As 2005 began to fade ahead of heralding aircraft would be worth the three-year wait. Reaching fever pitch. Many were asking if the quality of what would be in store. Further silence on the website, offering a tantalising glimpse time with no word from the developer. Should be available as you read this. Look float. Just Flight is also releasing a boxed arctic operations and a maritime variant on release a version of the Lockheed C-130 Hercules for Microsoft Flight Simulator. Things went quiet for quite some time with no word from the developer. Soon, however, screenshots began to appear on the website, offering a tantalising glimpse of what would be in store. Further silence followed, in which anticipation and rumour reached fever pitch. Many were asking if the aircraft would be worth the three-year wait. As 2005 began to fade ahead of heralding the arrival of 2006, the aircraft was finally released.

The public unveiling was not without its disappointment. However, Captain Sim quickly responded with an update that addressed many of the reported issues. Shortly afterwards the company released an expansion pack for the Hercules C-130-J model and expressed an intention to continue with a range of expansions including an intriguing model on skis for arctic operations and a maritime variant on floats. Just Flight is also releasing a boxed version of the aircraft on DVD, which should be available as you read this. Look out for a companion review in our next issue and a very special Just Flight Hercules competition! In this review we concentrate on the base pack and the newly released J variant in their download forms, direct from the developer. Captain Sim, to assess if the long gestation period during development has given birth to an aircraft of quality or disappointment.

The Hercules is something of an iconic transport aircraft and arose out of a requirement by the United States Air Force for a turboprop-equipped freighter. The first production prototype flew in 1951 with the most recent “F” variant first taking to the air in 1994. The Lockheed Hercules has an enviable reputation of having been in constant production for more than 50 years, to both a civil and military operator base. The Hercules this aircraft has undertaken over the years are extensive. In addition to its cargo-hauling role, the aircraft sees service in search and rescue roles, Special Forces deployment, oil slick dispersal and a massive range of duties, even taking to the air as a military gunship. The aircraft is operated both by civilian agencies and the military. The military use it as a cargo workhorse and a transporter of personnel, spreading far beyond the initial deployment with the US Air Force to many military forces around the world. The United Kingdom and the United States, both key operators, also use Hercules aircraft as support aircraft to their world famous display teams, the Red Arrows and Blue Angels respectively, in addition to more conventional military duties.

Graphical excellence
Very often, we talk about an FS2004 aircraft as having an excellent external model, but in the case of the Captain Sim Hercules, this seems to be a gross understatement, with the aircraft modelling and texturing being taken to an incredible level. This is particularly evident when viewing the aircraft in spot view, where its appearance is undeniably photographic.

Many simmers forgo the external inspection as part of their pre-flight checks, preferring to jump straight into the cockpit, but this is an aircraft that cries out to be viewed and inspected. We heartily recommend a pre-flight walk-around, either in spot view or with a camera utility to really appreciate the quality of this aircraft. Every detail down to the last rivet is reproduced authentically in concert with superb animations for all the control surfaces and the propeller blades of each of the four engines. An option to configure the aircraft in a secure parking mode is also implemented. At the press of a button on the custom-made in-cockpit panel-switcher, wheel chocks, warning flags, duct covers and skirt exclusions are added to the aircraft model. The “E” and “K” and HC-130 variants of the aircraft are included in the base pack, the “K” model being equipped with an air-to-air refuelling probe. The “F” variant is also available as an additional expansion pack from Captain Sim, which will also be covered in our review. The “F” model exhibits a significant revamping of the external model to support the modified fuselage, with no less than three Doughty Aerospace powerplants as an alternative to the four-bladed Allison engines seen on the “E”, “K” and HC-130 variants.

The 3D models include all the usual array of moving parts we have come to expect in FS2004, including opening aircraft doors and animated control surfaces, along with the rear door and ramp that are associated with Hercules operations and air-drops.

If this was not enough, additional features include the ability to position a military Hummer vehicle behind the aircraft, via an icon on the panel-switcher. The vehicle animates fully under icon control and can be seen to reverse into the cargo bay of the aircraft. In addition, the FS2004 “wing fold” key is assigned to display a national flag out of the cockpit windscreen, see if the Union Jack, Stars and Stripes or a host of other national flags or NATO emblems. These finishing touches set this aircraft apart from much of its competition.

The base pack installs liveries for a range of forces, comprising the Royal Air Force, United States Air Force, the Italian, Australian, Canadian and Swedisch Air Forces. The United States Air Force and the British RAF are particularly well represented with various schemes included in the base installer, including the much-loved 1980’s RAF ‘camo’ livery. The HC-130 is a specialist variant of the aircraft, in use by the US Coastguard and is represented by the distinctive red and white livery of that organisation.

The United States Coastguard HC-130 is a fascinating inclusion and adds additional mission flexibility to the package. This aircraft is the workhorse of the US Coastguard in locations as diverse as Alaska, Hawaii and the North Atlantic. The North Atlantic-based aircraft also form the backbone of the International Ice Patrol (IIP). Flying seven-hour sorties, these aircraft patrol the North Atlantic in search patterns at altitudes as low as 5000 feet, spotting icebergs that can be a hazard to sea-borne navigation and provide a vital service to maritime safety. The inclusion of this variant adds an extra dimension to the whole Captain Sim Hercules experience, opening up further opportunities for mission variety.

In addition to the liveries included in the base pack, a swathe of freely downloadable liveries are available from the Captain Sim website (www.captainsim.com). At the time of going to press, there are currently 63 such liveries available for download. While the great majority of these liveries represent military operations from around the world, particular note should be made of one also included for a company that goes by the name of Air Contractors. Based in Dublin, this organisation owns and operates the only civilian Hercules in Europe, employing the aircraft on a wide variety of tasks. We have an interview with Jon Stratfull, the Operations Manager at Air Contractors, at the end of this review. The inclusion of the Air Contractors aircraft in this package has expanded the scope of the simulation beyond military-based sorties. This aircraft
deserves to find general appeal with those who also enjoy the dynamic and large flight to diverse airfields in civilian as well as military aircraft. (Combining this product with FSX:charged reviewed on page 30, for example, could provide purpose to your flying and hours of fun! – Ed)

Internal details

Of course, the finest external model in the world would only be window dressing if the interior cockpit and body of the aircraft did not reflect the aircraft modelled on the exterior. Taking our seat in the 2D cockpit, all apprehension immediately evaporated after viewing the photo-realistic representation of the Hercules cockpit in all its glory. As our regular readers will be aware, we expressed some concern with the previous offering from Captain Sim, the Boeing 707, with regard to the legibility of the cockpit instruments. Both the Boeing 707 and the C130 Hercules use the same technique of photo-realistic panel segments, but there the similarity ends. It seems clear that the development team at Captain Sim has listened to general comments, as the Hercules cockpit is crisply and clearly represented and we had no issues with gauge sizes and legibility of the analogue panel. The main panel has been effectively split into two pieces to ensure legibility, with the inclusion of not only a pilot’s, but also the co-pilot’s position, both interchangeable via the panel switcher. Legibility is further enhanced by the availability of dynamic ‘tooltips’. Holding the mouse pointer momentarily over gauges such as the altimeter, airspeed and heading indicators will offer associated information in text form. We found it extremely handy when setting the heading bug, for example, to use the ‘tooltips’ to precisely confirm that the heading we had selected was accurate. The 2D cockpit also has a weathered appearance to add to the authenticity. It is clearly an aircraft that has seen some service, with scratched fascias, loose cabling and even dust and dirt accumulating on the glass of the gauges. This attention to detail is greatly to the authentic feel of the aircraft.

In addition to the primary panels of Captain and First Officer, a panel switcher also provides an array of views and panel segments. The panel switcher, displayed in the usual Captain Sim style as a bank of icons, boasts more options than any other aircraft we have seen in FS2004. We counted no less than 35 individual icons. Luckily, simply pressing shift-2 can hide the rather imposing panel switcher. The full cockpit area is available for view, constructed using photographic imagery, and has no less than nine differing views consisting of angled views of all four corners of the cockpit, left and right cockpit window views, the Captain and First Officer panel and a rear facing view. Additionally, Captain Sim has provided two passenger-porthole views, which look out to each side of the aircraft to both wings and engines.

The ‘K’ variant of the Hercules, included in the base pack, sports a refuelling probe that extends out over the nose of the aircraft and a more modern electronic ECAS cockpit.

The K-variant of the Hercules, included in the base pack, sports a refuelling probe that extends out over the nose of the aircraft and a more modern electronic ECAS cockpit.

The option to release infrared flares around the aircraft is extremely useful for avoiding ground to air missiles over hostile territory.

Many air forces are represented including this Canadian example.

The panel switcher icons also give you access to a number of other aircraft systems, including the switches for the TCAS (Traffic Alert and Collision Avoidance System) or weather radar unit, which sits above the glass-shield on the centre post. While the weather radar appears to contain non-functional gauges and does not respond to the flight simulator’s weather, the TCAS is fully operational and includes a test mode.

The 2D cockpit is composed of photo-realistic textures to accurately reflect the Hercules layout and has a staggering array of 32 pop-ups and view options.

The weathered and worn look of the analogue cockpit certainly gives the impression of an aircraft that has had a long working life.

The traditional analogue panelling of the ‘J’ and HC-130 variants have been supplemented by a newer digital ECAS (engine instrument and crew alerting system) that forms the 2D cockpit of the ‘J’ and ‘K’ variants. These use digital gauges for the engine display and offer a more modern feel. The inclusion of the ECAS cockpit to the base installer in the ‘K’, and as part of the expansion pack of the ‘J’ model, is sure to appeal to many, although, as a matter of personal preference, we preferred the look and feel of the traditional analogue display.

Despite a bewildering array of 2D panel options, those who enjoy the experience of a dynamic virtual cockpit have not been forgotten, because both the analogue and digital versions have been fully modelled. It is clear that a lot of work has gone into the Virtual Cockpit, which immediately conveys the look and feel of its full-sized counterpart. All of the gauges, switches and controls of the aircraft are fully operable from within the VC, with the exception of those in the navigator’s station. However, as these are all implicated within the main forward panel and functionality, there is an understandable concession to preserve processing power. This VC certainly holds...
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