

British military plane downed in suspected Iraqi insurgent attack

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A British Royal Air Force (RAF) transport plane crashed on Sunday, January 30, northwest of Baghdad, killing all 10 servicemen aboard. While the exact cause of the incident is yet to be determined, it is suspected that Iraqi resistance fighters were responsible.

The Hercules C-130 came down on the same day as Iraq's sham election was being conducted. The plane was en route from Baghdad airport to Balad, a town 40 miles from the capital, when the incident occurred. Wreckage was strewn across a wide area, indicating that the plane exploded in mid-air.

Nine RAF members and one soldier died in what was the single most devastating incident suffered by the British forces since the beginning of the Iraq war. Among the casualties was dual Australian-British citizen Flight Lieutenant Paul Pardoel—the first Australian military casualty of the war.

Two Iraqi resistance groups claimed responsibility for the crash. Ansar al-Islam declared that they had shot the plane down with an anti-tank missile. However, a number of experts rejected this claim as implausible, given the height at which the plane was flying.

Al Jazeera broadcast videotape issued by the 1920 Revolution Brigade that showed two rockets or missiles being fired, followed by footage of a plane's wreckage. The organisation has previously claimed responsibility for a number of attacks, including the downing of two US helicopters last August.

It remains unclear whether the tape is genuine, but a number of experts believe that at least part of the footage is authentic. "I think it is a genuine Hercules crash, with the other bits superimposed on it," Andrew Brookes, of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said. "It is possible someone has decided to cash in and produce a video. It could be someone trying to convey the impression after the election that 'we are

still here and able to do things.'"

Tim Ripley, defence analyst at the Centre of Defence and International Security Studies, added: "The rebels have not shot down any big planes before, so it's not as if they'd be recycling old footage of wreckage."

Resistance fighters have frequently targeted foreign planes in the area, which is an insurgent stronghold. Despite the presence of a major US airbase, insurgents effectively control Balad. The *Times* reported that villagers celebrated the crash, believing that a local tribe had shot down the plane.

Several thousand surface-to-air missiles disappeared in the aftermath of the US-led invasion, and many are believed to be in the hands of the insurgents. The *Daily Mirror* and the *Independent* have also suggested that the resistance has imported advanced hand-held Stinger missiles from Afghanistan. The CIA originally supplied the weapon to Mujahedin fighting against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

The crash is another damaging blow for the occupying forces in Iraq. Large parts of the country remain effective no-go zones for foreign forces, and there are few areas in which the coalition can transport troops, fuel and supplies with any degree of safety. The insurgents control many of Iraq's major roads and highways, and have forced the occupying forces to largely rely on air transportation.

Sunday's incident calls into question the ability of the foreign troops to move anywhere within Iraq, whether by land or by air. "If we lose freedom of air movement it will be a massive problem. The investigation will conclude what exactly happened, but at the moment it looks more and more like enemy action," an unnamed British officer in Iraq told the *Independent*. "The C-130 has anti-missile defences, so this is quite puzzling."

The plane was flying at a very high altitude, which has led to speculation that an internal explosion was more likely to have caused the crash. Such an explosion could have been caused by the accidental detonation of weaponry or ordnance being transported by the Hercules, or by a bomb planted by resistance fighters.

If such a hidden explosive device did bring the plane down, it will be another indication of the extent to which the resistance has infiltrated the coalition's stooge Iraqi security forces. In December, a suicide bomber killed 22 people after penetrating a US military base outside Mosul.

Irrespective of the cause of the fatal crash, the incident has damaged the British government. Prime Minister Tony Blair issued a perfunctory statement on Sunday, releasing few details. He was no doubt anxious to avoid any distraction from the "good news" story of the election. While there was no shortage of hypocritical official condolences and paeans bestowed upon the deceased, the death of the 10 men was little more than a political irritant for the government.

Prior to last Sunday, 29 British troops had been killed in combat in Iraq and 43 more had died in non-combat incidents. Opposition to the war within Britain has continued to increase, particularly in the wake of allegations that British soldiers have been involved in the torture of Iraqi prisoners. A survey conducted for the *Guardian* last month found that just 38 percent in Britain thought that the war was justified.

Despite popular antiwar sentiment, the government has increased the number of British troops stationed in Iraq. In early January, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon announced that another 400 troops were being dispatched, supposedly in order to secure the election. On January 27, the government revealed that it was sending an additional 220 soldiers to help cover the withdrawal of the 1,400 Dutch troops that is scheduled for March. The total number of British troops in Iraq is now approximately 9,000.

The Hercules crash has punctured Blair's efforts to use the election as a means of neutralising antiwar sentiment and criticisms of the troop build-up. "I know the war in Iraq deeply divided opinion here and right round the world," the prime minister said on Sunday, "but I also know that whatever views people have of how we came to this point, we all of us will want to embrace the birth of Iraq's new democracy."

Foreign Minister Jack Straw then launched an aggressive attack on all those who continued to oppose the war, denouncing demands for the government to set a deadline for the withdrawal of troops as "utterly irresponsible." Instead, Straw suggested that the new Iraqi government would request an extension of the United Nations mandate that is due to expire at the end of the year. This would see British troops remaining in Iraq beyond 2006.

While an indefinite occupation is openly discussed, the Hercules crash raises questions as to exactly what Britain's troops are doing in Iraq. The standard presentation in much of the media is that the soldiers are engaged in reconstruction and security work, and, in contrast to the heavy-handed American forces, are working in cooperation with local Iraqi communities.

These myths were exploded with the publication of photographs allegedly showing British troops committing abuses similar to those recorded in Abu Ghraib prison. Three soldiers are currently before a court martial, accused of indecency, assault and sexually humiliating Iraqi civilians. Sunday's plane crash has now provoked questions regarding the activities of the Special Air Service (SAS) and its coordination with US forces.

It remains unclear why the Hercules was flying to the US airbase in Balad, which lies outside Britain's main area of operations in Iraq. The base does, however, also serve as an outpost for the SAS. According to the *Independent*, Labour MPs speculated that those killed in the crash were involved in operations along the Iranian border. Other reports have referred to the flight as an unspecified "secret mission."

Officials at the Ministry of Defence have refused to release any details of the mission, but have insisted that the flight was routine, whilst Blair's spokesman warned the media against indulging in "conspiracy theories."



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