



Airmen of a troop carrier squadron in the Pacific region load a jeep into a C-47 in the mid to late 1940s.

Loadmaster Evolution

The loadmaster specialty has evolved from ad hoc beginnings to a central job in modern airlift.

By Sam McGowan

Though practically indispensable today for mobility missions around the world, aircraft loadmaster duties have not always been part of military air transportation.

No such crew position existed in the troop carrier and air transport squadrons of World War II. Aerial engineers had responsibility for the cargo compartment and, with help from the radio operator, dispensed air-drop bundles. Sometimes, ground personnel flew along to help handle cargo.

Air cargo officers planned the loads while ground personnel, usually from the unit that owned the cargo, performed loading and unloading. Quartermasters took on responsibility for rigging bundles for air-drop and although a passenger handling specialist had joined Air

Transport Command aircrews by 1944, it wasn't until after the Korean War that USAF established the loadmaster career field.

Before the US entered World War II, Air Corps Maintenance Command activated the 50th Transport Wing to haul cargo from depots to combat squadrons in the US, Alaska, and the Panama Canal Zone. The crew member responsible for ensuring the airplane was properly loaded and cargo secured was the aerial engineer (commonly called the crew chief)—a sort of jack-of-all-trades on multiengine aircraft.

In 1941, the 50th Transport Wing had the responsibility of providing airplanes to support new airborne regiments, and engineers had to monitor jumps, dispense air-drop bundles, and

install glider tow equipment. Shortly after the US entered the war, the Army Air Forces reorganized and ACMC's transport squadrons transferred into the new Air Transport Command.

In 1942, Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, AAF commanding general, elevated Army Air Forces Ferrying Command to form Air Transport Command. The former command was redesignated as the I Troop Carrier Command and given responsibility for training troop carrier units for overseas service. In July all existing air transport units were redesignated as "troop carrier."

By the time of I Troop Carrier Command's redesignation, transport squadrons were heavily involved in combat operations in the Pacific. Far East Air Force established an Air Transport Com-



Kentucky ANG loadmasters guide a pallet of cargo onto a C-130 Hercules. By 1964, scanner duties on C-130s belonging to TAC were combined with loadmaster duties, and the loadmaster became part of the flight crew.

mand on Feb. 2, 1942. It became part of its Directorate of Air Transport. To facilitate load planning, the DAT established “station control teams” made up of Americans and Australians, trained on payload capacities and weight limits of aircraft used as transports—from worn-out bombers and civilian transports to C-47s and C-53s. To staff the teams, the Army established Military Occupational Specialty 967—air transportation technician—for airmen whose duties included manifesting of cargo and supervising aircraft loading. Personnel from units that owned the cargo performed the actual loading, under the supervision of a station control officer. In 1943 Fifth Air Force combined the station control teams into the 1st Air Cargo Control Squadron. Similar units soon followed.

In July 1942, Japanese troops were advancing in New Guinea toward Port Moresby. They were met by Australians supplied by air and overland porters.

Aircrews from the 21st and 22nd Troop Carrier Squadrons flew to Moresby from Australia to pick up loads then continue northward into the mountains to deliver their cargo. A team of three enlisted men and an NCO supervised by a station control officer would load the cargo by hand, secure it with straps and ropes, and then take up stations. One man sat on the floor by the open cargo door, in position to kick out each bundle when the pilot activated the green light. Similar methods were used in Burma and adopted worldwide as the war continued. If no ground personnel accompanied flights, the crew chief and radio operator dispensed bundles.

By May 1944, as the Allies prepared to invade Normandy, IX Troop Carrier Command saw a need to formalize cargo drops. Since quartermasters processed and handled cargo, IX Air Force Service Command’s 2nd Quartermaster Depot Supply Company put its quartermasters through a two-week training course and placed them on flying status as “dropmasters.” Their duties included rigging cargo bundles and flying on drops to assist the crew chief and radio operator with dispensing the loads. But fewer than 100 had been trained by D-Day, so more than half the C-47s assigned to supply drops flew without one.

Jettison Masters

Interestingly, although Air Transport Command was originally established to issue contracts to national airlines, it also had responsibility for operating airplanes appropriated for noncombat transport operations. In fall 1942, ATC began taking delivery of a fleet of Consolidated C-87 and Douglas C-54 transports for transoceanic missions.

In December, ATC gained control of the India-China ferry operation, which had been set up to deliver supplies to China. To maintain the India-China Wing’s transport fleet, ATC established Fireball missions using C-87s to transport aircraft parts from a depot in Ohio to bases in India. To keep track of the high-value cargo, enlisted men accompanied the cargo to destination. Since they primarily kept track of manifests, they were referred to as flight clerks—and this led to the creation of the flight traffic clerk billet.

In 1944 ATC established scheduled passenger flights from the US to Europe and the Pacific and between India and China. Flight traffic clerks ensured safety and provided passenger comfort items such as coffee, blankets, magazines, and newspapers. Cargo missions continued operating with only an engineer and radio operator. Cargo loading and securing of ATC transports was conducted by ground personnel under the supervision of air transportation technicians assigned to Army Air Forces base units.

In 1947, when the Air Force became a separate service, troop carrier operations became part of Tactical Air Command. The quartermaster rigger function remained with the Army and aerial delivery duties were an Army responsibility through the Korean War. Army quartermaster riggers installed and operated C-119 aerial delivery equipment, and Army kickers flew on C-46 and C-47 drops.

Initially, Air Transport Command had uncertain status, as no plans were made for such an organization in the new service. Military Air Transport Service was established in 1948 as a Department of Defense-wide specified command, with USAF as the lead service. The flight traffic clerk function continued on passenger-carrying aircraft but the term was changed to flight traffic specialist, then to flight steward for a time.

In 1950 the Air Force took delivery of the Douglas C-124 for MATS, TAC, and Strategic Air Command, and for the first time cargo handlers were assigned to flight crews and called loadmasters.

The assignments were due as much to the possibility of cargo jettisoning as to any particular need for a cargo specialist to fly on missions. The C-124 crew included a second flight engineer—a scanner—but the airplane’s large size and payload capacity dictated the need for additional personnel in the event a load had to be jettisoned. The aircraft also had cargo handling features requiring special training to operate. Initially, air freight personnel received training for the equipment and reported to transport and troop carrier units for aircrew duty.

Immediately after the Korean War a major reorganization of troop carrier functions occurred. The dropmaster role transferred to the Air Force and became part of the aerial delivery sections of new aerial port squadrons that

were established at troop carrier bases in the US and overseas.

An aircraft loadmaster specialty code first appeared in 1953 as a shred-out of the air transportation career field. TAC and Far East Air Forces' C-124 squadrons took on tactical responsibilities including airdrop, and loadmasters rigged and inspected cargo and operated aerial delivery equipment.

MATS and SAC assigned loadmasters to transport crews to supervise loading, operate loading equipment, and handle jettisoning of cargo. In the early 1960s, loadmaster classes were told that their primary purpose on logistical flights was for jettisoning; otherwise they were not needed on nontactical flights.

The Lockheed C-130 entered service with TAC in 1956. Initially, C-130 crews did not include a loadmaster except for airdrop, and loadmasters were assigned to aerial port squadrons. Flight crews included a scanner, who worked on the flight line when not flying.

By 1964 scanner duties on TAC C-130s were combined with loadmaster duties and the loadmaster became part of the flight crew. This was not true in MATS, however, where loadmasters were considered cabin crew and flight crews included a second engineer who performed scanner duties. In the spring of 1964 an Air Force-wide call went out for airmen to cross-train to become loadmasters and the field opened up to basic trainees.

The Vietnam War was the first conflict to see loadmasters in a combat role and showed the importance of this crew position.

Tactical transports flew into forward airfields, frequently under artillery attack, necessitating rapid off-loading. The speed of loadmasters' efforts often determined whether the aircraft became a target on the ground. Airdrops were frequent for C-123 crews and less frequent for C-130s, until the 1968 communist Tet Offensive when they became routine.

Troop carrier wings were given "special missions," particularly C-130 and C-123 sorties over Laos and North Vietnam, leaflet missions, and the Commando Vault C-130 mission delivering 10,000-pound and 15,000-pound M121 and BLU-82 bombs, including sorties to destroy the infamous Thanh Hoa Bridge in North Vietnam.

Loadmasters served on other aircraft in Vietnam, particularly AC-47 gunships and rescue HC-130s. Mobility



USAF photo by MSGT. Jeffrey Allen

SSgt. Peter Jensen watches airdrop bundles just released from the back of a C-17 over Afghanistan.

loadmasters often worked at forward airfields.

Vietnam saw the only award of a Medal of Honor to an enlisted Air Force aircrew member when A1C John L. Levitow received it for actions as an AC-47 gunship loadmaster in 1969.

Integral Role

The highest award to an airlift loadmaster was the Air Force Cross awarded to SSgt. Charles L. Shaub, one of two loadmasters carrying out a C-130 airdrop over the besieged town of An Loc, South Vietnam, in 1972.

The exact number of loadmasters who lost their lives in Southeast Asia is not known due to the Air Force practice of sometimes using previous specialty codes for cross-trainees in casualty records. The USAF tactical airlift history relates that 229 transport crewmen died in Southeast Asia. Given that air-drop and special missions carried two or more loadmasters, at least 30 percent of those were likely loadmasters, not including men assigned to gunships or ground duty.

In 1970 Lockheed's gigantic C-5A entered operational service with Military Airlift Command, the successor to MATS. The revolutionary Galaxy increased responsibilities for loadmasters. Its complicated forward and aft cargo door and kneeling systems were so technologically advanced that C-5

loadmasters had a special suffix on their AFSC. In the mid-1970s the loadmaster career field moved from air transportation to a new operations career field made up entirely of aircrew skills.

At the end of the Vietnam War the tactical airlift mission was removed from tactical commands and assigned to MAC, which advocated deployment as its primary role. MAC leaders pressed for a new generation airlifter, calling for an airplane that would combine tactical as well as outsize load carrying capabilities. The solution was the McDonnell Douglas C-17, which requires a three-man flight crew, one of them a loadmaster. With the C-17, loadmasters assumed responsibilities previously belonging to flight engineers.

Lockheed continued development of the C-130 based on lessons learned in Vietnam, ultimately leading to the C-130J, which like the C-17, is designed for a crew of two pilots and a loadmaster.

Today's loadmasters are an integral part of the airlift aircrew. They receive basic training at the aircrew training school at Lackland's Medina annex in Texas, prior to aircraft-specific training at Altus AFB, Okla., or Little Rock AFB, Ark. Aircraft, organizations, locations, and equipment have evolved considerably since the term loadmaster first appeared in 1950, and the loadmasters themselves continue to evolve with the mission. ■

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