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The Combat Caravan could carry passengers, packages... or missiles.



Orbital ATK

By Eric Tegler Jul 22, 2016

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If the Cessna Caravan looks familiar to you, it should. Cessna has built more than 2,500 of these turboprops since the prototype flew in 1982. They're popular as short-haul airliners in places like the Caribbean. More than 250 Caravans haul cargo while painted in the unmistakable colors of FedEx. But there are a small number of Caravans that haul Hellfire missiles, electro-optical targeting, and reconnaissance systems.

During the recent Farnborough Airshow in the U.K., Cessna announced it has received FAA certification and is now offering wing hard-points for the Grand Caravan EX. Hard-points are structurally reinforced sections of a wing where you mount pylons or the other structures that carry external stores like fuel tanks or weapons. The upshot: This is a Cessna that could go into battle.

The AC-208B "Combat Caravan" has been doing this for more than seven years, actually, and has flown combat sorties in Iraq (which has a fleet of eight Combat Caravans). Cessna refused to discuss it. That's partly because Combat Caravans have a sensitive connection with U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) and partly because the Combat Caravan wasn't developed and modified by Cessna.

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The war-worthy Cessna came courtesy of Alliant Techsystems (now Orbital ATK), which has offered counter insurgency and intelligence/surveillance/reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities by outfitting various aircraft—Lockheed Martin C-130s, Bombardier Dash-8s, Hawker Beechcraft King Airs—with networked sensors and weapons. As the U.S. began rebuilding Iraq's air force in 2008, it contracted ATK to develop and modify a militarized version of the Cessna Grand Caravan for the Iraqi Air Force. Within 11 months, ATK completed live fire testing and delivered its first aircraft to Iraq.

As odd as this all sounds, the AC-208B Combat Caravan isn't the first Cessna to fly combat sorties. Not nearly. The Army used several hundred Cessna L-19 Bird Dogs (based on the company's civilian 305A) as artillery spotters and tactical reconnaissance aircraft during the Korean War in the 1950s. Bird Dogs also flew in the Vietnam War with U.S. and South Vietnamese forces until superseded by another Cessna, the O-2 Skymaster Forward Air Control aircraft that was based on Cessna's civilian 337.



The Nintendo Switch Was Hiding In Plain Sight All Along



Iraqi Air Force Combat Caravan

US Air Force

The AC-208B differs from its civilian counterpart, the Grand Caravan, chiefly in what it carries. ATK fitted the initial versions for Iraq and Lebanon with features including the company's STAR mission system, which gives the airplane day/night reconnaissance and fire control capabilities. STAR includes a compact motor protection unit, an Avedon 18-inch color display, and an integrated fire control system. A BAE Systems AAR-47/ALE-47 Defensive Countermeasures System dispenses flares or chaff to throw off enemy radars/infrared-guided munitions. Ballistic panels provide protection to the cockpit and passengers. Datalinks offer real-time video and an integrated laser designator illuminates targets for the Combat Caravan's Hellfire missiles.

The air-to-surface AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, carried on wing pylons, feature a blast fragmentation/incendiary warhead suitable for tanks or other targets. The Caravan made its combat debut in 2014 when Iraqi AC-208s launched

Hellfires at ISIS targets in Fallujah and Ramadi. Since then, the Iraqi AF has continued to hit insurgents with the Cessnas. This March, an Iraqi AC-208 went down near Kirkuk. ISIS claimed to have shot down an AC-208 using anti-aircraft artillery.

Combat Caravans aren't just serving in Iraq. Other versions are flying in Afghanistan, Argentina, Honduras, Kenya, Lebanon, Mauritania, Niger, and Yemen. Several more are scheduled for delivery to the Philippines in 2018. All have been provided by the US, either through direct foreign military sales or security assistance donations. Islamic insurgencies in most of the countries that operate AC-208s have provided the motivation. Foreign crews are trained in the U.S. by a combination of contractor and government personnel, likely including AFSOC trainers. The Air Force won't confirm this and says it does not "own" any Combat Caravans.

Like any other Grand Caravan, the AC-208 cruises along at about 213 mph behind an 876 horsepower Pratt & Whitney PT6A-140 turboprop. It's just that rather than taking you to the Bahamas for vacation or bringing your latest Amazon purchase to the local airport, this Cessna is snooping on bad guys and sometimes taking them out.

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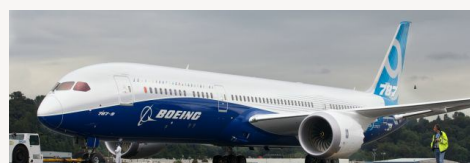
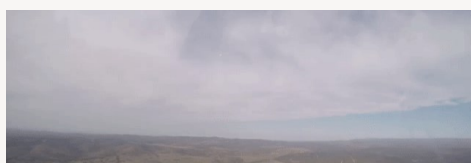
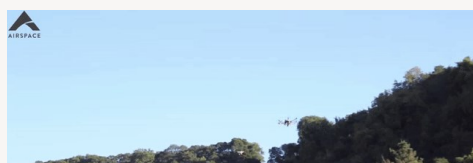
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