

The Sunday Times Top Ten Bestseller

SCOTT BATEMAN

Former RAF Hercules captain

HERCULES

The Inside Story of
an RAF Legend

'Excellent'
JOHN NICHOL

'Engrossing'
FLIGHT RADAR 24



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Hercules

Born and raised in a small village in Scotland, Scott Bateman served with the RAF between 1990 and 2008 as an air loadmaster and pilot with 47 Squadron. He was awarded the MBE in 2000 for services to the NHS. Scott now flies for a large airline, alongside a new career as a successful television producer. He lives in the West Country. *Hercules* is his first book.

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Hercules

SCOTT BATEMAN MBE



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This book is dedicated to the crews of Star Trek 3 and
Hilton 22, who lost their lives doing what they loved,
flying the Hercules at low level. Although the Hercules
has flown off into the sunset, their sacrifice will
never be forgotten.

Sans Peur

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Author's Note

Over an eighteen-year military career, I have been fortunate to be part of the Hercules family, and, as a member of the fabled 47 Squadron, to have filled three of the crew positions on the aircraft: air loadmaster, co-pilot and captain. While I have gathered all the stories you are about to read, and blended them with a couple of my own, I am by no means a gifted pilot or crew member. Many whose stories are to be found in this book are. Aviators operating at the pinnacle of tactical air transport. I am truly standing on the shoulders of giants.

Due to the sensitive nature of operations and tactics, some of the stories within these pages have had to be anonymized, and, in a few cases, slightly altered. This won't, I hope, detract from your reading enjoyment.

Welcome to *Hercules*. Pull up a sandbag and let's begin.

Scottie Bateman

May 2024

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FRACTIONS .X .XX .XXX										CHWR J. MCKINNON		150112					
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LOADING CONDITION	DATE SHED OF NOSE MAIN	WEIGHT-LB	C.G. LOCATION ± M.A.C. APPROX	A	B	C
MAX TAKE-OFF GROSS WT.	4.8 2.4	155,000	25.0	42.9	40.7	455.2
OPERATING WT.	6.7 7.3	75,000	16.9	45.8	48.7	466.1

AIRFOIL SECTIONS AND DATA

WING NACA 64A318-ROOT
NACA 64A412-TIP
MAC 184.5
WING INCIDENCE - ROOT +3°
WING INCIDENCE - TIP 0°
HORIZONTAL STABILIZER
NACA 23012 (MODIFIED)
VERTICAL STABILIZER
NACA 64A015

TOTAL SURFACE AREAS AND ANGULAR MOVEMENTS

	SQ. FT.	(ASPECT RATIO 10.09)
WING AREA	1745.5	+15°-25°
AILERON AREA (2)	108	+20°-20°
AILERON TAB AREA (2)	5.8	+36°
FLAP AREA (4)	342	(ASPECT RATIO 5.02)
HORIZONTAL TAIL	545	+15°-40°
ELEVATOR (2)	155	+25°-6°
ELEVATOR TAB (2)	15.9	(ASPECT RATIO 1.81)
VERTICAL TAIL	300	35°L 35°R
RUDDER	75	25°L 25°R
RUDDER TAB	5	

NOTE - DENOTES UPWARD MOVEMENT
+ DENOTES DOWNWARD MOVEMENT

- ⑤ MAIN TIRE PRESSURE, AS REQUIRED TO GIVE 33%
TIRE DEFLECTION FOR EACH LOADING CONDITION
OR 60 PSIG, WHICHEVER IS GREATER
④ EXTENSION WILL HAVE SUFFICE E STATIONS
③ NOSE TIRE PRESSURE IS 60 PSIG AT ALL GROSS WEIGHTS
② SUBJECT TO AIRFRAME LIMITATION OF
19,600 IN-LB INDICATED TORQUE
① MAX TAKE-OFF GROSS WT

NOTE:

ENGINES

- ④ ALLISON AE2100D3 TURBOPROP
T.O. ESHP 4,591 MAXIMUM CONTINUOUS ESHP 4,591
POWER TURBINE RPM NORMAL 14,269
POWER TURBINE RPM LOW GROUND IDLE 10,329
GEAR RATIO 13.977:1

PROPELLERS

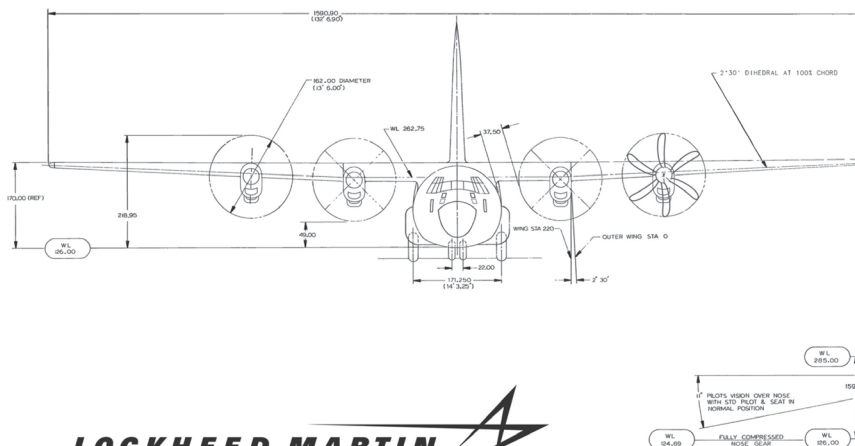
- ④ DOWTY AEROSPACE R391 PROPELLERS
6 BLADE, COUNTERWEIGHTED, ELECTRO HYDRAULIC CONTROLLED
FULL FEATHERING-REVERSIBLE-CONSTANT SPEED

WEIGHT DATA (FOR DESIGN)

	MAX PAYLOAD MISSION (2.50)
WEIGHT EMPTY	77,388
OPERATING EGT & CREW	2,114
OPERATING WEIGHT	79,502
CARGO & TIEDOWN EQPT	37,850
ZERO FUEL WEIGHT	117,352
FUEL	37,648
TAKE-OFF GROSS WEIGHT	155,000

REFERENCE DRAWINGS

- 337003 BASIC DIMENSIONS - OUTER WING
337004 BASIC DIMENSIONS - WING CENTER SECTION
344478 DIAGRAM-CARGO DOOR & RAMP HOOK LOCATIONS
3305005 BASIC DIMENSIONS - FUSELAGE
3365268 EMPENNAGE INSTL
370500 WING JOINT - BASIC DIMENSIONS
3305028 JOINT DIAGRAM - 100 INCH FWD EXTENSION
3303503 BASIC DIMENSIONS - LANDING GEARS
3319207 JOINT DIAGRAM - 80 INCH AFT EXTENSION



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Without Fear

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1. Playing *HALO*

Hercules (/ˈhɜːrkl̩ʊˌliːz/, US: /-kjə-/) is the Roman equivalent of the Greek divine hero Heracles, son of Jupiter and the mortal Alcmena. In classical mythology, Hercules is famous for his strength and for his numerous far-ranging adventures.

Wikipedia

Basra, Iraq, Early 2000s

Dawn is just breaking over the arid desert landscape, fingers of sunlight giving form to the undulating dunes, their tips swept by the downwash of a fleet of menacing-looking AV-14 Attack VTOLs, whose engines are making the very air vibrate. The atmosphere is becoming thick with clouds of spiralling dust and the noxious smell of jet fuel prickles in our nostrils. This is a perilous situation and none of us are confident of success.

From our elevated position, we can see a vast military bunker far below us. Rockets from the VTOL attack are now arcing skywards, before plunging into their targets with a reassuring crump. With the entire airfield complex wreathed in leaping dayglo-orange flames, personnel are scattering, like so many rats fleeing a burning nest.

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We're tooled up, expecting trouble, and the tension is palpable as we slam our technical into gear and career towards the remote desert airstrip.

I raise my weapon to begin engaging targets ahead of us, but then – ‘Boom!’ – the windscreen explodes. My driver's been hit.

I shake my head in exasperation and turn to *Coolpilot*54. ‘Fuck's sake, bro!’ I berate him. ‘Will you stop getting killed!’

We're three weeks into our five-week detachment in Basra, and definitely establishing a routine. There is lots of flying, of course, but we also have downtime to fill. So we watch endless DVDs, do the whole ‘eat, sleep, fly, repeat’ thing, and spend a great deal of time in the rudimentary gym. Though our favourite activity by far, we all agree, is to engage in combat of the ‘first-person shooter’ variety: challenging the other Herc crews to games of *HALO* on our Xboxes, having managed to hook them up between our tents. Nothing like a bit of a busman's holiday.

On the way back from dinner one evening, as I've done many times before, I mosey past the ops room to see what's planned for us the following day. I look at the board and see that next to my name there is no destination. Just a single, intriguing word, ‘Spec’. Since our experience of this conflict so far is more *Groundhog Day* than *HALO*, this news is met by the team with a frisson of excitement.

Arriving at the operations facility early the next morning, I'm met by an old friend who has been recently promoted.

‘Your special mission,’ he informs me, ‘is to take some “special” people into Baghdad. It is vitally important,’ he adds, ‘that they get there.’

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I'm disappointed. So not one requiring any superior aviation skills, after all. In fact, all a bit mundane. Just a routine flying task, with secret passengers.

Or at least that's my thought until I read the TAF (weather forecast) for Baghdad. This day looks like it is going to be anything but routine; the forecast visibility is shockingly little in the shamal around Baghdad (the shamal being the desert equivalent of the mistral, with lots of added sand). Given the severity of the sandstorm, it's obvious that any attempt to land there will be way outside our peacetime norms.

'Have you seen the TAF?' I ask my new boss. 'This clearly isn't going to happen.' Only a mad person would contemplate such a rash act, I think but don't say.

At this point, I am politely taken aside and the command position is made a bit clearer. I must do it, so I *will* do it. I just have to find a way *to* do it. A rather one-sided Mexican stand-off then ensues. This task must be bloody important.

The compromise we agree on is that, as a qualified instructor, I will fly from Basra to Kuwait with an aircraft filled to the gunwales with fuel, and on the way we will carry out some 'continuation training approaches' to 'go around' at Baghdad, with 'no actual intention of landing there' – unless the opportunity presents itself, that is, in a gap in the appalling weather.

We both understand now what I have *really* been asked to do, without, of course, anyone saying so out loud. Backed into a corner, all I can think is that I am about to become that very mad person.

We arrive at the airport to find our passengers are

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already settling in. I have no idea who they are, but they're definitely not your normal troops. For one thing, they all have rather splendid black beards; for another, rather than military garb, they are wearing clothes from the North Face summer catalogue collection.

'We need to get to Baghdad urgently,' their leader tells me, 'so we can get helicopters into the Green Zone, so we can carry out a job.'

Forty minutes later, on being handed over to the Baghdad controller we announce that we, Surf 28, request to carry out some practice approaches to the airfield before proceeding on to Kuwait.

'Not possible,' the controller informs us. Then, to no one's surprise, adds, 'The aerodrome is closed due to severe weather.'

I leave a short pause, then ask if we can hold in the vicinity instead, till the weather improves. Which, with a quick glance below us revealing a maelstrom of sand engulfing Baghdad, it obviously shows no sign of doing.

'How long are you willing to hold for?' they ask.

'Sixteen hours,' we reply. Which is obviously bonkers.

'No,' they respond, not unreasonably.

I then inform them that we will be taking up the hold anyway, and get a grudging, 'Roger.' And when it becomes obvious that, incredibly, we don't appear to be bluffing, an American voice can be heard on the radio, clearing us for a training approach, as requested. I suspect they must have at least an inkling of what's *really* happening because who does training approaches in the middle of a war zone?

Not us. We have every intention of landing. Others

wouldn't. The vast majority of others wouldn't. Now we're playing *HALO* for real. (Be careful what you wish for.)

Luckily, the Hercules C-130J is an amazing aircraft. And the tempo of operational flying – we are doing this seven days a week, day and night – means that it feels like a second home. It's so responsive that it's like an extension of your body, so much so that you can make it do almost anything you want with complete confidence. Today, though, we are going to need a little tech help to get us where we want to go (i.e. down), and that means radar.

The weather radar in the C-130J is the same as is fitted to the F-16 fighter jet for target mapping, and, when offset slightly from what you want to map, it's great for extremely accurate ground mapping. Before leaving Basra, therefore, we'd already decided that we would carry out a slightly offset approach and then use the radar to identify the runway and surrounding features. We've played with it during good weather, on several occasions, so why not use it now in anger? It at least gives us a Plan A, if not a Plan B.

'Surf 28,' says the Arab-sounding air traffic controller, 'you are cleared for your practice approach and go-round.'

Here goes nothing then. We duly start our descent, which takes us straight down into the very middle of the sandstorm, and it gets very dark very, very quickly; so dark, in fact, that it feels as if the Herc has been enveloped by a sheet of red-tinted paper, and the symbology in the head up display starts getting brighter.

I call to the loadie on the intercom. 'Can you come up and watch the instruments for us?' We need an extra set of eyes now, because the copilot and I don't have

enough – all our focus needs to be on what’s going on outside, and then some.

‘Shout out anything that looks out of place,’ I tell him once he’s joined us. ‘Especially if you think we’re going to kill you.’

I’m only half joking. Somehow we have to find the runway in all this.

The first sweep of the radar and we are more than surprised; despite the interference of many tons of swirling airborne sand, our electronic eye can see it, even if our real ones cannot. The Master Chief is obviously looking out for us. No need to respawn today.

‘Fifty . . .’

‘Thirty . . .’

‘Twenty . . .’

‘I’ve got it!’ I announce, as the edge of the runway finally comes into view. There is an audible exhalation of our collective breath.

We arrive with a thump. It’s not pretty, but at least we are down. Today, at least, it’s not going to be Game Over. I select reverse and brake hard; barrelling through a sand-storm is generally never recommended, especially in a fifty-ton aeroplane. Though air traffic control are now becoming a bit anxious; since we’re on the ground, they obviously haven’t heard us fly overhead on the go-around. ‘Surf 28,’ they keep asking, ‘what is your position?’

My co-pilot answers with commendable calm. ‘Due to a technical emergency on approach,’ he lies, ‘we have had to continue to land. We are now on the runway, stopped on the ground, and are requesting taxi instructions.’

The tower controller, who has only cleared us for a

training approach to go around, is, understandably, fucking furious. 'I cannot *see* the ground!' they shout back.

Once they've calmed down enough to give us instructions, it takes us longer to taxi to the northwest military ramp – some forty-five minutes – than it has for the flight here from Basra.

On arrival at the ramp, we are met by an RAF movements officer, who, under a head-to-toe covering of fine desert sand, is dressed like a character from *Star Wars*.

'Where have you come from?' he asks me, and I can tell from his expression that by 'where' he means 'Which part of this airfield?'

'Basra,' I tell him. He gapes at me in shock. 'I have a special team on board,' I add, 'in need of an urgent helicopter transfer to the Green Zone, to do a "job".'

He is aghast. 'The helicopter crews stacked for the day hours ago,' he informs me. Because nobody, but nobody, would be mad enough to go flying in this appalling weather.

He is wrong, of course.

A few of us are . . .

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2. The Twelve Labours

I am standing in a bar, the small space tightly packed with people; as chat buzzes around the room in competition with the blaring music, the smell of beer is heavy on the air. It could be any bar across the country in the run-up to Christmas, but this one is different: almost everyone is wearing combat uniform or flying suits. For this is something special. An event called Guinness and Mince Pies, a Christmas party held annually by 47 Squadron – *my* squadron – to thank those who have supported them throughout the year. It is also a chance for old hands and veterans to return and, at least for a short period, to feel young again, as we swap our stories of derring-do.

This year's celebration, however, feels poignant. The squadron is due to disband in 2023, so it's the last of these gatherings we'll be attending for a while. It's the close of a big chapter in all our lives, so, despite the high spirits and buoyant festive mood, there is a tinge of sadness and emotion to our reminiscences. But this gathering doesn't just mark the ending of 47 Squadron. It's also about the ending of another, arguably even more historic, era. That of our beloved 'Fat Albert'.

For over fifty years, the Royal Air Force has had a constant. In every single conflict, skirmish, or major overseas operation the UK has been part of – and in some that it hasn't, at least officially – has had the Lockheed Martin

C-130 Hercules, the lump of aluminium that binds all of us together. As the RAF sunsets this capability, it is only fair that we celebrate the engineering and innovation that has served us so well for over five decades. We have had fun times and dangerous times, and also some very sad times, as our own personal Hercules stories have been written.

And, for every one of us, it's been quite a ride.

The first labour of Hercules was to slay the Nemean Lion, who was causing havoc to the farms and farmers of Nemea. My own labours, on the way to becoming a Hercules pilot, were naturally a little less life or death. It's worth noting, however, that, as a boy growing up in Scotland, becoming a Hercules pilot couldn't have been further from my thoughts. Yes, I wanted to become a pilot, but a very different kind of pilot. After all, what was remotely heroic about flying what I regarded as an airborne removals van?

For as long as I can remember, I have always had a passion for all things aviation and, in particular, the RAF. My first memory of flying was as a seven-year-old driving from Dundee down to Gatwick – an adventure in itself – to board a Boeing 720 bound for Malta, where we were headed on a family holiday. I was so excited I was literally bouncing in my plane seat, driving everyone mad for almost the entire flight. In fact, my main memory of the holiday was that for much of it all I could think about was the excitement of the journey home.

A few years later, my early fascination was cemented when my dad took me by train to RAF Leuchars, near

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Dundee, to visit their ‘Battle of Britain at Home’ day. The opportunity to sit in a Lightning sealed the deal. I was hooked, and though I had no idea how to go about it, I knew my future: I was going to be a fighter pilot.

My dad, who worked in oil refining and loved what he did, was thrilled that I too had found a passion and a focus, and to get me on the right track he went on to spend a small fortune on limited-edition posters and squadron prints. Mum thought it an extravagance, but it helped keep the flame alive and, in 1984, at the age of thirteen years and three months (the youngest you were allowed to), I joined the Air Cadets in Dundee.

As well as our twice-weekly meetings, where we learned aviation-related academic subjects, the Air Cadets gave me the opportunity to participate in some amazing annual camps, one of which was at RAF Lossiemouth, on the northeast coast of Scotland, where they had a Sea King rescue helicopter and several ancient Avro Shackletons, as well as Buccaneers.

I was fortunate to be picked to spend a day with one of the rescue crews and, back then, that meant flying in the helicopter. Many who know me now will be surprised at this, as these days I have a pathological and not at all irrational fear of helicopters. But as a teenager, with typical teenage bravado, I was beyond excited to be on board this yellow-painted paraffin-fuelled canary (as these rescue helicopters were affectionately known), just as I suspect our new Prince of Wales might have felt when he first tried them.

During the day with the crew, we flew the Sea King at low level, and did some practice winching with a trawler,

lowering a winchman down to the deck and then picking him up again a few minutes later. We even landed in someone's back garden at one point, so the winch operator could drop a parcel off to his wife. We didn't know (and obviously didn't dare ask) what was in it, but given that it was a plain brown jiffy bag and no one offered to enlighten us, speculation was rife.

This, to me, felt like the coolest job ever, and all my thoughts of flying a fast jet were now consigned to the bin; it was now rescue helicopters all the way. It felt perfect, combining my love of flying with hillwalking, something I was into in a big way, loving the fresh air, the dramatic scenery and, most of all, the solitude; the freedom to think my important teenage thoughts.

Later in the camp, I was given the opportunity to fly in one of the Shackletons. A direct descendant of the Lancaster, the Shackleton was an aircraft that was truly from the World War II era, with four big propeller engines, and, being a 'taildragger', I thought it looked like a Lancaster. I was plonked in a seat with a view at the front of the aircraft and, with the exception of a pee break, stayed in place for some five hours as the crew flew around Scotland at about 5,000 feet, doing whatever they were doing, which was never really made clear. The views were spectacular but, compared to the excitement of being on the paraffin canary, the job itself seemed very dull to me. I vowed that day that I would never want to fly a multi-engine aircraft because it was so mundane. Oh, how wrong I would turn out to be.

The Harris Academy – my then high school – was a fine educational institution and provided me with all the tools

to be successful. So said the brochure, and I know it to be true. It was just that, at the time, I lacked both the wisdom to appreciate it and the emotional maturity to make use of it. Despite having managed to pass a respectable eight O grades, the distractions of my teens (mostly beer, girls and showing off in my dad's 'champagne'-coloured Austin Ambassador) meant that I had no passes at Highers.

That university was off the table was no issue, however, because RAF officer training only required five O grades; so, as soon as I could, I applied to become a pilot and awaited my interviews at the careers office in Dundee. Though I had by now added 'realist' to my modest skill set. Knowing full well that few ever made it as pilots, I took the lead from several of my air cadet friends and applied to the police service as well.

On the day of the RAF interview, I was the most nervous I had ever been in my young life. There was a dream at stake, after all, and I had done everything in my power to ensure I had the best chance of getting through to RAF Biggin Hill and the Officer and Aircrew Selection Centre (OASC), including reading my bodyweight in textbooks and scouring broadsheet newspapers, plus practising every question I thought might conceivably come up.

I was met by a sergeant, who ushered me into a room with an officer, where I was asked some questions about myself and my career aspirations. They also asked, as they would, if I'd considered any other roles, and I answered with a resounding 'no'. It was aircrew or nothing for me. I wanted to fly. And I wanted them to know just how much.

My confidence when Dad picked me up wasn't entirely misplaced, either. In just over a week, I received my invite

to Biggin Hill and to a selection process that was days long, and also pretty complex. Bring it on, I thought airily. I can do this.

That said, I was still a little wet behind the ears. Leaving Scotland on my own was a bit daunting. These were different times, and I had never really travelled without my family, or as part of a group like the Air Cadets. Just venturing into London and then out the other side was a pretty big deal for me. So it was with a sense of satisfaction that I negotiated Bromley South Station, and finally made it to RAF Biggin Hill.

Once installed in the accommodation, and having said hello to my cohort of selectees, I settled in for a night of serious study, to ensure I was prepped for the morning. And I was right to be conscientious, because the following day I was subjected to a barrage of exams and computer-based tests, and measured and poked by medics for what felt like hours. In between these various tests, we returned to a central reception area where, every so often, the receptionist, an RAF airman, would call a name and direct its owner to the second door on the left.

This, I learned early on, was definitely not a good thing. Unlike a modern airliner, where turning left means first class, that door meant the opposite – you were not going forward to the next stage. So once 5 p.m. came around and I hadn't been directed through it, my relief was intense. Boom! I'd survived to fight another day!

Just before I'd set off, my dad had slipped me a £20 note: a substantial sum of money back in those days. 'For emergencies,' he'd told me. 'In case you need to buy yourself some snacks or a drink in the bar and want to buy someone

a beer.' And there was indeed a bar area, near the candidate's cornered-off area of the airmen's dining room. However, determined not to squander any opportunity to study by hanging around in a bar drinking, I scurried back to my room and my books. Little did I know – and would only find out on the train on the way home – that the socializing was also a part of the selection process; seeing the candidates in a social environment was just as important as any test they put us through during the day. Thankfully, they didn't hold it against me.

Day two was dominated by what are still colloquially known as 'shark-infested custard problems', a mix of reasonably complex team-building conundrums that we were each required in turn to try and resolve as a leader, working with a team of other candidates. They were an opportunity to show leadership, followership and emotional intelligence, after which we faced desktop versions of the same type of problems, both as an individual and as a team.

To my delight, I had avoided the 'door of doom' once again, and, at the end of this day, we were all given a letter explaining what would come next, including the fact that, whether positive or negative, our results would take a while to arrive. I then returned home, and on the train back, just as we were passing Alnwick, I saw an RAF Sea King flying up the coast. I let myself dream, just a little. One day that could be *me*.

I returned to good news: the police had accepted me. Assuming my RAF dream turned out to be short-lived, I at least had employment; I was to start training at the Scottish Police College in my first week. Which would mean a big

decision, but I still had a few weeks' grace. I wasn't ready to give up on the RAF just yet.

The clock continued to tick, however, and with three weeks already passed, I knew it would be wrong of me to procrastinate further. So I decided, with just a little family pressure, to do the sensible thing and accept the police job. After all, as things stood, I had no viable alternative and I needed to stand on my own two feet. But just a week later, and with my flying dream on indefinite hold now, Dad called me in from the garden to take a call from 'some RAF chap'.

The chap in question was a wing commander from OASC, and he wanted to know, if I wasn't selected for pilot, whether I would consider any other role, such as airman aircrew. It was obvious that I hadn't made the grade, and though I knew I should feel grateful that they were considering me for something else, I was gutted. So I told the wing commander that it was pilot or bust for me, and resigned myself to heading off to police college.

Then came the letter, in an 'On Her Majesty's Service' brown envelope. I assumed, given our conversation, it would be bad news. Yet I opened it to find that they had offered me a post anyway – not as a pilot, but as sergeant aircrew air loadmaster.

It's amazing how a young mind can change in an instant. For all my 'pilot or bust' nonsense, I felt nothing but elated; I could still be on rescue helicopters, not as a pilot but as a winchman, and suddenly that didn't seem so bad after all. In fact, it made me realize just how badly I wanted to be in blue – not police blue, but RAF blue.

I started my six weeks of initial training at RAF Swindon on 12 June 1999. Because of my years in the Air

Cadets, which had been exactly like this, I had a huge advantage, and sailed through recruit training. I also somehow managed to be awarded the trophy for best recruit.

None of that, however, was on my mind – far from it – when I arrived at RAF Finningley for the Airman Aircrew Initial Training Course. This was a whole different level. Where I'd coasted initially, now I struggled to keep up. The basic problem was not only that I lacked sufficient maturity, but that I also lacked the maturity to accept my deficiencies: in short, that I was neither mentally or physically equipped for this course. No wonder my distress when, having done the entire course, I was told I didn't meet the standard, and would be recoursed back to the beginning.

The blow was huge. I was lost. Was the RAF really for me, after all?

I had a week until the start of the next (same) course and sought the counsel of Jack Daniels on several occasions, in the Ritzy nightclub and an eclectic bar called Camelots, in Doncaster. It was there, one night, that I fell in with the medical staff who support the AAITC on their outdoor activities, and one of the nurses offered me a shoulder to air my woes. I owe her: she gave me advice that allowed me to pick myself up and keep moving forward in the face of what seemed a life-changing catastrophe. It wasn't an earth-shattering revelation, but it was such sound and wise counsel that I still use it as my mantra today. It was, in brief, that nothing is ever as bad as you think it is, nobody else probably cares, and nothing will change unless you change it yourself.

I stopped moping and vacillating and swallowed my pride, and two days later I started again. This time, my

wounds licked and important lessons learned, I passed the AAITC eight weeks later. To this day, I have never done anything so mentally and physically demanding. It taught me a lot about myself and also made me realize that OASC had been correct: I was not equipped to be a pilot at eighteen.

Now a sergeant, I started my training as an air loadmaster but, on day one at the school, it was bad news. The first Gulf War was a couple of months in and seeing huge demand being put on the Chinook fleet; we were all told that we would be doing a short rotary course to be streamed to the Chinook as helicopter crewmen.

Once again, I was despondent. I had always wanted to be a search and rescue guy. I wanted to help people stranded in the mountains, have adventures, be heroic – not be crew on a lumbering support helicopter. But at least we were off to war, which was obviously what we'd trained for; so, putting aside my disappointment, I started in earnest that morning to become a helicopter crewman.

The bad news, however, did not stop there. On day three of the course, we were told that, 'due to competing demands', there were going to be some further changes. And they were big ones: two of us wouldn't even end up as helicopter crew. No, we'd be going to the Hercules.

This was my worst nightmare. Not just a lumbering support helicopter, potentially a lumbering support *plane*. Me, who had vowed, after my brain-numbing experience on that Shackleton, that I would never, *ever*, become a fixed-wing guy. I hoped some other young airmen, who didn't care as much as I did, would be the ones whose names were called out that day.

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But of course they weren't. It was me and one other equally unhappy guy selected for the Herc, and duly fast-tracked to meet a training slot in just a few weeks' time, on the ponderously named Hercules Operational Conversion Unit.

I could not have felt more miserable. While the 'heroes' were going to fly the search and rescue and support choppers, what were we going to be? The delivery guys. And even worse, we were all 'fast-tracked' together, to grasp the fundamentals before transferring to our respective aircraft-specific conversion units, so I was reminded of this fact every day. While others were learning exciting stuff, such as how to undersling loads beneath their helicopters, we were learning . . . the principles of food hygiene.

And didn't everyone know it. I quickly discovered that we were referred to as the 'tea and coffee queens'. Trainee helicopter crewmen would come into the school crew room and never miss the chance to let us know they'd like two sugars, please.

I put a brave face on it, because you had to, but I was gutted. My dream of being a search and rescue helicopter winchman was dissolving faster than the sugar in that bloody tea. I felt more disappointed than I'd ever been in my young life, and even questioned whether an air force that had so cruelly denied me my dream was the right place for me.

Little did I know that I was, in fact, joining the ranks of some of the most incredible, heroic people I would ever encounter. Still less did I realize that I had just begun what would become a lifelong love affair. With the most iconic military aircraft ever built.

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3. An Icon Is Born

‘Smile. We’re going to build a thousand of these.’

Stanley Beltz, 1911–1955
Lockheed Martin test pilot

Untroubled by the fact that, some thirty-six years in the future, a misguided young RAF airman would dismiss it so rudely, the first C-130 Hercules rolled off the production line in 1954, an aircraft that would go on to become one of the most important in aviation history.

A little under five years after the end of World War II, the USA was entering the Korean War, and found its trusty C-47 Skytrain – one of Eisenhower’s five World War II-winning weapons – was now falling short. As things stood, the US Air Force had to use their C-47s in combination with their much larger C-124 aircraft based in Japan, in a two-step ‘spoke and hub’ model, whereas the ideal would be a single aircraft-type with the capability to airlift combat troops over medium distances and also deliver them to small, rough airfields.

Some new thinking was clearly needed and several big aviation firms, including Lockheed, Boeing, Douglas and Fairchild, all set to work. Each factory had the same specifications, issued by the USAF, for a new, currently only

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theoretical, ‘Swiss army knife’ of tactical airlifters. At that point, the specifications given were so challenging that the Lockheed Martin engineers honestly didn’t think they could get anywhere near them, either in terms of performance or manoeuvrability. They tried, though, putting together a proposal using all the latest technologies, including new turboprop engines. This complicated and relatively new jet technology was challenging to incorporate on a large transport propeller aircraft, but would turn out to be the key to their success.

The turboprop is a jet engine that powers a propeller, a big change from the piston engines that powered the DC-3, its military C-47 variant and other early transport aircraft. Turboprops work at a constant speed, but the props can be twisted at their root in order to provide more or less power, as required by the pilot. Crucially, the blades can also be turned right around in order to provide reverse thrust – something which would give the C-130 such an advantage over any of its predecessors. A new era in tactical air transport was born.

In July 1951, the aerospace giant that was Lockheed had by now seen off the competition, and was given the green light to build and fly two of its experimental transport aircraft, which it would later name Hercules in homage to the Roman god known for his strength and many adventures. Then, on 23 August 1954, test pilots Stanley Beltz and Roy Wimmer started up the first one and tentatively taxied it from the terminal at Burbank Airport, California.

For its time – for *any* time – the Hercules was an arresting, slightly odd-looking aircraft, but then it was never intended to be a show pony. Its looks were a reflection of

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its capabilities. Its enormous nose housed an astonishing twenty-three cockpit windows, allowing the crew maximum visibility even in steep and sticky situations, and the wings were set high (in line with the top rather than the midline of the fuselage) to allow the Herc to operate from even the roughest airfields. It wasn't slick, it wasn't sleek, and it certainly wasn't pretty, but it was fast (it could reach speeds of 360 miles per hour) and, with its low centre of gravity, it could outperform any comparable machine that had come before it. With those four engines, moreover, it also had sufficient surplus power to pressurize the enormous 40,000-pound freight bay – something that would enable it to operate efficiently at high altitudes.

The noise those engines made, everyone recalled, was incredible: a low hum that has since become the signature of the Hercules. But on that day, all that the assembled mechanics and engineers could do was look on and pray that it was as good as it sounded; that they had got it right, and it would live up to their faith in it.

As the aircraft turned and taxied onto the runway, the noise began building, then it leapt forward, much faster than anyone was expecting. The ugly duckling of the Lockheed stable was moving! Those on the ground thought that Stanley was bringing the nose up way too early, but then the aircraft lifted off, and roared magnificently past everyone standing on the flight line.

Mouths dropped open in shock. The first C-130 Hercules had taken off, and it had only taken 855 feet for it to become airborne! (For comparison, that was less than a fifth of the distance normally required by aircraft of similar size.)

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Beltz probably had an inkling about the calibre of aircraft he was taking up for its maiden flight. He's quoted as having said afterwards that 'she's a real flying machine. I could land it crossways on the runway if I had to.'

Hercules was clearly going to be a bigger game-changer than anyone had thought – a military aircraft that could land and take off almost anywhere. An aircraft that, at least in theory, was so strong and powerful that it could even land on one engine in a crisis. An aircraft that would go on to prove its worth for seven decades.

Beltz reckoned they'd sell a thousand. In fact, they went on to sell over 2,500.

Rather older than the aircraft that would come to be so associated with it, 47 Squadron was the only one in the RAF to be entirely equipped with the C-130 Hercules, since being allocated its first ones back in 1969.

The squadron itself is far older. Formed in Beverley, Yorkshire, in 1916, as a reconnaissance squadron, the unit also holds the unique accolade of being the only RAF squadron ever to have fought under its own flag, a tricolour which now adorns the shoulder of those who serve on it.

The squadron has a rich history, which spans almost the entire life of the Royal Air Force. One of the only exceptions was during the Russian Civil War in 1919–20, when the squadron was hastily, and temporarily, disbanded, and redesignated 'A Flight'.

British involvement in a civil war on foreign territory was obviously politically sensitive, so this 'rebrand', which happened not long after the squadron was deployed to support the White Army, was – in what would turn out to

be a sign of things to come – all part of a covert operation. All personnel were personally recruited and conveyed to Russia by Squadron Leader (later Air Vice-Marshal) Ray Collishaw, and since all were volunteers (so technically not RAF crew) and no longer flying under a British flag, it was possible for it to be truthfully announced in the House of Commons that ‘no RAF squadron is involved in a foreign civil war’.

The participation of British troops in the Russian Civil War was, in fact, extensive. In the early stages, Collishaw was, incredibly, even appointed temporary governor of Crimea, and A Flight formed the sole aviation support for one million soldiers, organized into three armies. Historically, it also achieved a couple of air firsts. It sank nineteen out of twenty-three armed Red Army gunboats, and, having comprehensively decimated the opposing ground forces, killed off the use of a cavalry as a viable weapon. It was also the only RAF squadron in recorded history to conduct a campaign without any whisky – but, unsurprisingly, not without vodka.

After mounting political pressure in the UK, A Flight was recalled in early 1920, so it avoided the final show-down of the Russian Civil War, but its red, white and blue tricolour lives on. Though with the white having darkened to yellow in the harsh Russian climate, a new colour scheme of red, blue and yellow was adopted from then on.

The squadron was re-formed in 1920 and spent much of the period between World Wars I and II in East Africa and the Mediterranean. This included Egypt and Sudan, where it was mostly engaged in reconnaissance, and where the squadron’s official and unofficial emblems have their roots.

While 47 Squadron is unique within the RAF in having its own flag, like all squadrons it also has its own official crest and standard. ‘Squadron standards’ were introduced in 1943, and to be eligible squadrons had to have twenty-five years’ standing, or the monarch’s appreciation for outstanding operations. This is the squadron’s official flag, and is what was laid up in the rotunda of RAF College Cranwell, in September 2023, after 47 disbanded. It will remain there until a new role is found for the squadron and the new team comes to collect it.

The official crest shows a demoiselle crane on a background of white and blue water, which represents the White and Blue Nile rivers, whose confluence is at the city of Khartoum. The Latin legend, ‘The name of the Nile will be an omen of your strength’, adorns it. The unofficial badge, which predates the official one, shows a sun rising over a pyramid with the legend *Sans Peur*, meaning ‘Not Afraid’ or ‘Without Fear’. It also has the word *Khartoum* underneath.

After spending World War II based in East Africa, in 1946 the squadron left behind its legacy of flying fighter bombers and reconnaissance aircraft and was equipped as a transport squadron instead. Returning to the UK, it first flew converted Halifax bombers, before switching to the more modern Hastings, which were rushed into service to allow the unit to support the Berlin Airlift in 1948. The aircraft mainly carried coal into the city, delivering 22,000 tons across the air bridge, in 3,000 sorties.

In 1956, 47 Squadron was the first in the RAF to equip with the new Blackburn Beverley transport aircraft, perhaps a nod to its roots in the Yorkshire town. This aircraft

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