

An Aussie Chinook medium-lift helicopter is dwarfed by two Mi-26s – true giants of the sky.
PIC BY PETTY OFFICER DAVE CONNOLLY

the cavemen are busy today



A Chinook aircrewman mans the door-mounted M134 Dillon minigun.
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'The Cavemen' of the the Rotary Wing Group, Tech Support Troop, C Squadron, 5th Aviation Regiment, at Kandahar Airfield are in the middle of a regular 10-day avionics test and blade removal from the rear rotor of a CH-47D Chinook.

Craftsman James Chapman is proud of the caveman moniker, spray painted and heat-etched onto nearly every surface and vehicle the detachment owns [and, if today's crafties are up to speed, many vehicles they don't own, too – Ed].

"We are the guardian of the dinosaurs", he says, nodding to the Chinook on the concrete outside the Australian 'clamshell' tent that serves as their workshop.

Soon, six-barrelled M134D miniguns will be fitted to the machine, once the avionics techs ensure the electronic self protection suite operates correctly.

One of the miniguns – which can spew 3000 rounds a minute – is being serviced in a sealed workshop in the rear of the tent. Corporal Phillip Bell has the disassembled barrels laid out neatly on a bench and is carefully cleaning the remainder of the gun.

He dusts off brass shavings, comfortable with heavily greased hands and stained t-shirt, hallmarks of the hours he puts in at his workbench.

The Australian Rotary Wing Group operates from Kandahar, in Afghanistan's south, their two, dark-coloured machines nestled among Dutch equivalents, almost bright green by comparison, and a row of brand new pale khaki US CH-47Fs.

To describe Kandahar Airfield as bustling is an understatement. It is expected that, with the influx of US forces into Afghanistan, one aircraft will, on average, lift off or land on the airfield every three minutes. Simply put, it is one of the busiest airfields on the globe.

At night, the strip sounds busier, with jets, prop aircraft and helicopters crossing the airfield constantly.

"We recently had a C-17 land every five minutes," Craftsman Chapman says, reclining on a timber deck between two iso containers.

From the deck, the airfield stretches away, a concrete ribbon lined with Black Hawks, Chinooks, Kiowas, Sea Kings and Apaches. Across the airstrip are parked white Mi-8s, while, at the far end, two colossal Mi-26s sit brooding in the sun, dwarfing all the machines arrayed around them.

The Rotary Wing Group maintains good relations with the Coalition forces around KAF, and have even put some time in helping their Canadian counterparts come to terms with their own newly-acquired Chinooks.



Corporal Donnell Riddle mans a Chinook-mounted minigun.
PIC BY CORPORAL RACHEL INGRAM

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"It's good to see how well we are trained," Craftsman Jason Buttigieg says.

"The Yanks have four or five different blokes to do the same job as one of us."

Aircrew conduct pre flight checks before each mission over Afghanistan's south.

Weapons are loaded, cargo is secured and touch-ups are applied to the nose art of 'Rough n Reddy'.

Corporal Don Riddle is an aircrewman with the Australian Chinook contingent based at Kandahar from where they perform combat-support, quick-response-force and medical/casualty-evacuation missions.

Among coalition soldiers, Corporal Riddle and the Australian detachment have made a name for themselves by going 'above and beyond', carrying mail and creature comforts for coalition ground forces in Afghanistan's south.

"If we can fit it in the aircraft we can take it," he says. "Mail is a big priority for us."

Boxes of doughnuts or other big-base treats are also delivered to far-flung patrol bases.

Having just directed the loading of a Ford utility vehicle into the cargo hold of an Australian CH-47D Chinook helicopter, Warrant Officer Class 2 Lee Maloney moves quickly to enable the aircraft to continue to its next location.

In one resupply mission, the aircraft will visit a number of forward operating bases and at each location, it is important that the aircraft spends as little time as possible on the ground.



Maintenance crew inspect a Chinook after a flight.
PIC BY PETTY OFFICER DAVE CONNOLLY



Warrant Officer Class 2 Lee Maloney moves to get his chopper back in the air quickly.
PIC BY CORPORAL RACHEL INGRAM

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