

In the Nick of Time

by Frederick Wickert

She is the Argos Georgia, a British fishing trawler, and she is in trouble. She has lost her main power and with a crew of twenty-three, has been stranded for the last six days off the Ross Ice Shelf in Antarctica. She is drifting deep into the ice.

Compounding her problems are two storms coming towards her location and they are going to collide with each other right over her position.

An engine piston and a casing are needed to make repairs. New Zealand and private companies are unable to deliver the parts for at least ten days. Supplies on board the trawler are getting low. If they cannot get their engine parts soon, they will perish when the two storms collide at their position. The situation looks grim.

ARGOS Group and the New Zealand rescue coordination center turn to the U.S. Air Force operation Deep Freeze at Christ Church for help. Lt. Col Jim McGann is Commander of the 304th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron based at Christ Church, New Zealand.

Typically the men of the 304th and Operation Deep Freeze fly 60 supply drop missions a year in support of scientific research conducted from McMurdo Station. If anybody could get to the trawler in time, it had to be the 304th.

Flying cargo drops with C-17 Globemaster III aircraft is what they do. This one presented some unusual problems to be overcome. The problems were both bureaucratic and logistical.

The ship had not called an S.O.S. Therefore, law required that Col. McGann needed to obtain permission from the State Department before he could undertake the mission. That was going to take some time. Time they didn't have to spare.

To make the drop successfully, a system had to be designed to keep the one hundred fifty pound cargo from sinking if it hit the water, and from breaking it if it hit the ice. In the next forty-eight hours the loadmasters jury-rigged a five hundred pound package using buoys, plastic packing material, and some wood boards. The package was unsinkable and provided enough cushioning that the engine parts were not going to suffer damage if it hit the ice.

The incoming storms allowed officials at Pacific Command to declare an emergency and give approval for the drop without having to get it from the State Department and all was go for the flight.

To reach the location of the ARGOS Georgia was normally a five-hour flight. The crew pushed the C-17 at near top speed, reaching the distressed ship in a record time of three and a half hours. The cargo was dropped on the ice at 170 miles per hour from 400 feet above the ship.

Two hours later, the storm edges had arrived with winds of fifty miles per hour bringing waves fifteen feet high. The drop at that time could not have been possible because of the weather.

Repairs were made with the delivered parts and the ARGOS Georgia sailed out of danger twelve hours after the drop was made. The parts were delivered in the nick of time.

Lt. Col. McGann said, "We demonstrated that we can go anywhere on the planet and be there in a short time. Those people needed help and we gave it to them in a short time. That's global reach."