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RICHARD POTTS

Preflight

ON THE COVER

An Air France Boeing 747-200 on final approach to St Maarten, a Caribbean paradise for airplane watchers—see page 38 (CHRIS WELDY).

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JUSTIN CEDERHOLM

With UNHAS in Kabul

by Jeff Kelly



One of the Transafrik L-100-30 Hercules (S9-CAJ) used by the UNHAS from Kabul.

Kabul airport can be grim. On the day I arrived, in the dead of an Afghan winter with the sky threatening snow, it was very grim. The hulks of destroyed aircraft littered the field. Besides the warplanes killed-in-action, a wingless Ariana Afghan Airlines Boeing 727 sat on its tail, nose in the air, gear dangling. The front third of another one lay tilted on its side. "Don't leave the hard pan. There are mines out there," my boss warned before I left Islamabad, Pakistan—which is why, I guess, no one touched the hulks.

I was there to manage the Kabul station for UNHAS, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service. It operated a Fokker F28 Fellowship twin-jet that shuttled humanitarian workers, diplomats, and journalists between Islamabad and Kabul. UNHAS also had a small fleet of Beechcraft, three Lockheed C-130 (L-100) Hercules for cargo lift, and six Mil Mi-8 helicopters. The chaos I saw on exiting the Fokker told me reorganization was needed. A mob of internationals, locals, and soldiers milled about the ramp at will. Toyota Landcruisers from various aid agencies and embassies backed up to the aircraft's cargo hold for self-appointed-VIP baggage claim. It seemed everyone but I had an entourage waiting on the ramp. Inside the passenger terminal there were no seats, no lights, no glass in the windows—just biting cold.

Finally one of the UNHAS staff located me and put me in touch with the young British fellow I was replacing. Before this



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he had been a loadmaster on a freighter. He had no experience with passenger operations or any form of management. That the operation functioned at all was a tribute to the local staff. They escorted me through immigration and customs and we headed into town past bomb-damaged buildings, monolithic Soviet-style apartment blocks, and hundreds of small shacks lining the road. I could tell when we reached affluent neighborhoods by the high walls topped with razor wire. It seemed Afghan sartorial fashion has not changed much since ancient times—people were wrapped in blankets, turbans, *burkas*, and scarves as they leaned into the icy wind.

The thing about the UN is that as an organization it is not very united. Each agency is a world unto itself, focusing on its particular function, be that moving refugees, caring for children, or filling empty bellies. UNHAS was created to prevent the duplication of effort by each agency operating its own mini-airline. Although run by the World Food Programme (WFP), UNHAS was a common service for all the UN agencies.

Our tiny office in one of the UN compounds had a single booking desk, one laptop computer, and a diesel-powered heater. Originally designed to handle a couple of Beechcraft, it now worked a 75-passenger jet doing two, and sometimes three,

PHOTOS: RICHARD POTTS



The UN Fokker F28 Mk 4000 (ZS-JES), one of two former Linjeflyg/SAS/Air Botnia aircraft operated by Airquarius Air Charter of South Africa.

rotations a day, plus the internal Beech flights and the cargo operation. The booking clerk, a well-spoken, intelligent, and impeccably-mannered guy named Kalil, was besieged by unruly internationals who refused to queue, rudely grabbed at his laptop to see for themselves, would not move away from the heater, and tried to bluff or con their way into a precious booking.

I empathized with Kalil's predicament, remembering my own ticket agent days. Unfortunately he had never been toughened on a schedule that included New York flights. He would ask me to overbook, saying, "But Mister Jeff, she said it is urgent! She said she *must* go."

"You're not going to fall for that, are you Kalil?" I asked.

"Oh yes, Mister Jeff." (I could never get them to drop the mister.) "That is what she said."

I came to really admire Kalil and the other Afghan staff for their patience and polite nature, something I had not expected in Afghanistan. Any foreign nationals I observed trying to bully or con the locals were set straight by me in short order.

UNHAS was the only scheduled air service into Afghanistan, the main reason being an ICAO NOTAM warning of 'indiscriminate missile and small arms attacks on aircraft'. Those pesky stinger missiles Mr Reagan gave the *mujahideen* came back to haunt us. Austrian Airlines checked out the possibility of starting service between Vienna and Kabul, but could not with that NOTAM in effect. The alternatives to UNHAS were a few charter flights with Ariana's one remaining 727-200 or a 12-hour drive on a bad road with questionable security. Not surprisingly, our flights were full.

Because the terminal was uninhabitable, the procedure was to hold check-in at the UN compound, then load passengers, bags, and cargo on buses and haul the lot out to the field. It was a logistical nightmare, and the traffic and confusion inside the compound drove the UN brass mad. Once at the field there was absolutely no ramp discipline. Without fences, or glass in the floor-to-ceiling windows, crowd control was

impossible. Just keeping smokers away from the aircraft was an accomplishment. As a former FAA-certified ground security coordinator at a Category X airport, I found the lack of even rudimentary security procedures alarming. After all, this was the birthplace of Al-Qaeda.

"See that chap?" indicated Glen, one of our South African pilots. He was pointing at a little old guy in a turban sitting in the first row. "He just strolled across

the ramp, tossed his bag in the bin and took a seat. Do you know who he is?"

I did not, but promised to find out. It was Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former president of Afghanistan, big time political player, and all-round VIP. He demonstrated the urgent need to revamp VIP handling procedures.

So in my first week at Kabul I saw that I had to gain control of the booking office, see if we could put some money into the airport to move check-in there, and begin an airport security program. Then my staff said they needed radios, mobile phones, computers, vehicles—and they had not had a day off in three months. Finally, my boss in Islamabad called saying he wanted to base two helicopters and half of the Beechcraft fleet in Kabul, and could I line up fuel and a crew house. Whew!

When a Mercedes-Benz limousine carrying Saudi VIPs came roaring up to the Fokker, missing the nose cone by three feet and sliding to a stop almost hitting me, I decided ramp discipline was a top priority. Locating the ICAO rep was like joining a victims support group. His background was ATC, but the security situation had him freaking out too. We talked airport security over breakfast, in meetings during the day, and over a drink in the UN bar at night. He started an airport security committee and I was a charter member.

There were lots of meetings, especially with the Afghan government. Five separate entities ran the airport: the airport manager's office controlled the ramp and collected landing fees; the Ministry of the Interior police controlled access; the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism set policy; the Ministry



Another South African company, Balmoral Central Contracts, operated this Beech 1900C for UNHAS.

Strollers enjoy unrestricted access to Kabul's ramp.



Kabul baggage handlers have no ramp tug and very little salary.



PHOTOS: JEFF KELLY

of Finance oversaw customs; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs granted visas. These organizations did not always get along or even talk to each other. Political affiliations played a big rôle. Northern Alliance people did not like the King's men. For example, the airport manager gave me a letter granting unrestricted vehicle access. The police commander said it was worthless and would accept a letter only from his boss, the Minister of the Interior. All ministers had two things in common: they had no money and you had to refer to them as 'your excellency'. Letters always began with, 'We present our compliments to his excellency, the minister of whatever'. Once I called a ministry on my mobile phone and the big cheese himself answered saying, "This is his excellency." Pretty funny, I thought.

What was not funny was their funding. They had none. A minister's monthly salary would not cover lunch at a moderately priced restaurant in the USA. If a minister was paid \$25 a month, what were his employees paid? Answer: nothing. They worked in the hope that someday their job would include a salary. That turned squeezing money from the international aid community into a national pastime. They hounded us for *baksheesh* (gifts of cash). I was gentle but firm. I did not want to go down that road. Investing in infrastructure was a good thing; supporting everyone who worked at the airport was not.

ICAO and the US military were the big contributors when it came to the airport. Glass in the windows and fixing the generator allowed me to move check-in to the airport. Plans for a fence were drawn up and ramp access ID cards were ordered. ICAO had located the former air traffic controllers, all in their 60s now, and was working on retraining and re-equipping them.

Persuading the international community to adhere to airport access rules was a problem I worked on. Everyone

thought rules were a great idea—for the other guy. They, however, had important business and deserved access. After all, their program/funding/career could be negatively impacted if they could not meet and greet bosses and donors the minute they stepped off the aircraft. I suppose I bruised a few egos ushering people off the ramp. Embassy people were the worst, and NGO (non-governmental organization) staffers the most creative at getting around me. I was beginning to make a dent in the problem when the Islamic *Hajj* pilgrimage began in February this year.

Seven thousand *Hajjis* (pilgrims) were scheduled to leave Kabul for Mecca. At the airport the first groups came, took a ritual bath, shed their worldly trappings, and donned large terrycloth towels and flip-flops (rubber sandals). Many had saved for years for the trip that all able-bodied Muslim males are required to make at least once. Each group had a flight date but the airplanes were not showing up. The next day more *Hajjis* came, took their baths, and waited—but again no aircraft. It was developing into a crisis. But crisis turned to emergency that night when the temperature dropped and an elderly pilgrim died of exposure. The airport manager called the UN in a panic; I took a load of high-energy biscuits and blankets out to see the *Hajjis* through the night.

The next day was sunny and *Hajjis* were wandering all over the ramp. Some set up in the strip between the ramp and the taxiway that was supposedly clear of mines and unexploded ordnance—but I would not think of setting foot there. I kept waiting for the boom but I guess the area really was cleared. Throughout the day more *Hajjis* were arriving, bathing, et cetera. Late that afternoon, as the sun lowered and with it the temperature, the *Hajjis* revolted. They wanted the Ariana 727 to take them to Mecca. But it was scheduled for a flight to Delhi.

They mobbed the president of Ariana Afghan Airlines when he tried to address them. He had to be rescued by international peacekeepers. The 727 was not going anywhere, not with thousands of cold-crazed *Hajjis* surrounding it. In the ensuing riot, Abdul Rahman, the minister of civil aviation, was killed. He was the guy who allegedly took the *Hajjis'* money and was supposed to charter the airplanes, but failed to do so.

That night, through sources close to the government, I learned that Rahman had not been killed by the mob as reported. Neither had he been stabbed whilst inside the Ariana aircraft, as was reported days later. He had been beaten and thrown from the airplane by Northern Alliance henchmen because he had switched sides and become a supporter of the King. With both his legs broken in the fall, the mob beat him but—to the dismay of his Northern Alliance enemies—did not finish him off. They did that themselves, with a knife, in the ambulance on the way to hospital. The following day the *Hajjis* sat under heavy police guard as a hastily organized airlift of Saudi, British, Pakistani, and United Arab Emirates airplanes began taking them to Mecca. Work began on the fence that week.

The Muslim festival of *Eid* is a bit like Christmas and the USA's Thanksgiving rolled into one. This year, it fell on a long weekend that everyone was stretching into a week. The demand for seats to Islamabad was enormous. Nearly all the long-time international and national staff had homes and family in Islamabad. It had been their refuge during the Taliban regime. Even the Afghan ministers and advisors of Hamid Karzai, chairman of the Interim Administration for Afghanistan, were pressing me for seats. They did not ask nicely, either.

Weather, I feared, would be a problem. Cold fronts rolled through with such regularity that if the pattern held we would be hit with a front right at the period of greatest demand. And

we were. Kabul, being a VFR field with no ILS, no ATC, and no weather-measuring equipment, was dependent on good weather. Our snow-removal equipment was the sun. Although the Hindu Kush Mountains threatened in the distance, the real danger to flight operations was the lesser hills surrounding the field. Directly abeam the runway was a hill that rose 1,100ft (335m) above it. The area known as TV Mountain, a former Taliban stronghold, sat in the middle of town. Each end of the runway had a set of hills poking up.

If I could not see peaks on the surrounding hills, I would not clear the Fokker to leave Islamabad and our flight would be canceled. During the *Eid* rush, I canceled five flights in a row. Rain and low ceilings had all the peaks obscured. My mobile phone rang constantly with UN agency heads, government ministers, and embassy protocol officers demanding to know when we would fly. I would explain about the hills and the clouds but the problem was the Russian freighters. Ilyushin Il-76s and Antonovs would take off in the soup, people would hear the airplanes overhead, and wonder why the UN was not flying.

Of course, five cancellations built quite a backlog. We had waiting lists and standby lists and priority standby lists, but after a while it became hopeless. Most gave up and joined UN vehicle convoys to Pakistan. But late on the last day before *Eid*, holes appeared in the overcast and the ceiling lifted. I talked to Sid, the F28 captain, and he decided to have a go. Over 100 persons showed up at the airport. Journalists and non-implementing partner NGOs had no chance, and I turned them away. The load was mostly VIPs. But the terminal was deserted, with airport staff away with their families celebrating *Eid*. Passports would not be stamped, police checks not done. We were going anyway.

The overcast thickened and I worried that even this flight

An Il-76MD loads ISAF troops. Parked behind is a DC-8F-55 (3C-FNK) of Cargo Plus Aviation, with a temporary red cross on the fin, and Ariana's sole Boeing 727-200.



An Iranian Ilyushin Il-76TD (EP-CFC) of Chabahar Air.



PHOTOS: JEFF KELLY

would cancel, but Sid found a hole and we cheered when we saw his lights approaching from the east. Because there were no airport personnel I prevailed on friends to help work the flight. I had managers, program officers, and de-miners in the luggage bins throwing out bags. Security officers acted as gate agents. They loved it. Later at the bar they asked if they could do it again sometime. While working the rear bin I noticed a guy standing back watching and waiting. "Who are you?" I shouted over the roar of the APU.

"Italian embassy," he answered.

"Don't just stand there. Help us unload," I said rather testily. Time was of the essence. We had to turn the aircraft around while there was still enough light to take off. He jumped in the bin and did a great job. I was later told he was the ambassador.

My one UNHAS staff member was checking off passenger names, doing a manifest on the fly, when a well-dressed Afghan began screaming at him in *Dari* (Afghan Persian). I went to investigate and the guy began punching my staffer. I pulled them apart. "I am the minister of justice and I will not be treated like cargo!" he shouted. He marched past me and headed for the airplane. I stood there in shock. His bodyguards gave me just enough pause so that he was aboard before I regained my composure.

"He's denied boarding," I hissed through clenched teeth and marched after him.

Sid met me halfway. "We must go now. The light is fading. If we don't go now we shall have to spend the night here."

The minister received a pass because of the time crunch. It probably saved me from being PNG'd (persona non grata) out of Afghanistan. But I still feel bad about letting that misbehaving minister fly.

Gradually we improved security. The fence, training for the police, and ramp access ID cards all helped. We used big, pink boarding cards to identify passengers, and that reassured the flightcrews. A crude positive bag match procedure was instituted, with all baggage lined up by the wing for passengers to personally identify. X-ray machines and metal detectors would have been better, but we were doing the best we could with available resources.



Hajjis wait for their aircraft to take them to Mecca.

Things were going smoothly until changes at RAMCC (Regional Air Movement Control Center) disrupted everything. RAMCC was the military command that issued landing and takeoff slots. This was so that humanitarian flights would not conflict with military operations—like flying beneath B-52s dropping bombs, for example. Unfortunately RAMCC did not see a need for consistency in the slots they issued us. At 1800 we would get confirmation for the next day's slots. Our 0900 slot for the next morning might be changed to 0700. With no phone system except mobiles, which only top-level people had, we had no way to notify the passengers. We simply did not have the flexibility to respond to RAMCC's short-notice changes. And do not even think about missing your slot. You might wait three hours for the next one. Want a communication challenge? Try explaining customer service to a military command in a war zone. I could not; my boss in Islamabad could not; nor could his boss in Rome. But the boss in New York started to get through—a little.

I had been searching for a month for a source of clean, reliable fuel with little success. Supplies from the airport's fuel farm were contaminated, and would take lots of time and money to fix. The coalition forces had theirs flown in aboard an

Antonov An-124, the huge freighter that makes even a 747 look small. I thought that was a possibility until I learned they were paying \$1.50 per liter (\$5.68/USg). We solved the problem with a 23,000l (6,000USg)-capacity portable tank we located in Africa. A C-130 was sent to transport the tank, which even had a diesel pump and plenty of hose. The airport manager showed me where I could place it. He stepped off the hard pan and I nervously followed him to the filthiest spot in Kabul. It was where Ariana dumped its lav cart. There was no macerator or waste treatment of any kind. They just poured the effluent out into a field. "This is a good spot," he said. "Of course, you might want to clean it up." Oh, the joys of humanitarian work! I told the crane operator to set it on the hard pan, ground it, and let the airport



PHOTOS: JEFF KELLY

The 23,000l-capacity portable fuel tank acquired from Safair.



JEFF KELLY

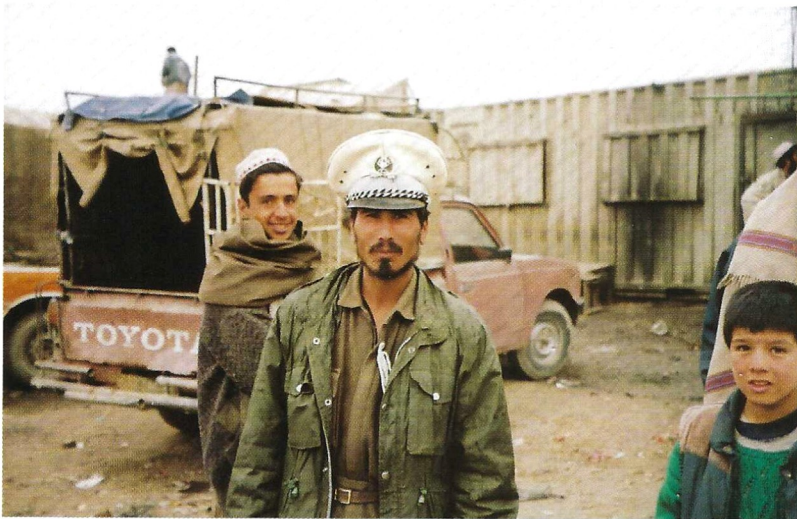
Wrecked aircraft at Kabul include this Afghan Air Force Antonov An-26 (231) and Ilyushin Il-28 in the middle of a minefield.

manager clean his own toilet.

The crew house I rented was outrageously expensive because of all the internationals vying for space. News media representatives were the worst, bidding up the price and making it bad for everybody. I was paying \$6,000 per month for a house that formerly rented for \$400. It was all I could find. I made my budget of \$600 per person per month by having carpenters cut up the big rooms into ten little ones. We lucked out with the cook, however. He was great and all our friends wanted to eat at our place.

As my three-month contract wound down I was feeling pretty good about my job. But my health was another matter. I had picked up a stomach parasite, and looked gaunt and felt terrible. I declined an invitation to extend my contract, and just wanted to go home and become healthy. My replacement was like me, a retired airline guy. His name was Jim and we saw eye-to-eye on everything. That assured a smooth transition, which is good for an organization. On my final Friday—which is the Sabbath in Afghanistan—we had just one flight: a Beech 1900 dropping off passengers from Herat and dead-heading to Islamabad. I gave all the staff the day off and Jim and I worked the flight.

It was very quiet at the airport—no freighter activity, no Chinook choppers moving Royal Marines around, just our 1900 beginning to taxi out. I noticed three ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) scout cars racing toward us. They flew the French tricolor. The lead vehicle shouted at the police guard to open the gate to let them off the ramp. But the guard was not moving fast enough, so the soldier jumped down and opened it himself. Then two of the vehicles went out and the third one turned in our direction and came to a stop directly beside us. I watched idly as a very young-looking soldier



JEFF KELLY

A traffic policeman at the Kabul marketplace.

A Ukrainian-registered Antonov An-26B of Royal Airlines Cargo on the Kabul ramp. In the background are a Kazakstan Yakovlev Yak-40 (right), a Yak-42, plus an Airbus A310 and Boeing 747-300 of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA).

RICHARD POTTS





swung his machine gun around and chambered a round.

"What's happening?" I asked in alarm.

"I don't know," he replied, his eyes darting about nervously.

Seconds later firing started, echoing off the buildings. Tracers ricocheted off the terminal and flew out across the runway. A dormant conditioned response, learned as a combat Marine in Vietnam, kicked in and I hit the deck. I pulled Jim down with me. The Beech 1900 was inadvertently taxiing into the tracer's path. On the radio the tower was telling him to take off immediately. I cringed as red, fluorescent threads arced gracefully over the 1900's tail. Thankfully, they missed.

Actually, Jim and I had good cover. The passengers who stepped off the Beech were right in the middle of it, on the other side of the building. They had to exit their vehicles and lay on the ground as two French scout cars exchanged fire with unknown persons hidden in a field beside the Afghan Air Force mosque. One French soldier was grazed on the leg. Our passengers received just a bad scare. The firefight lasted only a few minutes but it was hours before the police opened the road and we could leave. When they did Jim and I went straight to the UN bar for a drink.

I was glad my airline experience at Delta Air Lines helped UNHAS in Kabul. The international aid community needs air transport to do its job. I hope my small contribution did some good for the Afghan people. They are overdue for a break. †

Workhorse of heavy cargo operations is the Antonov An-124 Ruslan. The peaks surrounding Kabul overshadow an example operated by Volga-Dnepr Airlines.

The author on the ramp at Kabul.

