



Air Force Base unlikely to close as cargo heads north

By Katy Stech
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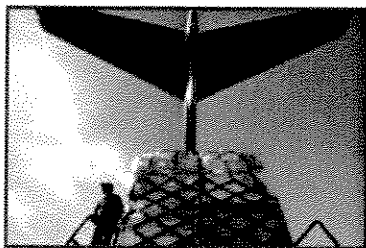
Melissa Haneline
The Post and Courier/File

Pallets of cargo bound for bases in Germany and Iraq are loaded onto a C-17 at Charleston Air Force Base in January of 2007.



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Senior Airman Jacob Loftin (from left), Tech. Sgt. Kenneth Brooks and Lawrence Curtis push a pallet of supplies into the belly of a C-17.



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Lawrence Curtis, a civilian work leader at the Charleston Air Force Base, waits to load 16 pallets of cargo weighing 71,728 pounds into a C-17 that will make deliveries to bases in Germany and Iraq back in January.

Since 2003, the road to Iraq has run through the Charleston Air Force Base, but in January most of that traffic is moving north.

The Air Force on Thursday said that much of the 600,000 pounds of cargo and supplies now being shipped to Iraq, Afghanistan and Southwest Asia will be shipped through bases in Delaware and New Jersey.

But despite the early worries of South Carolina political and business leaders — recalling the loss of the local Navy base more than a decade ago — it's not a sign of trouble for the Charleston air base.

"This operation was always meant to be temporary," said U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. "This won't affect Charleston one bit, and it's not going to change the Air Force base's mission. No planes are leaving."

For four years or more, the Charleston Air Force Base has moved everything from towels and TV monitors to Humvee armor and ammunition to military operations overseas on a daily basis, using its 50 C-17 cargo planes.

The local base took over those duties after a snowstorm collapsed the roof of a warehouse at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware in February 2003. That forced military contractors in the Northeast to truck supplies south to Charleston to send overseas.

Moving that hub back to the Dover base, which has been refurbished, and McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, will save about a day on delivery time and nearly \$40 million in annual costs. Most of the cargo suppliers are in the Northeast.

For years, Charleston Air Force personnel handled the work of two bases and took great pride in it. But Graham said that continuing that sort of operation was taxing and overextending the tours of some reservists.

"It's just reality setting in," Graham said. "What Charleston has done is heroic and, quite frankly, unsustainable."

Despite the move of most supplies to other bases, Col. John Michel, the 437th Air Life Wing Vice Commander, said it will not amount to much change for base personnel.

"We at Charleston have no indication of a permanent party manpower shift at this time," Michel said in a statement. "However, we approximate that should a manpower shift occur, it will not exceed 50 people."

Local business leaders were pleased the move will not endanger the Air Force base.

"From our perspective, we would have loved to see it remain here permanently, but that was never the intent," said Mary Graham, the Chamber of Commerce's senior vice president of public policy.

The Charleston Air Force base will continue to move some supplies to the Middle East, including the mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles built in the Lowcountry. It also will continue to run its regular missions to South America and Africa.

"The Charleston community and the Air Force have enjoyed a strong working relationship since the 1940s," said U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, R-Hanahan. "Charleston Air Force Base has always met the evolving needs of the Air Force, and I have every reason to believe that it will continue to do so in the future."

Daniel Goure, vice president of the Lexington Institute, an Arlington, Va.-based military think tank, said it would be wrong to read anything into the Air Force's move.

"We've been through a (base realignment and closure) and you survived for a reason," Goure said. "I think that's a confirmation of the value of the facility in South Carolina."

Graham said the role of the C-17s remains unchanged and that a plan to extend the current runway at the base is a sign that the Air Force plans to have a large Lowcountry presence for years to come.

"No one in the Air Force would ever dream of an Air Force without the Charleston Air Force Base, just like no one in the Marine Corps would ever dream of the Marines without Parris Island," Graham said.

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