



Tucker's Tale

ALPA Cargo Crewmembers Accommodate A Special-Needs Passenger

By John Perkinson
Staff Writer

From limousines to lemurs, ALPA air cargo crewmembers transport it all. Capt. Rich Fazio (FedEx Express) said he once flew a shipment of crickets out of New Orleans, and Capt. Mark Danielson (FedEx Express) remembers carrying sea turtles and ferrets. So when an 8-year-old, male hippopotamus needed a lift to the West Coast, these ALPA pilots viewed the assignment as just another day's work.

Tucker, a 5,500-pound hippo and resident of the Topeka Zoo, needed to be relocated to the San Francisco Zoo. He and the Topeka Zoo's female hippo, Mara, became parents last August and the facility could not accommodate all three. Born and raised at Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge near Orlando, Fla., Tucker was scheduled to be moved on Nov. 30, 2010, by a private contractor that specializes in transferring zoo animals.

However, the large mammal wasn't cooperating and in the time it took the zoo to convince him and plan another trip, the contractor was booked. FedEx stepped in, offering to transport the animal gratis. Tucker would fly

on Jan. 6, 2011, from Kansas City to Memphis and then from Memphis to Oakland, where he would be loaded on a flatbed truck and shuttled to his new digs in the Bay City.

"The station manager contacted me the day before," said Fazio, who piloted the first leg of the journey. "We talked about some of the concerns he and the people from the zoo had." Tucker would be in a crate with six bales of hay, several containers of grain, and the strapping and reinforcement devices necessary to support and contain him. Lighting and temperature would also be a concern.

"On takeoff and until accelerating to climb speed, the A300 goes through several pitch changes, some approaching 10 degrees. F/O Mike Michaud and I discussed how to minimize these changes and decided we could do so by manipulating the flight management system into climbing the way we wanted it to, rather than the most economical way the aircraft seeks to fly," said Fazio.

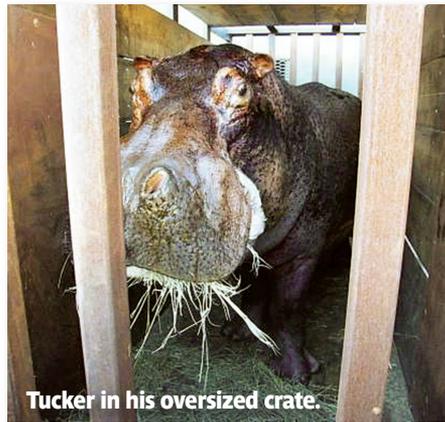
He added, "Our initial takeoff rotation in the A300 is to 18 degrees nose up. Mike and I elected to stop that rotation at 12.5 degrees to keep Tucker from being forced to the back of his pen." Fazio noted that he had to constantly think about the live cargo in the back and not the quickest way to the parking spot.

During both flights, the hippo was attended to by two handlers and a veterinarian. Fazio noted that the vet had a large dart gun, just in case

Tucker became unruly.

On the ground in Memphis, the hippo was transferred to an MD-11, where FedEx's Danielson and F/O Brian Donar were waiting for their payload.

"Tucker's oversized crate was approximately 1½ times the size of a normal MD-11 pallet," said Danielson. "Loaded with hay and food, he was as comfortable as any hippo can be," he observed, adding, "Our airplane was equipped with a rigid cargo



Tucker in his oversized crate.

barrier that kept Tucker's distinct aroma confined to the upper cargo compartment.

"He was a perfect passenger throughout our flight. Had he been upset, we definitely would have known since annoyed, oversized animals tend to bounce airplanes," Danielson noted.

Every accommodation was made for this unusual air traveler; even the air traffic controllers did their part.

"On our initial descent into Oakland, the Oakland Center controller assigned a step-down altitude. To make it easier on Tucker's ears, I had Brian request a constant

descent because of our special cargo," said Danielson.

Curious about the request, the controller asked if the aircraft was transporting horses. Hearing that the flight's cargo was a hippo, he said, "Cool," according to the captain, and information about the airplane's unique freight was forwarded to the other controllers along the MD-11's flight path to ensure that Tucker continued to get kid-gloves treatment.

Danielson remembers, "I

elected to use the full runway length so our deceleration was gradual. The taxi in went as smoothly as our taxi out. The San Francisco Zoo was very appreciative of FedEx's service, and I was happy to be among those

playing a part in (Tucker's) relocation."

Tucker isn't the first hippo to travel the stratosphere, and he certainly won't be the last. Because he enjoyed an easy hub connection and good weather, he probably hasn't given his journey or all of the arrangements that made it possible a second thought. Despite the apparent ease of this adventure, it's easy to take air travel for granted. But the staffs from the two zoos are truly grateful for the efforts of FedEx and its pilot crews, and now the citizens of San Francisco are, too. 🌍