

Delivering the Airbridge

The Tristars of 216 Squadron



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No 216 Squadron RAF was formed in 1918, and has roots even earlier. It was formed from No 16 Sqn Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), making it one of the oldest units in the RAF. The

Squadron has a history of global operations: it conducted operations from airfields in France during World War I; Egypt from 1919; Burma during World War II; Ancona in Italy during the Kosovo campaign and presently continues to support Op TELIC with an Air to Air Refuelling (AAR) detachment in Muscat, Oman.

In nearly a century of Squadron operations, it is perhaps the last five years that have seen the most change. The Squadron has evolved from a unit with routine embedded tasks to a squadron on the front line. Air stewards, engineers and pilots now leave home in the morning, and the same evening may suffer mortar attacks in Basra or Kabul. Two days later they are home again with their families. This may seem trivial to those who suffer these attacks on a regular basis and who spend six months deployed away from their families and friends. But what is challenging to the crews and families of 216 Sqn is that the weekly exposure to the high threat environments of Iraq since December 2004 and Afghanistan since March 2006 will be endured for the foreseeable future.

The airbridge to Kabul is the Squadron's main effort and its engineers work 24/7 to prepare the primary aircraft and a reserve for each sortie

A typical mission to Afghanistan entails the crew reporting two hours before departure. The air load master and air stewards prepare the aircraft while the pilots and the air engineer plan the sortie in detail, considering how much fuel can be uplifted from Kabul airfield, and whether or not any low pressure weather might affect the aircraft's performance departing Kabul.

After the intelligence briefing, we head out to the aircraft carrying our flak jackets and hard hats. The Defensive Aids Suite (DAS) is tested along with all the other more routine systems and with everything serviceable, we launch for Afghanistan.

The Squadron's mission is to deliver a thoroughly reliable airbridge. Despite some delays (due to an ageing airframe, limited availability of spares and the requirement for serviceable DAS), the vast majority of tasks run on time. The recent Relief in Place of No 3 Parachute Regiment by 45 Commando Royal Marines went to plan. All members of the Squadron (from ground engineers to aircrew to the Squadron Boss) are acutely aware of the importance of the task, and how any delays can directly impinge on an individual's leave or time in theatre. It is for this reason that wherever possible, missions to Afghanistan have a spare aircraft available as a back-up for the sortie.

The first five or six hours of the mission are relatively relaxed, but as we approach Afghan airspace things become less mundane. We switch from a civil controller in Turkmenistan to an American military controller, arm the DAS, don flak jackets and descend in preparation for our approach.

Our initial flight over Afghanistan reveals a beautiful country and few viewing the terrain from the flight deck can fail to be impressed

Gaping chasms thousands of feet deep with sparkling rivers marked with thin green lines of agriculture, stretch high into the sandy mountains marking a stark contrast to the harsh rocky crags, some well over 18,000 feet high. The austere beauty of the scenery is soon relegated to second place however, as we begin the approach into Afghanistan's capital.

Due to the mountainous terrain, groundbased communications are never reliable and the partially severed life line that radio contact offers means an even sharper lookout is required. Fast jets, small twin-engine aircraft, C-130s, old Antonovs, Gulfstreams, helicopters and even the odd Predator are all up in the air with us.

The Traffic alert and Collision Avoidance System (TCAS) is of huge benefit and greatly increases our situational awareness.

Further descent, with a good lookout and reference to TCAS just above the safety altitude, marks the start of the approach into Kabul. The airfield at Kabul is probably one of the most challenging and difficult airfields in the world in which to operate the TriStar — the aircraft has limited manoeuvrability unlike the C-17. With winter approaching, the weather starts to deteriorate, and thunderstorms develop around the airfield. As the mountains loom closer, it always seems slightly strange to fly an ex-civil airliner into such an unforgiving environment. But then, that's what we train for; to deliver the support to those on the ground fighting in the valleys of which we only have a glimpse. With checks complete, lookout maintained, and a wary eye for the terrain, we make our preparations for final approach. Flaps are deployed, gear is lowered and as we pass a peak several miles to the left and 1,000ft above us, we intercept the glide path. The workload remains high on the flight deck for the last five minutes of the approach. The co-pilot gives 'check-heights' every half mile, while the Captain maintains a high rate of descent (in the initial stages more than double that normally required) and keeps the aircraft on track, while the Air Engineer continues to monitor the whole approach. The Captain reduces the rate of descent in the final thousand feet and establishes the aircraft on our standard glide path. Touchdown brings no respite, as the aircraft must be stopped promptly at such a high altitude airfield, and all three engine reversers are quickly brought in. Brakes are applied at around 100kts, and we make the turn-off at the end of the runway

The taxi to parking is managed carefully as the taxiways are in poor condition, with crumbling tarmac at the edges, a particular concern for the TriStar with a heavier wheel loading than a Boeing 747.

Once the engines are shut down, the aircraft is readied for a rapid turn around. With the ever present risk of mortar or rocket attacks on the airfield, the passengers are off-loaded (more troops are moved into Afghanistan by 216 Sqn than by any other squadron in the RAF, or indeed the world) and the on-load and refuel started. With little of the equipment usually available at international airfields to support an aircraft as large as the TriStar, our engineers have developed procedures to become largely independent and quickly work to prepare the aircraft for the next leg.

Performance out of Kabul is critical, with only a small margin of error, so the take-off weight is vital and we set to work looking at the conditions of the day. There is a constant dust haze. The limited and unreliable airfield navigation aids mean that on takeoff the flight crew has to be visual with the 1,500ft ridge at the end of the runway so we can avoid it in the event of an engine failure.

The take-off from Kabul is at full power and we wring every last bit of performance from the engines. We climb faster than normal, to stay well clear of the terrain and to reduce to the minimum possible our exposure to surface-to-air threats. We head for RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, as this is much closer than RAF Brize Norton. We therefore need less fuel leaving Kabul and have more room for cargo. This ensures that every TriStar leaving theatre carries as many people back to the UK as possible. Once we have left Afghan airspace, there is always a feeling of relief that the most dangerous part of the mission is over. All that's left is to fly the final approach to RAF Akrotiri and hand the aircraft over to the next crew, who will then fly the passengers and cargo onward to the UK, sometimes via Germany.

Balancing all the mission risks in the context of military operations is a challenge and one that is reviewed constantly. Members of the Squadron are aware of the inherent risks, but the engineering support, training to flight crews, the DAS fit and the new tactics developed for Afghanistan all play their part in minimising possible hazards. These ensure that 216 Sqn has provided, and continues to deliver, a safe, effective and robust airbridge.

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