

# REACH

## A C-17 aircrew's dramatic flights during the fall of Kabul

BY JAN TEGLER | PHOTOS BY TECH SGT. AUSTIN KNOX, USAF



**ROUGHLY TWO HOURS AFTER LANDING** at Hamid Karzai International Airport on the afternoon of August 15, Major Thomas Sukut and the crew of a Boeing C-17A from the 6th Airlift Squadron, had an eerie feeling. The airport, nestled in the mountains of the Hindu Kush just over three miles from the center of Kabul, Afghanistan, was under attack.

Part international commercial airport, part military airfield, Hamid Karzai's ramp was littered with international airliners, coalition airlifters, helicopters, and Afghan Air Force aircraft, all rushing to get out of Afghanistan. Just a couple of hours before, operations at the field had been "relatively organized," Sukut says.

"And then air traffic control just left the tower," he remembers. "There was nobody controlling the airfield."

Members of the 6th Airlift Squadron crew who flew evacuation missions from Hamid Karzai International Airport on August 15 and 17. Left to right: Capt. Ian Watkins, Staff Sgt. Christopher Truty, Maj. Thomas Sukut, Capt. David Yi, Capt. Kevin Taylor, Master Sgt. Kristofer Mack, Tech. Sgt. Colton Desmarais.



As darkness approached, Sukut and his crew were stuck on the ramp, witness to the early stages of chaos that would overtake the airport in the most dramatic phase of "Operation Allies Refuge," the largest non-combatant evacuation operation airlift in U.S. history.

Home based at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst near Trenton, New Jersey as part of the 305th Airlift Wing, the crew and their "Moose," as the airlifter is affectionately nicknamed, was one of the more than 100 Globemasters—roughly half of the Air Force's entire C-17 force—committed to the airlift.

Between August 14 and August 30, crews and C-17s were pushed to the limit, transporting more than 124,000 people out of Kabul away from the horror of Taliban rule, flying with the call sign "Reach."

What happened over the next 24 hours made international news. The airfield was overrun and pictures began to emerge of refugees trying to board or cling to C-17s taking off. Some tragically fell to their deaths or were crushed by landing gear.

Four days earlier, the crew was preparing for a routine flight.

#### **2130 HOURS, AUGUST 12, 2021, JOINT BASE MCGUIRE-DIX-LAKEHURST**

Shortly before sunset, the crew—including aircraft commander and evaluator pilot Major Sukut, pilots/copilots Captains David Yi, Kevin Taylor, and Ian Watkins; loadmasters Master Sergeant Kristopher Mack and Technical Sergeant Colton Desmarais as well as Staff Sergeants Christopher Truty and Joseph Pashnik and Senior Airman Jonah Lomu—was readying for "a completely different mission" Sukut says.

"It was Captain Yi's check ride to be



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Aircraft commander Maj. Thomas Sukut sits in the pilot's seat of a C-17 at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst alongside copilot Capt. David Yi, with fellow copilots Capt. Ian Watkins on the left in the foreground and Capt. Kevin Taylor on the right in the foreground.

an aircraft commander and two of the loadmasters were getting check rides. It was just a standard, run-of-the-mill mission," he remembers.

"Then we got a phone call right before we started engines, saying 'Standby, we're working something else for you.'"

Watching the news and hearing rumors, the crew was aware that they could be called on to fly to Kabul. Sukut says, "We kind of anticipated it but it was still a surprise."

Already topped off with fuel for the previously scheduled mission, the crew was given a new flight plan by the Wing's operations center. They took off at sunset on the first leg of their mission, headed for Ramstein AFB, Germany.



Details of what they'd be doing weren't fully understood until they reached Ramstein.

"They told us, 'We're working on all of the materials for you guys. Just go and we'll figure it out,'" Captain Yi recalls. "That put us, and definitely me, in a state of unease. But you have no choice but to say, 'Alright. Let's get it done.'"

After a 12-hour crew rest period in Germany, they learned they would be heading to Hamid Karzai with troops and equipment to augment the security force already in place at the airport.

### APPROXIMATELY 1300 HOURS, AUGUST 15, KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

"Going in there was unremarkable," Sukut says. "I'd been there before. Nothing we'd heard along the way led me to believe that we were getting into anything different than what I'd experienced the last time I'd been to Kabul."

But clues that things were changing began to emerge. As the crew closed in on the airport, they realized there were a number of aircraft "stacked up in a hold" waiting to land.

"There was limited ramp space for landing aircraft," Sukut notes. "Then it started to sink in: This is different. There's a whole lot more going on here. We need to be prepared for anything."

"I wasn't flying at the time," Captain Watkins remembers. "I was listening on the radios. There was a disabled aircraft on the field for a while. It was a weird feeling sitting there in the cockpit just waiting to go land and see what would happen."

Forty minutes later, they touched down and the crew waited another half hour for a parking space to open up on the ramp. Sukut describes the scene as "an international airport that happened to be very busy" with lots of civilian traffic on one side and military aircraft on the other.

The pilots ran through their engine shutdown checklist, began crunching a new flight plan for their departure, and determined how much fuel they'd have to take on while the loadmasters offloaded the troops and equipment and prepared to load "40 to 50 coalition personnel looking to get out and some equipment" TSgt. Demarais explained.



**Major Thomas Sukut:** "I remember after landing, off-loading those passengers, standing in the cockpit looking out the window and just seeing how little some of these people had with them. They left everything. That was rough."

## FLASHBACKS

While the crew was fortunate not have gone through the worst of the chaos at Hamid Karzai, they did experience high stress and were, like many other C-17 crews, moved by what they saw. We asked them what they'll remember most.

**Captain Ian Watkins:** "I have two memories. When the base was being attacked and all of the helicopters were in there. I got to watch them launch in every direction. I felt like it was out of a movie."

"On the second mission, it was the care and handling of the refugees at the airport and me sitting in the cockpit seeing a little girl who looked very similar to my daughter. She stared right at me and waved at me. I don't think I'll ever forget that."

**Captain Kevin Taylor:** "One of the fathers had five children with him, all smaller than his hip line. In broken English, he touched his heart and said, 'You saved them.'"

"To give them a better chance at life like we'd do for any other kid around the world—that was the biggest thing for me."



**Master Sergeant Kristopher Mack:** "My mind goes back to the kids, looking around the cargo compartment, playing around and just being entertained by the aircraft, smiling and dancing with their buddies. That's ingrained."





Staff Sgt. Christopher Truty, one of the load-masters who carefully packed 270 refugees aboard the 6th Airlift Squadron's C-17.

"Time began to stretch out on the ramp" Sukut says, as they waited to find out exactly what they'd be taking aboard and when they could get fuel.

"We were aware that the security situation was deteriorating," he adds. "The base perimeter held but at that point they halted all of the civilian airline traffic. Nobody was allowed to taxi or depart."

Sukut says the airliners "just sat" periodically making requests for "some kind of departure but there was no one there to give them any clearance."

Eventually a U.S. military member grabbed a hand-held radio and "started to try to control things on the airfield" he added, noting that it's not unusual for C-17 crews to fly to and from uncontrolled airports. "Everybody just kind of defaulted to that."

But the situation was growing tense. U.S. and NATO forces were moving quickly to try and get control of the airport while Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police dispersed and stopped patrolling the area.

"It was very chaotic even with none of the airliners continuing to fly," Sukut explains. "There were still military aircraft coming in and it was getting darker."



Tech. Sgt. Colton Desmarais said the process of bringing refugees, ranging in age from toddlers to the elderly, aboard the C-17 was "relatively orderly."

Captains Yi and Taylor had been trying to rest in the "crew box" aft of the flight deck to be fresh for the flight out of Kabul. They awoke to news that the field was under attack. Yi says the civilian airliners abided by the ground hold "for just a little while."

"I believe they just decided, 'Screw this. We want to leave.' There was a line of six or seven aircraft trying to take the runway. These were foreign national crews so there's a language barrier and they were saying, 'Hey, we're taking off on 29 right now!'"

"We were aggressively announcing our intentions every time we moved our aircraft," Sukut stresses. "I wasn't about to contribute to a smoking hole in the ground."

He says communications from the airliners and other aircraft were "unclear or not even made" as they fled, adding to the hectic situation. "The Afghan Air Force also mixed in, taking off," Sukut adds. He didn't know their intentions but the airport was the Afghan Air Force's main base. Its pilots were departing fast with "Cessnas and [Embraer] A-29 Super Tucanos."

The crew finally took to Runway 29 as the sun set. Captain Taylor donned night-vision goggles to make sure the arrival and departure ends of the 11,519 foot runway were clear.





The 88-foot-long cargo compartment of a C-17 filled with refugees sitting mostly on the floor during a flight out of Kabul, Afghanistan. (Photo courtesy of the USAF)

Below: An Afghan child takes refuge under a C-17 crewman's uniform top. (Photo by 1st Lt. Mark Lawson, USAF)



was turning into but they said, 'Let's just get our butts on the ground and help out as best we can.'"

#### **APPROXIMATELY 1400 HOURS, AUGUST 17, ON APPROACH TO HAMID KARZAI**

After several hours of crew rest at their destination, Sukut and his crew awoke on Monday August 16 to the news and videos that shocked viewers globally.

"Seeing some of the some of the decisions our crews had to make ... that was rough," Sukut remembers.

The aircraft commander and his crew were on alert status.

Heavily loaded with fuel, cargo, and passengers, the pilots took confidence in the Moose's power and short field capabilities. With the throttles to the stops, the airplane's four Pratt & Whitney F117-PW-100 turbofan engines can provide a maximum 161,760 pounds of thrust.

"We had a lot of cargo and we were at a very high pressure altitude, so our concern was making sure we were able to climb enough to clear the obstacles, Sukut notes.

The aircraft used "a lot of runway," he says. Fortunately the weather was clear and the pilots "could fly visually between a couple peaks to make sure the terrain wasn't going to win that one."

Relieved to be heading away from Kabul, the crew communicated with several inbound C-17s, giving them a picture of what they were getting into.

Among the aircraft heading for Hamid Karzai was a Moose flown by another 6th AS crew. Watkins says they tried to contact them on a C-17 common frequency but were unable to reach them.

"They elected to land," he recalls. "I thought that was really admirable, knowing what they knew. They understood what this

Thirteen hours into their "legal for alert" time, they got the call. "We knew exactly what we were going to do," Sukut says. "Go back in and take some more people and equipment out of there."

With the situation at the airport unstable, the crew quickly made a plan.

"Down in the cargo compartment we discussed multiple ways that we'd conduct business and who would be doing what," MSgt Mack explains. "Even though the information was changing, it seemed like everyone knew what they were going to do."

The loadmasters had to work out how to take on an unknown number of refugees with safety as the highest priority. The people loaded into the airlifter would have to sit on its floor.

Even with 15 years of experience as a loadmaster, Mack was apprehensive. "I had done some floor-loaded personnel movement before, but nothing quite like this. I was just concerned with getting the mission accomplished, getting people aboard, and treating them with dignity and care. How would I want one of my family members to be treated?"

Launching on Tuesday morning, Sukut and his crew arrived over Kabul in early afternoon to a very different scene.

"Visibility was garbage," he recalls. "Looking near and around the airfield there were a lot of fires burning and a lot of dust in the air."

Still, his impression was one of comparative calm given the chaos that had overtaken the field 24 hours earlier. "I won't say it was uneventful but the security situation had been remedied mostly. But it was eerie."

"When we landed the pits between the taxiways were filled with hunkered down Marines, securing the airfield itself," Yi says.

Some combination of air traffic controllers had been brought in and despite what Sukut says were "lots of helicopters flying around the field contributing to the security situation," the crew didn't have to wait to land or find ramp space.

Once parked, the crew and a security team they had embarked to "provide additional security for the aircraft" got right to work, Sukut says.

He adds, "We had briefed ad-nauseum on the way in for much of the three hour flight. We had all kinds of contingency plans. We were preparing for anything."

Scanning the ramp, they saw other American airlifters and aircraft from coalition nations boarding refugees. The pilots quickly turned their aircraft for

departure, substituting one flight plan for another. Having "tankered" enough internal fuel for their round trip, the C-17 didn't need to refuel this time.

TSgt Desmarais and the other loadmasters broke the 88-foot long cargo compartment into thirds, depositing any items the refugees were carrying at the back of the compartment and making sure, those boarding "were supposed to be there and were cleared."

He says the process was "relatively orderly" but lengthy, with little fuss over where people would be sitting. It took three and a half hours to bring 270 people aboard, more than twice the standard load of 102 troops/paratroopers the Moose is normally configured

for. Ranging in age from toddlers to the elderly, nearly all had never left the ground before.

"We were definitely under the impression that a lot of these people probably had never been this close to an aircraft, much less flown on one before," Sukut notes. "So we were trying to do everything in our power to make sure they were as comfortable possible given all of the extenuating circumstances."

Departing Hamid Karzai as sunset descended was "a little

less stressful" than it had been on Sunday evening, Yi says. "We used the same procedures we used Sunday, departing tactically and getting out of there."

The flight to Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar was relatively uneventful, Sukut says, with just one hiccup—a non-working bathroom.

"You can imagine getting that many people in that small an area for that period of time," he says. "It's going to happen. We did what we could to take care of it and we got them to the next location."

Over the course of their eight day mission, the crew slept three times.

"It was a testament to the training we do," Sukut concludes, explaining that non-combatant evacuation is one of the mission sets C-17 crews train for regularly, including "tactical approaches, landings, and departures, and landing on NVGs."

"The difference here was how rapidly the situation changed," he says. "That was surprising."

The crew expressed pride and satisfaction at having pulled off a humanitarian evacuation in dangerous circumstances with an added kicker: "The fact that we were able to accomplish this extremely dynamic and complex mission while completing three check-rides was incredible," Sukut says. →

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