

Christmas in

By GySgt. Andrew Gates



Loading or unloading aircraft can be hazardous.

Christmas Eve was a day I never will forget. As the flight line chief for HMLA-369, I had to supervise the loading of an AH-1W and UH-1N on a C-17 Globemaster for movement from Al Taqadum Airbase to Al Asad Airbase. It would be an experience that would teach even us old-timers a few lessons.

The loading and movement to Al Asad was uneventful. Once at the airbase, the aircraft had to be unloaded and prepared for subsequent reloading on a C-5 Galaxy for a flight to Cherry Point, N.C. for high-level repairs. An event of this nature never is routine, and that guy Murphy made sure this move wouldn't be easy.

The normal steps would have to be considered: weight of the helos, angles for movement and storage, and removal of certain aircraft components to make sure the aircraft weren't damaged. My vigilance and stress level always rises when I'm assigned such important jobs, and it stays that way until the job is done.

With the first phase complete and all aircraft loaded and off to Al Asad, my team and I headed back to the spaces to drop off our gear and ATAF our tools. Trying to enjoy Christmas Eve while deployed in Iraq always is a tough job. But Christmas morning would prove even tougher.

I faced a less-than-pleasant situation as soon as I reached the maintenance spaces. I was told the UH-1N had been damaged as it was offloaded in Al Asad. My first guess was that one of the main rotor blades had come loose and struck the inside of the C-17 cabin. As pictures and more e-mails poured in, I would find that the truth, unfortunately, wasn't that simple.

During the offload, a winch was used to control the speed of the aircraft being rolled down the ramp. It freewheeled, and the aircraft sped at an uncontrollable rate toward the end of the ramp, slamming into the deck. The ensuing impact caused the skids to collapse, separating the tail boom at the mounting lugs. The aircraft still was partly inside the C-17. It would remain



Controlling offload speed and alignment of the helo is critical.



When precautions aren't taken, damage like this can occur.



Creative Marines rigged a sled-like platform to move the helo.

that way until a team of Marines could to fly from Al Taqaddum to Al Asad, assess the situation, and come up with a game plan to remove the aircraft from the C-17.

Once that team returned from Al Asad, we assembled QA, DSS, the MMCO, and four hard-charging Marines to help with the effort to remove the aircraft. Once in Al Asad, we assembled the maintenance team, and gathered the tools required to complete the job. In my 16 years of service, I had never seen anything like this before and wanted to make sure it was done correctly.

The aircraft was positioned in such a way that we couldn't lift it with a crane or tow it. The tail boom was crushed upward, and the aircraft was at such an odd angle that we were afraid to move it. First, we chained down the Huey from the front to prevent it from falling out of the aircraft and then secured it with more tie downs, preparing to remove the tail boom. Since there was no manual for removal of stuck aircraft, we had to get creative and do this job safely. The best course of action we came up with included a forklift, railroad ties, Air Force pallets, cargo straps, and a little luck. Essentially, we built a sleigh for the aircraft body with the above items, placing these items in key weight- and load-bearing areas. Three hours later, we had wrestled the aircraft off of the C-17 with no further damage to either airframe.

Maintainers are trained from day one to do by-the-book maintenance. In our case, we had to make do with experience and ingenuity. The key to making this evolution safe and effective was teamwork, planning and communication. Like any other day out here, the goal was to make sure everyone came back in one piece. ✈️

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