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621st Contingency Response Wing Public Affairs

7/16/2010 - **CAMP MARMAL, MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan** -- Flying high above the rugged Hindu Kush mountain range in northern Afghanistan, a massive C-5B Galaxy begins its descent through the inky darkness with thousands of pounds of cargo and a code-worded radio message over its ultra high-frequency radio that essentially says;

"We are coming, and we are bringing tons of the war with us."

Far below, at the base of those same mountains, rests Camp Marmal, a small NATO base in Mazar-I-Sharif. Command and control specialists assigned to a special team of expeditionary mobility Airmen have been expecting the call and respond.

"We are ready."

With this exchange, the Airmen of the 621st Contingency Response Wing from Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., begin a well-rehearsed process they have honed to perfection since the CRWs creation in 2005.

"The key role of the Contingency Response Wing is to rapidly establish a hub for air mobility operations worldwide, to include remote or damaged locations, on short notice," said Maj. Gene Jacobus, 621st Contingency Response Element commander. "This means that if you are going to be expecting a large number of aircraft to arrive where there was no ability to handle them previously, you call the CRW."

As the fully-loaded airlifter descends through the darkness towards the waiting Airmen, the command and control cell serves as the nerve center of the mobility operation, both issuing instructions and tracking the movements of aircraft, cargo and personnel. A command and control specialist makes a call over a tactical radio network set up by the CRW's communications specialists, and begins a storm of activity.

"Charlie-five 30 minutes out, 32 pallets offload, requesting 160,000 pounds of fuel."

A team of aerial porters hurry to the ramp and prepare to process the Galaxy's cargo with their specialized equipment -- The 10,000 pound articulated forklift and either the 60,000-pound pallet loader or the much lighter next generation small loader. Together, they are referred to as materials handling equipment, or MHE. The mission of the CRW revolves around these vehicles, and they set the tempo and do all of the heavy lifting.

As the specialized handling vehicles rumble to life and pull forward, lining the edge of a closed runway they use as a cargo ramp, the flashing hazard lights pierce colored beams through the dusty air and illuminate a filthy but friendly local dog that always sleeps near the door of the tent used by the team. It seems she only wakes from her slumber when an aircraft is near. How she knows it's coming, nobody knows, but she always does. She barks and wags her tail, running quickly up and down the taxiway in front of the trucks as the "port dogs" try to call her over. The night shift calls her "Ramp Dog," the day shift, "Brownie." She answers to nobody, especially the porters. The dog seems to love the planes more than the Airmen, and has been seen sitting in the shadows of a few of them over the past few weeks. As the night progresses, she will be everywhere, closely supervising these temporary visitors to "her" ramp.

Watching this scene on a thermal camera system inside the security forces command tent, a CRW security team gears up to defend the aircraft and offloading operation with its armored Humvee and heavy machine gun if needed. As the porters unload an aircraft, a security team patrols the darkness around them, ensuring their ramp stays safe.

Looking over all of them is a CRW-assigned air traffic controller who waits in the small Afghan control tower nearby, ready to clear the aircraft to land and direct it to its parking area. The ATC specialist has been working closely with his German Air Force International Security Assistance Force hosts to safely guide the large number of extra aircraft into the small air base. Working alongside coalition and host-nation partners is a common aspect of the CRW mission, and few spend more time than the ATC team.

As the mobility Airmen finish preparations and begin their wait, a quiet calm settles over the ramp. This is nothing new to the CRW - they have done this before and will do it again tomorrow. What makes this team of mobility Airmen special are the circumstances and conditions in which they are asked to perform.

"The mission of the CRW is simple, yet staggeringly complex," said Major Jacobus. "We handle any cargo off of any type of aircraft, anywhere in the world, using only the equipment we brought with us."

The CRW is required to be able to deploy worldwide from the initial notification to the first team departure in only 12 hours. They deploy a carefully-adapted package of equipment and specially trained Airmen that allow them to sustain their own operations

Story at a Glance

- Small teams of Contingency Response Airmen are providing rapid-response aerial port capability worldwide.
- The unit has a 12 hour response time from the initial notification to departure.
- Common CRW missions include humanitarian aid assistance and wartime surge airlift support.
- The 600-member, JB-MDL-based 621st CRW is one of only two such wings in the U.S. Air Force. The other is at Travis AFB, Calif.

Photos

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CAMP MARMAL, MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan – Command and control specialists assigned to the 621st Contingency Response Wing from Joint-Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, NJ, work inside a mobile air reporting communications shelter at Camp Marmal, Afghanistan July 3. The MARC is an air-deployable facility that provides CRW Airmen with the ability to communicate with aircraft as well as schedule and track cargo movements worldwide. (U.S. Air Force photo/Tech. Sgt. Parker Gyokeres/released)

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without resupply for the first five days. The unit brings its own living quarters, power, aircraft maintenance equipment, MHE, command and control facility, and a satellite communications suite that provides phones and internet connectivity. The equipment the team uses is as specialized and varied as the Airmen that operate it.

Of the 20 Airmen working together on this warm evening, there are 12 different career fields represented. The entire element of around 45 Airmen takes pride in "fighting above their weight" to get twice the work done with less than half the resources of a standard aerial port squadron. Most specialties are represented by only a single Airman, and everyone performs more than one role to get the mission accomplished. Every member is expected to assist with core functions such as security duty, set-up, tear-down and maintenance of the camp. They also push cargo onto and off of aircraft if the aerial porters need some extra muscle.

With its distinctive whining howl, the C-5 lands onto the darkened airfield. The ramp boss meets and then guides the huge aircraft to a waiting aircraft maintainer, who waves it into a parking spot. Moments after stopping, the four massive engines spool down and every moving part of the CRW springs to life, converging on the shaft of light spilling from the yawning rear loading ramp.

Cargo handling equipment, fuel trucks and security forces take up positions around the dark grey aircraft, followed closely on foot by aerial porters and aircraft mechanics. They begin to perform their choreographed moves in a well-rehearsed mechanical ballet, set to the whistling tune of the aircraft's power turbine and thumping to the tempo of aluminum cargo pallets clattering over steel rollers.

As pallet after pallet of boxed, stacked or containerized war materials slides off of the airlifter onto a waiting loader or forklift, thousands of gallons of fuel are flowing into it. It is a sequence the CRW has performed thousands of times.

Soon after the aircraft is fueled for its next leg and loaded with outgoing cargo, it closes its doors and moves on. But the small team of aerial porters keep working in the darkness by headlamp and if the situation requires it, night vision goggles, processing the tons of cargo left behind by the night's latest guest. In the staging yard a short distance from the parking ramp, cargo is downloaded and the pallets are unchained, unstrapped, unwrapped and taken apart. Within moments, the essential supplies are handed over to an Army transportation unit. They will distribute it directly to U.S. and Coalition Forces throughout northern Afghanistan.

When there are no more supplies to deliver to this remote location, or permanent aerial port facilities are stood up to replace the small Contingency Response Element, they will tear down their tents, wrap up all of the equipment and head home. Arriving back at home station, they will have just 72 hours to restock, repair and repack their gear and be ready to repeat the entire process.

It is missions like this that keep the wing and its 600 Airmen constantly deployed and in demand worldwide.

The McGuire-based unit was an initial part of the U.S Air Force response into Port-au-Prince, Haiti after the devastating 7.0 earthquake on Jan. 12. More than 100 mobility Airmen arrived less than 48-hours after the quake and immediately provided the overwhelmed international airport with a critically needed capacity to offload and process the tons of supplies already arriving constantly from worldwide donors. Just a few days after they arrived, the team was processing more than 150 aircraft through the small parking ramp every 24-hours.

When the Contingency Response unit handed over sustainment operations to the 24th Air Expeditionary Group 37 days later, the 621st Contingency Response Group had assisted with the delivery of more than 13,600 tons of relief supplies and assisted with the evacuation of more than 10,000 U.S. citizens.

"The CRW was created to be the Air Force's first choice when we need rapid global air mobility capacity anywhere in the world," said Col. Brian O'Connor, 621st CRW commander. "A look back into our short history leaves me with no doubt our wing will be given many more opportunities to excel."

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