in a new part of the world."



BARROW, Alaska--Lieutenant Tommy Wallin, aircraft commander, left, and lieutenant Bill Sportsman, copilot, nod to each other as they cross the North Pole Thursday. The flight was more than 1,100 miles one way from Barrow and took more than eight hours. (Official U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Kurt Fredrickson)