

Operation UNDERHILL – UK Air Dispatch operations in Gaza

First-hand account by Cpl T Conroy

47 Air Despatch Squadron RLC is based at RAF Brize Norton, a detachment of 13 Air Assault Support Regiment based at Merville Barracks, Colchester. We are a high readiness Squadron supporting all 16 Air Assault Brigade units and UK Special Forces whilst remaining on standby for any national Search and Rescue (SAR) requirement. Personnel are trained to the highest standards to respond quickly and efficiently to any allocated task. With the recent retirement of the Hercules C130J, 47 Air Despatch Squadron has worked incredibly hard with the Royal Air Force to develop the Atlas A400M to fulfil the air drop requirement. Being able to deliver aid from the A400m on the world stage, presents a massive opportunity to showcase the UK's air dispatch capability.

21 Feb 2024: "UK AID SUPPLIES AIRDROP INTO GAZA FOR FIRST TIME" BBC News

Having seen the October 7th attack and watching the Israel- Hamas War unfold, the situation for the local population was clearly shocking. The ensuing high intensity war has destroyed Gaza. Famine had begun to set in with multinational Aid being restricted by Israel. With world news at the tips of my fingers, I opened BBC news to see UK Aid had been airdropped by the Jordanian Air Force. Seeing this news reminded me of the Squadron's 2014 Humanitarian Air Drop into Mount Sinjar¹ on Op SHADER. The similarities between Mt Sinjar to the Gaza situation opened the opportunity for 47 Air Despatch Squadron to assist and enhance the Jordanian airdrop effort.

The BBC article highlighted the continuing challenge to get humanitarian aid into Gaza, emphasised by the UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron where:

"Thousands of patients will benefit and the fuel will enable this vital hospital to continue its life saving work.

"However, the situation in Gaza is desperate and significantly more aid is needed - and fast. We are calling for an immediate humanitarian pause to allow additional aid into Gaza as quickly as possible and bring hostages home.

With troops on standby for contingency operations such as this, individuals understood they could be deploying at very short notice. The Squadron began to prepare air drop equipment ready from any potential rapid deployment to assist the Jordanian Air Force.

24 Feb - 06 March 2024: The Waiting Game

For 2 weeks, personnel from 47 Air Despatch Squadron were stood up at high readiness in order to fulfil a tasking directed by PJHQ and HMG. An advance party boarded a flight to Jordan to assess the situation on the ground and gain an understanding of what input UK Air Despatch capability could add. With this development, the UK initially donated over 500 parachutes to the Jordanian forces to be used. We also sent a small crew to deliver a Short Term Training Team (STTT) package to assist the Jordanian forces with installing UK donated parachutes. Remaining individuals, now held at a higher state of readiness, continued to watch the situation develop on UK news outlets and eagerly awaited the call forward to assist international efforts in dropping humanitarian aid into Gaza. This would be the first operational use of the A400M to conduct air drop operations; the last UK air



Figure 1- 47 AD SP deploying to Cyprus on standby. Photo taken by LCpl Gillison

17s and C-130Hs, an Australian C-130J, and a British C-130J delivered supplies to mostly Yazidi civilians stranded on Mount Sinjar.^[1]

drop into an active warzone was from a C130J Hercules for Op SHADER into Mount Sinjar 2014. Little did we know this would be the start of the largest multi-national air drop mission.

For days, the Squadron maintained its heightened readiness and continued to work toward the goal of assisting the international effort into Gaza. Then, finally, we mounted a C17 flying out of RAF Brize Norton on the 6th March 2024 into RAF Akrotiri, Cyprus. Troops began to believe the days of standby would come to fruition and the trade we all dearly love would be used for a good cause.

However, upon arriving in Cyprus we received news that the operation had not been approved – the risk of dropping aid by air was considered to be too high risk. This decision wasn't made easily, the intelligence suggested the Drop Area was overrun with the local population, the UK couldn't risk lives by dropping aid onto an overcrowd area. This development dampened our spirits and left JNCO's to maintain morale while the senior leadership team worked out a suitable risk mitigation plan to forward to higher headquarters.

We all understood that airdrop was not the most cost-effective method of delivering aid to the people of Gaza, and that more sustainable means were being investigated. However, with road convoys being blocked at the border, the view from the team was "If we can't be used for this, why do we continuously train day in day out?"

JNCOs rallied the troops and began planning continuation training to maintain focus. Lessons like SERE, rigging, and map reading were held to refresh troops knowledge, all having the understanding that this content may be essential on the ground if called forward.

Troops continued to watch the situation develop with a keen interest, with news articles and media showing the devastation and famine beginning to set in. All the news looked negative with Main Supply Routes (MSRs) being closed, aid trucks being overrun, and the idea of establishing a temporary port unlikely to bear fruit for weeks. Of course, troops had the desire to airdrop stores, but as a collective we thought any solution was better than nothing. The UK had also sent aid via a vessel leaving from Cyprus, so we waited to hear the outcome of this development.

Finally, after a few weeks held in the Cyprus Reception Centre, we got the call to move forward to Amman, Jordan. All equipment, personal kit and personnel were loaded onto a A400M and flown the short 350km journey into King Abdullah II Air Base (KAAB), Jordan.

20- 21 March 2024: The Set Up

Having landed in KAAB, Jordan at 2100 hours local, troops felt a slight sense of the unknown. We were greeted by members of the forward team and British embassy staff who had worked tirelessly with other nations to secure our support and a suitable rigging area for the team to operate efficiently. We started by unloading all the Aerial Delivery Equipment (ADE) into a designated hangar to ensure work could start immediately following a short rest. The conditions in the hangar were sub-standard, however this was expected. Rigging Containers requires a lot of space, and finding a rigging area at short notice was no easy task for the forward team. Working with the other nations and the Jordanian Air Force, the space provided was nothing like our hangar back at RAF Brize Norton, but for the mission the team remained flexible and made the best of the space available. We also couldn't believe the scale of aid waiting to be rigged. We were aware from our briefs back in Cyprus of the quantities waiting to be rigged, however, no one envisaged how full the hangar would be with rice, baby powder, oil, Meals Ready to Eat (MRE's) and flour - all essential items that were desperately needed on the ground. Our brief was to rig 12 containers a day in order to fulfil our first few drops scheduled with the other nations. Having been delayed in Cyprus for a few weeks, other



Figure 2- SP and equipment arriving in Kaab, Jordan on A400M. Photo taken by LCpl Gillison

nations like Singapore were already established in the hangar and had been conducting air drops with the other nations. To facilitate this, Jordan, Egypt, USA, and UAE had secured alternate rigging areas in Jordan and around the Middle East. While working alongside Singapore, we compared and exchanged valuable rigging techniques and experiences. Although exchanging experiences was possible, it was difficult to exchange equipment. Singapore's aerial deliver equipment is very different to UK equipment, meaning working together was not possible. Rigging side by side with other nations for the same end goal was interesting and showed that each nation operates differently.

After the rigging area was established, we all began the 40-minute transit to Amman to take over the accommodation. Safe to say, at 2230 hrs I didn't think the roads would be so busy but, oh, how wrong was I. We had arrived in Jordan in the middle of Ramadan, an experience that I will never forget. One of the Embassy staff, was aware of the road conditions and traffic and guided us through like a true local, navigating cars pulling out at every junction (regardless of right of way) and 3 lanes of traffic on single-lane, one-way streets. Jordan was pure chaos to drive in and the next morning would be our turn at the wheel.

21 - 24 March 2024: *Rig till your eyes bleed.*

After a few hours' sleep, troops began to surface for breakfast. With everyone understanding the task at hand, we quickly collected vehicle keys and assigned drivers that felt confident driving after witnessing the roads the previous night. All the forward teams briefed the selected drivers on how to drive in country, but you got the feeling anything goes if you get there safely. One by one the vehicles set off heading to KAAB ready to battle the traffic. Let's just say the driving is an experience like none other. Some of the troops had driven in Oman, Kenya, and other busy cities around the world but this topped the charts.



Figure 3- CDS container rigged within dimensions with the Aid. photo taken by Cpl Conroy

Once we all arrived safely in the rigging area, everyone got changed and swiftly started assessing the aid. Troops have trained day-in day-out for this moment and finally there was an opportunity to do something beneficial to help others in need. Sticking to the strict tolerances and guidance, the Despatch Crew Commander's (DCC) developed a rigging plan to follow. Once everyone was happy with the method, troops started a rigging station and rigged container after container until simply, we had run out of aid.

Every box contained different aid, so calculating the exact weights and dimensions had to be done before constructing the loads. This saved us time during the rigging as troops had a set configuration to follow and knew it would be within tolerances. Safe to say, no one wanted to stop and within the first 14-hour day, a solid 16 containers had been rigged ready to drop into Gaza. Throughout the day we had different

nationalities coming to inspect our loads. All were very impressed with the amount of aid under one parachute, they couldn't believe it when they saw we were able to drop 750- 970 kg containers, compared to their 250- 450 Kg containers. This was many people's first experience working alongside other nations' armed forces, let alone another military's Air Despatchers - like minded individuals with interest in our trade.

The rigging continued at pace for days, and the aid kept coming! Day after day containers were rigged and the stack of aid seemed to stay the same. Morale stayed high and the work continued – sustained by a real understanding of the situation in Gaza and how much this aid would mean to the people on the ground.

24-25 March 2024: Green on... or maybe not.

Troops had spent days preparing for the first drop, all the aid neatly packed, parachutes connected, and barriers fitted. Every detail had been checked and rechecked. A flying crew was selected for the first drop, a task very difficult for the ops team but all felt happy with the choice and the rest of the team understood their turn to fly would come soon. After a smooth loading process everyone was eager to go, flying briefs were conducted but we had a problem. After doing everything we could to get to this point, the problem was something, unfortunately, we couldn't control. While we practice airdrop operations in the UK daily, these drops are completed under the command of a qualified DZNCO (Drop Zone Non-Commissioned Officer) onto an authorised drop zone (DZ). Run by an experienced Junior Non Commissioned Officer (JNCO) with an understanding of the risk involved. However, this is not the case for a live airdrop into Gaza. Although the Drop Areas (DA) were authorised, approved, and deconflicted amongst the other nations, with no DZNCO this area was effectively uncontrolled. The civilian population observed on our DA made dropping safely a difficult, almost impossible task. The risk was deemed to be too high.

While the importance of this mission was very high, the UK's risk threshold, rightly, didn't permit us to drop onto an overcrowded and uncontrolled DA, therefore drop number one was grounded. The crew exited the aircraft only to see all the other nations take off, one by one to complete the mission at hand.

This set back started some serious conversations with our American partners to work out a suitable solution to help us complete this mission successfully. With all the UK's ISTAR assets already assigned to other taskings, borrowing the American link was the only option. Essentially with no DZNCO on the ground to control the DA, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR) overwatch is the safest way to deliver stores.

Following this first set back, the US had kindly offered to assist and provided an ISTAR feed. The clock reset, we planned to reattempt the drop in 24 hrs.

With improved safety measures in place and all nations happy with the plan, the next day went very smoothly. We didn't need to load, as it had already been sorted the day before and the same crew prepared for the drop. Again, the entire crew continued to rig more aid into containers ready for subsequent drops, while we waited for the crew to take off in stick order. Finally, we watched the UK A400M take off, hoping that the next time we saw the aircraft it would have completed its objective.

During the wait for their return, we rigged more and more containers only stopping for short breaks to get our breath back and eat food. Of course, during Ramadan this was difficult, and we continued to respect the local customs by shielding ourselves not to cause any disrespect to the Jordanian forces working alongside us.

Finally, the aircraft returned, troops anxiously awaiting the crew getting off. From the smiles on faces, we knew the job had been completed successfully.

27-28 March 2024: The Delay

After the first drop our spirits were high and the team was ready to continue building more containers until we physically couldn't rig anymore aid. *Whilst the aid was simple enough to construct, the weight was the issue. When dropping into Gaza the minimum the drop heights was higher than our standard operating procedure due to the threat level, this also meant that the containers needed to be heavier to achieve a minimum weight to enable the parachutes to open sufficiently. Heavy aid was needed, not just by us, but all nations.*



Figure 4- Photo taken from Defence Imagery. Photo Taken by AS1 Leah Jones

Luckily, one of the Jordanian military officers was only a few hundred metres away in the Jordanian rigging area. He was brilliant at delivering whatever we requested or needed, so when we asked for aid... we got aid. Pallets and pallets of flour, water, and rice arrived within hours of asking.



Figure 5- 47 AD Sqn rigging area in Kaab, Jordan. Photo taken by Cpl Conroy

With the first drop being a success, the USAF and RAF were keen to continue dropping, however we still needed to observe the DA with ISTAR which we simply didn't have, relying on the Americans to provide the link. Luckily, they understood this and were happy to help but we had to wait for them to drop on the same day, meaning we had a delay between drops.

The second drop was planned for the 29 March, with a large number of nations planning to drop the same day. Again, we followed a natural rhythm that the Squadron had become accustomed to; rig, rig, rig to hopefully get a few days off between drops.

29 March – 8 Apr: *Rhythm and Routine.*

After the short delay we successfully completed the second airdrop into Gaza. Another Block of 8 containers on SC15 parachutes.

Troops had the routine down to a tee, rig, load, fly, rig, and finally sleep. The days were long, but we all understood the task ahead.

However, questions were being asked about the longevity of this effort, when will the Squadron run out of equipment? When will the parachutes run out? All questions that needed answering to ensure this humanitarian effort would continue with UK assistance.

The senior team began talks with other nations and planned the potential use of a Low Cost, Low Velocity (LCLV) parachute. Normally trialling new equipment is a job given to JADTEU (Joint Air Delivery Trial Evaluation Unit) back in the UK at Brize Norton, a unit a few of the team had been posted to before. These trials often take months, sometimes years, to complete, and currently, with the handover from Hercules to A400M still being conducted, this could be an issue.

For days we continued to maintain the same routine. We waited for clearance to rig more CDS (Container Delivery Systems) and then got to work. More and more aid arrived, and more and more ADE was flown in from the UK to help maintain the operation. I remember coming into work knowing we could rig nothing until equipment arrived on the aircraft coming via Cyprus. With everything ready to go, we waited patiently for the A400M to land in KAAB. Finally, it landed, the pallets kindly offloaded by the Norwegians. Like ants the troops began stripping pallets looking for the equipment needed most.



Figure 6- 16 SP from 47 AD Sqn deployed to Jordan for the Operation Photo taken by Wo2 Dibbs

It was amazing to see such dedication from the team, the eagerness to rig and continue the aid operation was very impressive. We started off rigging 2 containers every 1:45 hrs and with all the hard work and knowledge gained, that time quickly began to decrease. We had shocked ourselves with the number of containers being rigged so quickly by so few. We were now rigging 8 in 3 hrs, which shows the experience the troops had gained from this deployment, was paying off. Troops were keen to do the job and get aid into Gaza. With tensions rising in the Middle East and the situation not improving on the news, we wanted to continue dropping, but without LCLV parachutes cleared, we couldn't.

9 April 2024: *Eid Mubarak.*

With LCLV now approved for operational use, The day had finally come. For Eid, 10 nations planned to drop together making it the largest multinational airdrop operation in history. The importance of this drop was significant for a number of reasons, not least because the SC15 parachutes were beginning to run low and if this LCLV drop wasn't successful it would have serious consequences for us as a Squadron, and of course the people on the ground. With this drop effectively being an operational trial, we followed all the JADTEU guidance to record and ensure a smooth delivery. SSgt Moore, a seasoned Qualified Air Despatch Instructor (QADI), flew with the crew to oversee the drop and give the crew confidence in the new equipment being tested on UK loads. Of course, other nations had used these parachutes, but this was a first for us and we didn't want to compromise the mission.

With everything loaded, we took off and began the transit to the holding pattern located over the Mediterranean Sea. Once all nations were in place, we built the stick order together and nations started the run in to their selected drop areas, counting down the timings into the drop area:

4 minutes – stood at the end of the Live load, the ramp and door opened. Gaza on my left and the med sea on my right. A sight very hard to describe but from that moment I felt immense pride in my job, this wasn't just a routine drop onto Salisbury plain on a Tuesday. This was live. Helping people in need. A thought that we had all had on the ground in Jordan, but it become real to me in that moment in the air.

2 minutes was called. Returning to the front of the aircraft the crew waited for the drop. Again, counting down.

...30 seconds...

...YELLOW ON...

...GREEN ON...

The load began its journey down toward the ramp. Each ERG (electromechanical release gate) fired off perfectly, leaving a short gap between loads to allow the parachutes to inflate. The crew followed the load down to the edge of the ramp, ensuring nothing jammed and all loads exited the aircraft safely. The DCC gave a thumbs up signal, he could see 12 fully inflated parachutes descending into Gaza.

We knelt on the ramp and watched the descent, seeing the situation on the ground clearly for ourselves. We saw vehicles and personnel moving quickly into the DA, focused on one load, desperately hoping to get there first to strip the contents. We didn't think we would be able to see the movement on the DA from our height, but the desperation on the ground was clear to see. Again, bringing to life the situation and seeing it first hand, not on media reports.

Of course, with 12 good parachutes the LCLV drop was classed as successful. This was a massive moment for us as it meant we could continue our efforts in Gaza. With no viable alternative to get aid into Gaza, air drop was the only source of aid and the UK could now conduct further drops.

13 - 20 April 2024: Iranian Missile Strike - *Is this really happening?*

With the humanitarian mission going well, our spirits were high, and we had a good working routine. With more successful drops and rigging getting faster and faster, the troops began to understand each configuration like it was normal routine work. Then we checked the news. Tensions between

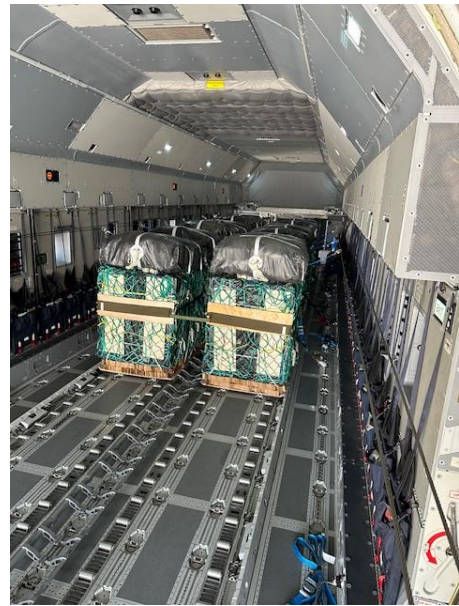


Figure 7- CDS containers installed onto the a400m ready for Airdrop. Photo taken by Cpl Conroy

Iran and Israel were rising daily, but no one predicted what would come next. Having worked tirelessly to get ahead of schedule, the troops had all gathered for some well-deserved down time, none the wiser to the unfolding situation on the news. Then, everyone's phone pinged in unison. It was a message from the ops team asking for confirmation of everyone's locations and telling us to stay in situ until further notice. We quickly checked the news, only to see Iran had confirmed its intent to launch 308 missiles and drones at Israel that night. Now, we didn't expect to be right in the middle of a live firing range that night but that's what was about to happen. We confirmed everyone was accounted for and had a short meeting discussing the situation. Jordan is located right in the middle of the two countries, and everyone was a little nervous about the fact missiles would be flying overhead. With the Jordanian air space closed as well, flying out of country was also not an option.

The following morning, the reality of the situation set in when one of the troops showed us all a video of the air defence systems shooting down a drone, filmed just outside his living accommodation. We couldn't believe how close we were to the unfolding situation.

We had another meeting called by 83 EAG (Expeditionary Air Group) to discuss the facts and the ongoing developments for our humanitarian aid mission. We were given orders to stay confined to our living quarters until further notice and maintain awareness of the situation.

20 - 22 April 2024: Returning the first teams

After 8 successful drops into Gaza, the team had completed a fantastic effort, something to be proud of, and everyone involved had become part of Air Dispatch history. With limited drops scheduled and tensions in the region high, a decision was made to return some members of the team to the UK and reduce our footprint in Jordan.

Also, with the UK Government looking at other options to get aid into Gaza, such as the temporary port, we could all see a reduction in aerial delivery was coming. With the airspace now reopened, the team selected who would return to the UK, people with families and for myself a second child on the way, a chance to return home was welcomed. As much as I would have liked to have stayed and completed the final drop, with tensions rising and the potential for a retaliation from Israel, getting out of country before the airspace closed again was a sensible move.

The team didn't stop there though, knowing that a reduced team would be staying, the pressure to rig containers would surely intensify. Suddenly a 16 strong team would reduce to 10 with the same amount of work to conduct. Knowing this, the returning team wanted to be as useful as possible on our final day in country.

We had rigged everything possible the day before and still had 40+ containers of aid to rig, but there was a problem. We had used everything in our store and all the air drop equipment needed was on the incoming aircraft. Despite this, the team did everything it could as soon as it landed, with the help of the Norwegian Army, pallets were quickly unloaded and stripped of the valuable equipment within 15 minutes of the aircraft landing.

The troops began rigging containers quicker than expected, keen to leave as little work as possible for the reduced crew. With the temperature rising, the troops' graft didn't go unnoticed, sweat was dripping from everyone. It was also generous to see the movement crew and Military Police (MPs) from the RAF offer assistance in rigging. They had flown in that morning to assist the backfill of equipment and personnel to Cyprus but had limited work to do until later that day, so they offered to be of assistance by carrying aid ready for the AD crews to rig into containers. It was brilliant to see everyone work together to finish what had been a monumental task for all involved.



Figure 8- Three C130 Aircraft parked on Airfield with a A400m aircraft taking off on a Sortie. Photo taken by Cpl Conroy

At the time of writing, the UK has dropped 110 tonnes of aid into Gaza. 120 containers over 11 individual airdrops. A small amount compared to what is needed, however, a fantastic contribution to the multinational effort by the team deployed and an experience I will never forget.

Key takeaways

The deployment to Jordan on Op UNDERHILL has opened the door to UK airdrop capability being used again for a broad range of humanitarian and conflict situations and demonstrated that holding the Squadron at high readiness offers the UK an expansive range of options.

It also developed and expanded the Squadron's unique capability, with new parachutes being approved for use, with the potential to add other parachutes to our loads in the near future.

We gained valuable experience by working with other nations, exchanging ideas and equipment that would benefit us going forward. One example of this was a palletiser with in-built weighing scales. A simple idea that improved our rigging tempo massively. Previously we had relied on crane-style scales which slowed down the process of rigging containers. With the palletiser scales, weighing a container can be done in seconds, without hassle. Simple, but effective. Mixing with other nations on Op UNDERHILL allowed us to learn and adopt solutions into our own procedures.

This brings me to the last point, working with other likeminded nations, and soldiers from the same trade developed our understanding of Air Despatch and its potential. I hope to have further opportunities to work alongside other nations which would improve our interoperability and develop the outputs we can deliver if this capability were needed again in future.