



# The Airfield is **CLOSED!**

*The skid mark told the tale of where we touched down ...*

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Photo by Sgt. Jason Heisch

I've always read the "there I was ..." first hand accounts of mishaps with a sort of distant reverence for the mishap writer, never thinking I might be writing the next edition. But, things can turn ugly fast, illustrating the need for constant vigilance on the flight deck and at all crew positions when flying a plane.

So here's my story. There I was, sitting in the right seat of my favorite airplane, the mighty Herc, on my first combat mission in the Stans. Tonight was the real deal; everything I'd trained for was coming to fruition, complete with tracer fire and maybe a few rockets being launched down there in the dark void of Afghanistan.

We left the comforts of home exactly a week prior, and it's possible some of us were suffering some remnants of jet lag. We definitely had a few nervous jitters brought on by the unknown of what or who was down there waiting for us to fly overhead.

Our first stop was Kandahar for normal download/upload of cargo and then on to Bagram. We'd been briefed on the condition of the runway at Kandahar as being "the worst runway you'll ever land on." It was, but they don't call it the Hercules for nothing. Our mission, after all, is beans and bullets to the guys at the front. You call; we haul anytime, anywhere! The landing part wasn't so bad, and as we slowed down, the runway seemed to smooth out.

The takeoff, however, was a different story. As we got to rotate speed, the bumps were worse than I'd ever experienced, and I've been on a departure from the snow packed ski-way at the South Pole.

We all felt a significant bump as we rotated, and the shimmy of the gear in the wells was more pronounced than what we were all used to. We put the gear in the wells, the fillings popped back in our teeth, and we began the spiral up to altitude.

After we got to altitude, we prepped for the descent into Bagram, where the runway was supposedly a lot smoother. We were on night vision goggles, and the pilot briefed the descent and landing profile, just like we practiced back home for such an occasion. The pilot descended on a

normal glide path, normal sink rate, and touched down about 800 feet past brick one.

As a testament to the pilot's skill, I never felt a pull to the left or anything else that would indicate anything but a normal touchdown. When we passed through about 100 knots, as per normal procedure, I took the yoke, and the pilot pulled the throttles into the ground range. Immediately, the plane started to pull to the left. At 90 knots we heard an expletive over the interphone. Simultaneously, around 80 knots, an Electronic Locator Beacon (ELT) began chirping in our ears. Another expletive was followed by the pilot stating we had a blown tire on the left and the Loadmaster (LM) saying he saw something hanging from the right trailing edge of the wing.

We continued working in a coordinated effort to bring the airplane safely to a stop on the runway so we could get out of it. Using the brakes on the right side and nose wheel steering, the pilot brought our C-130 to a stop on centerline about 3,500 feet from where we touched down.

Here's where one of the most important lessons I learned in pilot training came into play. A lesson learned from Ol' Cap'n Shenk back in Columbus, when he asked me who was more important to aviation: Bernouli or Marconi? The lesson being aviate first and then communicate later.

I got in what seemed to be a 10-minute, highly contested conversation with tower over our current situation. They wanted us to clear at Echo, and I told them we were unable on account of us not having any tires on the left side of the airplane anymore. I told tower we were shutting down on the runway, and they told us to clear the runway.

Tower asked if we were requesting a progressive taxi, and I replied in the negative that we had to shut down on the runway. They proceeded to clear us again to taxiway Echo, and I pulled out the trump card I should've played immediately upon the airplane grinding to a halt. I declared the emer-



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Photo by TSgt Justin D. Pyle

gency, told them the nature of the emergency, and asked them to roll the fire trucks.

At this point I had to go back to aviating, and I feathered all four engines, the pilot sounded the alarm bell, the Nav grabbed the fire extinguisher and a first aid kit, the Flight Engineer executed his duties, and the LMs led our two passengers out the crew entrance door. The plane was listing to the left as we all raced out like it was a burning building. The passengers headed straight for the grass, and we quickly got them back on the pavement because we didn't know if they had swept the infield for mines. We rallied up 300 feet off the nose as briefed before takeoff, watched out for the emergency equipment, counted noses, and began discussing what had happened. As the fire trucks were rolling, the night DO got there at about the same time to see what we had done to shut his runway down.

The skid marks told the tale of where we touched down, when the tire blew, and how well the pilot maintained centerline. The airplane sat for about 16 hours and effectively shut down operations until we got it fixed, a conundrum if there ever was one. We couldn't get it moved until parts could be



flown in, and parts couldn't be flown in until it was moved.

The lessons learned in our little escapade are that things can go to hell in a hand basket real quick. And, it's not just bad guys and bullets that you need to be wary of. Just because you're in a war zone doesn't mean the airplane miraculously stops breaking. We hadn't been shot, which was the first thing that popped into my mind when I felt the airplane snaking its way back and forth over the centerline and hearing the LM saying he saw something hanging off the right side. Rather, the tire had a mechanical failure.

We were all geared up for the anti-aircraft artillery and Manned Portable Anti-Aircraft Defense threats on the ground, and each of us breathed a little sigh of relief and let our guard down when we felt the gear touch down. The blown tires and subsequent ELT (which was ours and we can't figure out why) was the wake-up call that brought us all right back in the game.

Another lesson I learned was once the airplane stops, the emergency isn't magically over. I was still pumped full of adrenaline and had a hard time articu-

lating to the tower the nature of our plight. This illustrated yet another lesson, the need to heed basic Crew Resource Management training: speak clearly and concisely and make affirmative statements all the time.

The egress went smoothly but highlighted the importance of being prepared. We should've briefed the passengers, and the crew for that matter, not to depart the paved surface should the need arise to egress. We should have thought more fully about where we were going and emphasized what we might need to do differently than normal.



The final lesson is, if space allows, throw an extra pair of underwear, a toothbrush, and a few overnight amenities in your flight kit before leaving the home 'drome. You never know when you'll get stuck out on the road.

This entire situation reminded me of the words of wisdom my dad imparted on me years earlier. Back in the 70s flying off carriers in Vietnam he said they had far more operational casualties than any the bad guys inflicted upon them. Sometimes, we can be our own worst enemy. ▶